the Makers of Prime-Time Television (New York: New American Library, 1986), pp. 247–48, 267.

10. Ibid., p. 37. Dandel goes on to illustrate his point with an incident from his early days as a writer in Hollywood. While working on a western series called *Tucson Trail*, he wrote a moving story about a Catholic priest who discovers he has strong homosexual feelings; to test his sexual orientation, the priest initiates a love affair with a woman. Much to Dandel's surprise, the production company agreed to shoot his script. However, two days before production was to commence, the producer called to say that he had just secured the free use of a trained collie for a few days and instructed him to rewrite the script, dropping the female lead and adding a part for the collie. Dandel remarks: "That's when I realized what television was. A love affair between a homosexual and a straight collie."

11. The one major exception to this generalization is local news, which in the last twenty years has emerged as a profit center.

12. John Lippman, "Paramount, NBC Battle over New *Cheers* Price," *Raleigh News and Observer* (N.C.), 11 February 1991.

13. Jostein Gripsrud, "Toward a Flexible Methodology in Studying Media Meaning: *Dynasty* in Norway," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 7 (1990): 117–28.

14. Dallas Smythe, "Communications: Blindspot of Western Marxism," *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory* 1 (1977): 3.

15. John Fiske, "Popular Television and Commercial Culture: Beyond Political Economy," in *Television Studies: Textual Analysis*, ed. Gary Burns and Robert J. Thompson (New York: Praeger, 1989), pp. 21–40.

SEMIOTICS, STRUCTURALISM, AND TELEVISION

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Contemporary television criticism derives much of its vocabulary from semiotics and structuralism. This chapter will introduce the basic terminology of these methods, offer a case study of structuralist methods applied to children's television, and introduce some of the concepts the so-called post-structuralists have used to critique and expand upon semiotics and structuralism. The late Paddy Whannel used to joke, "Semiotics tells us things we already know in a language we will never understand." Learning the vocabulary of semiotics is certainly one of its most trying aspects. This vocabulary makes it possible, however, to identify and describe what makes TV distinctive as a communication medium, as well as how it relies on other sign systems to communicate. Both questions are vital to the practice of television criticism, and these terms will be encountered in a broad range of critical methods from psychoanalysis to cultural studies.

Semiotics is the study of everything that can be used for communication: words, images, traffic signs, flowers, music, medical symptoms, and much more. Semiotics studies the way such "signs" communicate and the rules that govern their use. As a tool for the study of culture, semiotics represents a radical break from traditional criticism, in which the first order of business is the interpretation of an aesthetic object or text in terms of its immanent meaning. Semiotics first asks *how* meaning is created, rather than *what* the meaning is? In order to do this, semiotics uses a specialized vocabulary to describe signs and how they function. Often this vocabulary

smacks of scientism to the newcomer and clashes with our assumptions about what criticism and the humanities are. But the special terminology of semiotics and its attempt to compare the production of meaning in a diverse set of mediums—aesthetic signs being only one of many objects of study—have allowed us to describe the workings of cultural communication with greater accuracy and enlarged our recognition of the conventions that characterize our culture.

The term *semiotics* was coined by Charles S. Peirce (1839–1914), an American philosopher, although his work on semiotics did not become widely known until the 1930s. The field was also "invented" by Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. The term he used to describe the new science he advocated in *Course in General Linguistics*, published posthumously in 1959, was *semiology*. Structuralism is most closely associated with anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, whose studies of the logic and worldview of "primitive" cultures were first published in the 1950s. Although it relies on many of the principles of semiotics, structuralism engages larger questions of cultural meaning and ideology and thus has been widely used in literary and media criticism. Semiotics and structuralism are so closely related they may be said to overlap—semiotics being a field of study in itself, whereas structuralism is a method of analysis often used in semiotics.[1]

Structuralism stresses that each element within a cultural system derives its meaning from its relationship to every other element in the system: there are no independent meanings, but rather many meanings produced by their difference from other elements in the system. Beginning in the 1960s, some leading European intellectuals applied semiotics and structuralism to many different sign systems. Roland Barthes carefully analyzed fashion, French popular culture from wrestling to wine drinking, and a novella by Balzac. Umberto Eco turned his attention to Superman comic strips and James Bond novels. Christian Metz set out to describe the style of Hollywood cinema as a semiotic system. By addressing the symbolic and communicative capacity of humans in general, semiotics and structuralism help us see connections between fields of study that are normally divided among different academic departments in the university. Thus they are specially suited to the study of television.

The Sign

The smallest unit of meaning in semiotics is called the *sign*. Semiotics begins with this smallest unit and builds rules for the combination of signs. Fredric Jameson has pointed out that this concern with discerning the smallest unit of meaning is something that semiotics shares with other major intellectual movements of the twentieth century, including linguistics and nuclear physics, but it is an unusual starting point for criticism, which has tended to discuss works as organic wholes. Taking the definition of the smallest unit as a starting point indicates a shift in the sciences from perception to models: "where the first task of a science henceforth seems the establishment of a method, or a model, such that the basic conceptual units are given from the outset and organize the data (the atom, the phoneme)."[2] Saussure conceptualized the sign as composed of two distinct parts, although these parts are separable only in theory, not in actual communication. Every sign is composed of a *signifier*, that is, the image, object, or sound itself—the part of the sign that has a material form—and the *signified*, the concept it represents.

In written language, the sign *rain* is composed of the grouping of four letters on this page (the signifier) and the idea or concept of rain (the signified)—that is, the category of phenomena we reserve for water falling from the sky. Saussure stressed that the relationship between the signifier and the signified in verbal language was entirely conventional, completely arbitrary. There is no natural or necessary connection between *rain* and the concept for which it stands. Furthermore, words have no positive value. A word's meaning derives entirely from its difference from other words in the sign system of language. On the level of signifier, we recognize *rain* through its distinguishability from *brain* or *sprain* or *rail* or *Braille* or *roan* or *reign*. The signified is meaningful because of its difference from *sprinkle, drizzle, downpour, monsoon*, or from *hail, sleet*, or *snow*. Other words could be invented, such as *raim* or *sain*, that use the same alphabet and are pronounceable, but because these "words" do not enter into relationships with other signs in the system in a meaningful way, they remain at the level of nonsense.

Each language marks off its own set of meaningful differences: we can imagine an infinite number of possibilities for signifiers and signifieds, but each language makes only some differences important and detectable. Learning a second language is difficult because each language consists of a set of signs whose meanings derive from differences to which we might not be sensitive—phonetic distinctions we can't "hear," grammar rules

that make distinctions unfamiliar to us, and words that are untranslatable into our first language. However, studying a second language does make us aware of Saussure's point about the arbitrary nature of verbal languages. The signifier for rain changes to *pluie* in French and *Regen* in German. Neither has any more natural connection to the notion of water falling from the sky than does *rain*. Even onomatopoeia—words that seem to imitate the sounds they signify—turn out to be partly conventional. For English speakers, a rooster goes "cock-a-doodle-doo." For Germans he goes "Kikeriki."

Saussure was interested in studying the structure of language as a system, and he bracketed off the real objects to which language refers: its *referents*. Semiotics does not concern itself with the referent of the sign rain, that is, actual water falling from the sky on a particular day at a particular place. The concept of rain is independent of any given occurrence of the actual event. Moreover, both Saussure and Peirce recognized that some signs have no "real" object to which they refer: abstractions (truth, freedom) or products of the imagination (mermaids, unicorns). More important, they wished to argue that all signs are cultural constructs that have taken on meaning through repeated, learned, collective use. Peirce emphasized that even when we try to define a sign, we are always forced to use another sign to translate it; he labeled the sign that we use to describe another sign the *interpretant*.

In this book, for example, we will be describing television's audiovisual sign systems using linguistic signs (words on these pages) and black-and-white still photographs that are in many ways quite distant and different from the original object. To take another example, when an image on the television news is identified as "Corazon Aquino," a sign produced by an electronic image is translated into another sign system—that of proper nouns. Proper names are a special class of signs that seem to have a real, easily agreed-upon referent. But our understanding of persons (especially those represented frequently on television) is filtered through sign systems: we don't "know" anything or anyone (even ourselves) except through language.

Images do not have an unmediated relationship with their referents. The image of Aquino could be understood in terms of general categories ranging from "world leaders" to Filipino women. The referent of Aquino's image will vary greatly depending on the cultural context—for example, from the United States to Japan. The proper name could refer to another interpretant, such as "president of the Philippines." Even if we were in the same room with Aquino and used our index fingers to point to her and

say, "*There* is Corazon Aquino," we would have used another set of signs, gestural and verbal ones. Charles S. Peirce saw the process of communication as an unending chain of sign production, which he dubbed "unlimited semiosis." Peirce's concept of the sign forces the realization that no communication takes place outside of sign systems—we are always translating signs into other signs. The conventions of the sign system control the ways we are able to communicate (that is, produce signifiers) and limit the range of meanings available (that is, what signifieds can be produced).

Umberto Eco defines a sign as "everything that, on the grounds of a previously established social convention, can be taken as something standing for something else."[3] Surprisingly, Eco means to include in this definition even those signs that at first glance seem to be more "natural" than linguistic ones. It is through social convention and cultural appropriation that a dark, cloudy sky becomes a sign for "impending storm." Those same dark clouds could be used to signify bad luck, or nature responding in kind to one's own gloomy mood (as in the literary convention of pathetic fallacy). The meaning of rain can vary greatly from one culture to another: in some Polynesian societies, a rainstorm is taken to mean that the sky is crying for the death of a child.

Eco's conception of the sign is adapted from the work of Peirce, who did not limit himself to symbolic signs (language), as Saussure did, but attempted to account for all types of signs, including pictorial ones. To do so, he introduced specific definitions of the terms *icon* and *index*. The categories *symbolic, iconic*, and *indexical* are not mutually exclusive. Television constantly uses all three types of signs simultaneously. Television images are both iconic and indexical, and programs often use words (symbolic signs) on the screen and the soundtrack.

In the iconic sign, the signifier structurally resembles its signified. We must "learn" to recognize this resemblance just as we learn to read maps or to draw. The correspondence between a drawing of a dog, for example, and the signified "dog" (which might be a particular specimen of dog or the concept of dog in general) could take many different forms. The drawing could be skeletal or anatomical, in which case it might take a trained veterinarian or zoologist to recognize any structural similarity between the drawing and the signified "dog." The iconic sign could be a child's drawing, in which case another kind of expert decoder, for instance the child's parent or teacher, might be required to detect the structural resemblance. Most drawings rely on rules that dictate point of view and scale; an "aerial view" of a dog, a head-on angle, or a drawing done twenty times larger than scale would be much harder for most of us to recognize

than the conventional side-angle view in which two legs, a tail, a pointed ear, and whiskers will do the job, even if no attempt is made at coloration and the drawing appears only as an outline in black. Most of these admonitions about the conventionality of drawings hold true for video images as well, even though we think of television as more lifelike.

Indexical signs involve an existential link between the signifier and the referent: the sign relies on their joint presence at some point in time. Drawings do not qualify as indexical signs because we can make a drawing of something we have never seen. Maps are iconic rather than indexical because a cartographer can create a map solely on the basis of other iconic signs, such as diagrams and geological surveys; she may never have been to the place the map will signify.

Indexical signs are different from iconic ones because they rely on a material connection between signifier and signified: smoke means fire, pawprints mean the presence of a cat; a particular set of fingerprints signifies "Richard Nixon"; red spots signify "measles." Most images produced by cameras belong to Peirce's class of "indexical signs" because they require the physical presence of the referent before the camera lens at some point in time for their production. This fact about an image is, however, virtually impossible to verify without being present at the time the image was made. Stand-ins and look-alikes, trick photographs, special effects, computer-generated graphics, multiple exposures, and animated images can all be used to lie to the camera. Even images that we treat as particularly unique because they have as their signified an individual living creature may be dictated by convention. Throughout Lassie's career as a television character, many different dogs (most of them male) have been used in the part, often within the same episode. Although many individual Lassies have now died, the iconic sign "Lassie" lives on, thanks to the skills of the various production crews and the animal trainers who find new dogs whenever a new version of the Lassie series is produced. It may be a blow to our faith in physiognomy, but we can be fooled by pictures of persons almost as easily.

Indexical signs are also established through social convention. Animals have left pawprints for as long as they have roamed the earth, but their pawprints became a sign only when people began to use them for tracking. As Umberto Eco explains: "The first doctor who discovered a sort of constant relationship between an array of red spots on a patient's face and a given disease (measles) made an inference: but insofar as this relationship has been made conventional and has been registered as such in medical treatises a *semiotic convention* has been established. There is a sign

every time a human group decides to use and recognize something as the vehicle for something else."[4] Indexical signs are no less tainted by human intervention than symbolic or iconic ones; they require the same accumulation of use and the same reinforcement and perpetuation by a social group to be understood as signs in the first place.

To understand television images, we must learn to recognize many conventions of representation. One of the characteristics of such representational codes is that we become so accustomed to them that we may not recognize their use; they become as "natural" to us as the symbolic signs of language, and we think of iconic signs as the most logical—sometimes as the only possible—way to signify aspects of our world. We can watch this learning taking place when infants and toddlers begin to watch television. Toddlers, for example, like to touch the screen frequently as they struggle to understand the two-dimensional nature of television's iconic signs. Conventional expectations of scale, perspective, camera angle, color, lighting, lens focal length, and subject-to-camera distance (that is, nonrepresentational aspects of the image) are acquired through exposure to television; if a camera operator violates too many of these conventions, we may not be able to "recognize" the image at all.

In its strict sense, Peirce's model does not require the "intention" to communicate: signs may be produced by nonhuman agencies (such as when a TV set's technical breakdown produces "snow" on the screen), for example, or by unconscious senders. Peirce's model does not necessarily require a human receiver of the sign, or any receiver at all, although, because signs are social and conventional, there must be the possibility that a given sign would be understood by a potential receiver. Signification cannot take place outside of human communication, but semiotics does not require the existence of empirically verifiable receivers of its signs, and it cannot promise that all receivers will agree on the relationship of signifier to signified. Thus authorial intention is not included in the study of signs and neither is the interpretation or reception of the message by empirical audiences.

"The camera never lies" is a statement that tells us a lot about the way we accept many photographic or electronic images as real when they involve indexical signs, even if, from a semiotic point of view, the statement is a falsehood. Many television images are produced in such a way that we are encouraged to understand them only as indexical signs. Stand-up shots of reporters on location are one example of this: we may not be able to decipher from the image itself whether Andrea Mitchell is really standing on the White House lawn, but TV places an enormous stress on the

connection between the image and this location as it exists in real time and space.[5] Since its invention, so much has been made of the objectivity of the camera as a recording instrument that we often fail to recognize the extent to which camera images are produced according to rules just as drawings are. Semiotics reminds us that the signifiers produced by TV are related to their signifieds by convention, even if, when we watch something like the news, we tend not to think of the active production of signs involved in TV but simply receive the news as pure information, as an unmediated signified.

To engage in fantasy for a moment, consider producing a newsbreak about a completely fictional event for broadcast on network TV. If we gave some careful thought to the way newsbreaks are written and the topics usually covered in them, we could script and storyboard a newsbreak that exactly conformed to the mode or presentation typical of U.S. network newscasting. If we had access to the facilities, technicians, equipment, supplies, and personnel of one of the networks, and if we could coerce an anchor to violate professional ethics (or find a convincing impostor) and read our script, we could produce a newsbreak, complete with "live action" reports, that would be indistinguishable from the authentic item. Semiotics reminds us that with nonfictional television, no less than with its fictional counterpart, we are dealing not with referents but with signs. In the end, it is impossible to verify the referent from television's sounds and images. Perhaps this is why, as Margaret Morse argues, the person of the news anchor, in his or her "ceremonial role," has become increasingly important in securing our belief in the news and our sense of its authenticity.[6] In this and many other ways, television relies heavily on the figure of the unique individual, the television personality. Most of television's signs are easily copied because they are based in convention, but the on-camera talking head of a known television personality is still one of the more difficult aspects of the image to fake.

Umberto Eco has criticized Peirce's distinction among symbolic, iconic, and indexical on the grounds that it tends to overlook the historical and social production of all signs. Instead, Eco offers a definition that casts all signs in terms of this context: "Semiotics is in principle the discipline studying everything which can be used in order to lie. If something cannot be used to tell a lie, conversely it cannot be used to tell the truth: it cannot in fact be used 'to tell' at all."[7] Television communication is no more mediated or contaminated than other forms of communication—spoken language, written language, still photography—in its relationship to reality. The important insight that can be gained from the study of semiotics

and structuralism is that all communication is partial, motivated, conventional, and "biased," even those forms such as print journalism that are founded on a reputation for truth-seeking and attempt to convey the impression of reliability. The study of semiotics insists that we should discern the distinctive ways of producing and combining signs practiced by particular kinds of television, in particular places, and at a particular point in time, because these codes are inseparable from the "reality" of media communication.

Denotation and Connotation

So far we have been discussing the sign in terms of denotative meaning. Connotative meanings land us squarely in the domain of ideology: the worldview (including the model of social relations and their causes) portrayed from a particular position and set of interests in society. Roland Barthes devoted much of his work to the distinction between *denotation* and *connotation* in aesthetic texts. In images, denotation is the first order of signification: the signifier is the image itself and the signified is the idea or concept—what it is a picture of. Connotation is a second-order signifying system that uses the first sign, (signifier and signified), as its signifier and attaches an additional meaning, another signified, to it. Barthes thought of connotation as fixing or freezing the meaning of the denotation; it impoverishes the first sign by ascribing a single and usually ideological signified to it.[8] This is why it takes many words to describe the signifier at the first level—we must include camera angle, color, size, lighting, composition, and so on. But connotations can often be described in just one word (noble, romantic, gritty, patriotic, humorous). Sometimes the difference between connotation and denotation seems rather mechanical in television criticism because television's signs are nearly already complex messages or *texts*, making it difficult to isolate the difference between the two levels of signification. Perhaps it is best to think of connotation as a parasite attaching itself to a prior signification.

To begin with a simple denotation, the fade to black has as its signifier the gradual disappearance of the picture on the screen and, as its signified, simply "black." This sign has been strongly conventionalized in motion pictures and television so that it exists as the following connotative sign: the signifier is "fade to black" and the signified is "ending" of a scene or a program. Television production texts insist that students must always use the fade to black at the end of every program and before any commercial

breaks.[9] The fade to black has become part of a very stable signification. But connotations may eventually change through repetition. On *Knots Landing*, a CBS prime-time soap opera that has cultivated an image as a "quality program," each segment ends with a fade to black that lasts several beats longer than in most programs. This "fade to black" is part of the tone of *Knots Landing*; it is used for the connotation "serious drama" or "high-class show" (suggesting that the audience needs a moment to collect itself emotionally, to think over the scene before going on to the commercial). The longer fade to black now appears on many shows that aspire to such a connotation, including *thirtysomething* and *L.A. Law*. Connotations fix the meaning of a sign, but in other kinds of texts—those not of broadcast television—the denotation "fade to black" could take on other meanings as well. In a student production, frequent use of the fade to black could connote "rank amateur direction"; in an art video, it could connote "experimental, modernist style."

To give another example, hair color can be singled out in a television image as a denotation. Many TV actors are women whose hair is light blond. On a connotative level, shades of hair color (the first level of signification) are used to produce signifieds such as "glamorous," "beautiful," "youthful," "dumb," or "sexy" on the second level of signification. These connotations, widely known through their repeated use in film and television, are ones that have a specific history in the United States, one that stems from glorifying the physical appearance of Anglo women (based on their difference from and presumed superiority to other races and ethnicities). But they are also subject to change or revision over time. Compare, for example, the changing connotations of blondness in the television images of Farrah Fawcett on *Charlie's Angels* (youthful, pure), Linda Evans on *Dynasty* (virtuous, rich), and Madonna in her music videos and public appearances such as the 1991 Academy Awards ceremony (in which she deliberately "quoted" Marilyn Monroe's hairstyle and what *it* connotes: sexiness as a costume).

Some aspects of the image and soundtrack that we think of as nonrepresentational actually function as symbolic signs and often carry connotative meanings; examples may include the color of light (pink for femaleness, white for goodness); music (minor chords and slow tempos signifying melancholy, solo instrumentals signifying loneliness); or photographic technique (soft focus signifying romance, hand-held cameras signifying on-the-spot documentary). Television is not completely different from written language in this respect. Printed words are inseparable from their nonrepresentational form in terms of typeface, size of type, boldness, color

of paper, and so forth. These signs are all established through convention and repeated use. Such nonrepresentational signs have not been studied as thoroughly by semioticians as have representational ones.[10] One of the goals of semiotic analysis of television is to make us conscious of the use of connotation on television, so that we realize how much of what appears naturally meaningful on TV is actually historical, changeable, and culturally specific.

Barthes argued that connotation is the primary way in which the mass media communicate ideological meanings. A dramatic example of the operation of "myth," as Barthes called such connotations, and of television's rapid elaboration of new meanings is explosion of the space shuttle *Challenger*. The sign consisted of a signifier—the TV image itself—that was coded in certain ways (symmetrical composition, long shot of shuttle on launching pad, daylight, blue sky background) and the denoted meaning or signified "space shuttle." On the connotative level, the space shuttle was used as a signifier for a set of ideological signifieds including "scientific progress," "manifest destiny in space," and "U.S. superiority over the Soviet Union in the cold war."

On 28 January 1986, these connotations were radically displaced. On that day, all three commercial networks repeatedly broadcast videotape of the space shuttle exploding. This footage was accompanied first by a stunned silence, then by an abundance of speech by newscasters, by expert interviewees, by press agents, and by President Reagan (who canceled his State of the Union address to speak about the explosion), much of which primarily expressed shock. The connotation of the sign "space shuttle" was destabilized; it became once again subject—as denotation—to an unpredictable number of individual meanings or competing ideological interpretations. It was as if the explosion restored the sign's original signified, which could then lead to a series of questions and interpretations of the space shuttle relating to its status as a material object, its design, what it was made out of, who owned it, who had paid for it, who had built it, what it was actually going to do on the mission, how much control the crew or others at NASA had over it. At such a moment, the potential exists for the production of counterideological connotations. Rather than scientific progress, the connotation "fallibility of scientific bureaucracy" might have been attached to the space shuttle; "manifest destiny in space" might have been replaced by "waste of human life"; and "U.S. superiority over the U.S.S.R." by "basic human needs sacrificed to technocracy."

Television played a powerful role in stabilizing the meaning of the space

shuttle. The networks, following the lead of the White House, almost immediately fixed on a connotation compatible with the state ideology. This connotative meaning is readable in the graphic, devised by television production staffs, that appeared in the frame with newscasters when they introduced further reports on the *Challenger*: an image of the space shuttle with a U.S. flag at half mast in the left foreground. This image helped to fix the connotation "tragic loss for a noble and patriotic cause" to the sign "space shuttle." Television produced this new connotation within hours of the event. Some of its force comes from its association with cultural and ideological codes that already enjoy wide circulation: the genre of war films, the TV news formula for reporting military casualties, the history of national heroes and martyrs. Later interpretations of the *Challenger* explosion or the space shuttle program had to compete with this one.

The study of connotation indicates the importance of understanding television signs as a historical system—one that is subject to change. Semiotics allows us to describe the process of connotation, the relationship of signs within a system, and the nature of signs themselves. But the study of connotation also directs us outside the television text and beyond the field of semiotics. We might want to study the producers of television messages (television networks, NASA, the White House press corps), the receivers of messages (the U.S. public), and the context in which signification takes place (the object of study of economics, sociology, political science, philosophy). Semiotics often leads us to questions about these things, but it cannot help us answer the questions because the study of the referent is outside its domain.

Combinations and Codes

A semiotics of television provides us with a set of problems different from those we encounter when we study written or spoken language. What is television's smallest unit of meaning? Does the set of rules governing combinations of sounds and images on U.S. television constitute a grammar? To answer these questions, it will be necessary to introduce several more terms from the special vocabulary of semiotics: *channel, code, syntagm, paradigm, langue,* and *parole.*

In language a small set of distinctive units—letters and sounds (phonemes)—are used to create more complex significations: words, sentences, paragraphs. Unlike language, television does not conveniently break down into discrete elements or building blocks of meaning; it has no

equivalent of an alphabet. The closest we can come to a smallest unit is the technological definition of the frame from Herbert Zettl's widely used textbook: "A complete scanning cycle of the electron beam, which occurs every 1/30 second. It represents the smallest complete television picture unit." But images already are combinations of several different signs at once and involve a complex set of denotations and connotations. Furthermore, if we use the frame as the smallest unit of meaning, we ignore the soundtrack, where 1/30 second would not necessarily capture a meaningful sound and where speech, sound effects, and music may be occurring simultaneously. Christian Metz has given painstaking attention to this problem as it exists for the cinema. When he wrote his semiotics of the cinema, he identified five channels of communication: image, written language, voice, music, and sound effects. In borrowing these categories, I substitute the term *graphics* for *written materials* so as to include the logos, borders, frames, diagrams, and computer-animated images that appear so often on our television screens. In *Cinema and Language*, Metz concluded that television and cinema were "two neighboring language systems" characterized by an unusual degree of closeness. Unfortunately, he never analyzed television in the same meticulous way he did the cinema.

Before returning to the question of TV's smallest unit of meaning, it will be useful to review some recent theoretical work on how TV uses these five channels and how this usage compares to that of the cinema. It is a commonplace remark that TV is nothing but talking heads—which tells us that facial close-ups and speech are singularly important to it. Television production textbooks warn students of the need for simplicity in the image and explain how to achieve this through visual codes like symmetrical composition, color compatibility, and high key lighting. These conventions of TV production represent an *interpretation* of video technology and its limitations but are not a necessary consequence of it. Most college textbooks on television production offer us a kind of grammar of television with a conservative orientation; their aim is to educate students to observe the rules of the system of U.S. broadcast television as it is currently practiced. John Ellis has explained the logic of these visual codes thus: "Being small, low definition, subject to attention that will not be sustained, the TV image becomes jealous of its meaning. It is unwilling to waste it on details and inessentials."[11] In part, these codes dictate both how the images are produced and what is represented: on commercial U.S. television we see more shots of actors, emcees, newscasters, politicians, and commodities than of anything else. But television varies greatly under different cultural and economic systems. Public television in Eu-

rope, for example, often employs more aesthetically prestigious "cinematic" codes: long shots, less talk on the soundtrack, longer takes, an image originally shot on film.

Broadcast TV in the United States uses graphics to clarify the meaning of its images, and it does so to a much greater extent than the feature film, where graphics appear only in the beginning and ending titles sequences. Diagrams are superimposed over news or sports images to invite a quasi-scientific scrutiny of the image. Borders and frames mask out the background of already pared-down images. Words constantly appear on the screen to identify the program, the sponsoring corporation, the network or cable station, the product name, the person portrayed. Words and graphics are especially important in certain television genres such as commercials, sporting events, news programs, and game shows. Often the words on screen echo speech on the soundtrack.

In his analysis of other forms of mass communication, Roland Barthes described verbal language as always providing the definitive meaning for the image: "It is not very accurate to talk of a civilization of the image—we are still, and more than ever, a civilization of writing, writing and speech continuing to be the full terms of the informational structure."[12] In Barthes' view, verbal language is used to close down the number of possible meanings the image might have. This "anchoring" of the image by the verbal text frequently supplies a bourgeois worldview: "The anchorage may be ideological and indeed this is its principal function; the text directs the reader through the signifieds of the image, causing him to avoid some and receive others; by means of an often subtle *dispatching* it remote-controls him towards a meaning chosen in advance."[13]

John Ellis and Rick Altman have argued that the television soundtrack—speech, music, sound effects—entirely dominates the image by determining when we actually look at the screen. The soundtrack is so full, so unambiguous that we can understand television just by listening to it. Because television is a domestic appliance that we tend to have on while we are doing other things—cooking, eating, talking, caring for children, cleaning—our relationship to the television set is often that of auditor rather than viewer. Altman argues that sounds such as applause, program theme music, and the speech of announcers tend to precede the image to which they refer and serve primarily to call the viewer back to the screen: "The sound serves a value-laden editing function, identifying better than the image itself the parts of the image that are sufficiently spectacular to merit closer attention by the intermittent viewer."[14] Altman asserts that the television soundtrack acts as a lure,

continually calling to us: "Hey, you, come out of the kitchen and watch this!"

From a semiotic viewpoint, one of the most important characteristics of television in general (and one that is shared by many genres) might be its tendency to use all five channels simultaneously, as television commercials typically do. This might also explain television's low status as an aesthetic text; on TV too much goes on at once and there is too much redundancy among sound and image elements for it to be "artistic." The primacy of the soundtrack violates conventional notions in cinema aesthetics about the necessity of subordinating soundtrack to image.

The high degree of repetition that exists between soundtrack and image track and between segments is mirrored at the generic level of the series, which is television's definitive form. As Umberto Eco explains the debased aesthetic status of TV: "This excess of pleasurability, repetition, lack of innovation was felt as a commercial trick (the product had to meet the expectations of its audience), not as the provocative proposal of a new (and difficult to accept) world vision. The products of mass media were equated with the products of industry insofar as they were produced *in series*, and the 'serial' production was considered as alien to the artistic invention."[15]

Because semiotics recognizes the role of combination in all verbal and visual sign production—including aesthetic production—it tends to take a less condemning view of television and therefore may have more to say about TV as a communication system than have more traditional approaches in the humanities, which tend to dismiss TV as a vulgarity. Other kinds of performances that rely on just one channel at a time (music only, or images only, or printed words only) enjoy a higher and more serious aesthetic status. In comparison to novels or silent films or oil paintings, television is a messy thing. But this is precisely why it has been of interest to semioticians: simply describing its signs presents a formidable challenge. Indeed, semiotics and structuralism have played a polemical role in universities by presenting television as a complex experience worthy of serious analysis.

Christian Metz concluded that the cinema is so different from language that we must be wary in applying linguistic theory to it. Metz discerned no smallest units in the cinema. Instead, he felt, it must be analyzed at the level of the shot, which he called its "largest minimum segment." This resembles Eco's conclusion that iconic signs such as images are not reducible to smaller units; they are already "texts"—that is, combinations of signs—and they are governed by a code that is weak compared with the

grammar rules that govern language. Weak codes are flexible, change-able, and can produce an unforeseeable number of individual signs.[16]

Metz was able to explain a great deal about editing as a code of the classical Hollywood cinema, using the shot as his "minimum segment" and applying the semiotic concepts *paradigmatic* and *syntagmatic*.[17] A *syntagm* is an ordering of signs, a rule-governed combination of signs in a determined sequence. Syntagms are normally linear and must follow a strict order. A *paradigm* is a group of signs so similar that they may be substituted for one another in a syntagm. A simple sentence provides an example of a syntagm: "Rosa throws the ball." This sentence follows the grammatical rules of order (or the syntagmatic code) for English: subject/verb/direct object. We cannot change the order of the words in the sentence without making it nonsensical or unidiomatic ("Ball the Rosa throws"). The sentence can be thought of as drawing on some paradigms defined grammatically (nouns, verbs, and articles). Another paradigm could be verbs synonymous with *throw* that might be substitutable here: *pitch*, *hurl*, or *toss*. Of course, we change the meaning of the syntagm every time we make a substitution from a paradigm.

To take another example, a meal can be thought of as a syntagm: glass of Chianti, tossed salad, spaghetti with meat sauce, chocolate cake, coffee. This syntagm follows American dietary customs that designate the order in which dinner items will be served. This syntagmatic code is: beverage, salad, main course, dessert, coffee. Different cultures or even different families might eat these things in a different order, using a different code and producing a different syntagm—for example, coffee, spaghetti, wine, green salad, chocolate cake. Or we can imagine an idiosyncratic, unconventional code in which someone always started with dessert. A paradigm would consist of all foods that could fall under the same category, such as dessert or main course. In a restaurant, we would have many choices within each category—among types of wine (red, rosé, or white, or more elaborate listings of the year, winery, and place of origin), among different kinds of pastas (spaghetti, linguine, fettucine) and sauces (alfredo, meatless, etc.), or among an assortment of items on the dessert tray. The menu's alternatives in each category constitute the paradigmatic sets for that particular menu; the individual meal ordered is the syntagm.

Paradigms are classifications of signs; Barthes wrote that in a given syntagm the individual signs are "united in absentia" with others of the paradigm that were *not* selected.[18] The meaning of a given syntagm derives in part from the absence of other possible paradigmatic choices. By some, the meal syntagm used as an example here might be deemed un-

healthy, a judgment based on the *presence* of certain ingredients (an alcoholic drink, red meat in the sauce, sugar and chocolate in the dessert, caffeine in the coffee) in our syntagm as well as the *absence* of some others (more vegetables and fruit, whole grain pasta, fruit for dessert, decaffeinated coffee, and water to drink).

For television we could argue that one paradigmatic category, based on subject-to-camera distance, consists of the class of signs we identify as close-ups; others would be head-and-shoulders shots, medium shots, long shots, and extreme long shots. Another paradigmatic category might be "all shots of Bill Cosby." Many television programs are produced inside a studio, with three cameras filming the action at once. The director calls the shots, speaking to the camera operators through headsets and asking for specific shots that may be used next: a close-up, a two-shot, a long shot. Thus the paradigm during taping consists of the shots available from cameras one, two, and three; the syntagm consists of the sequence of shots actually selected, "switched" in the control room in a definite order (only one at a time) and lasting for a specific period of time. In short, every television program consists of a set of paradigmatic and syntagmatic choices.

The concepts *paradigmatic* and *syntagmatic* may be applied to a level of organization higher than the edited sequence. They are also useful in describing the diverse types of materials one encounters in the "flow" of U.S. broadcast television. We could define as different paradigmatic sets TV commercials, trailers for upcoming programming, station identifications, program end credits, opening sequences, and the programs themselves. On a given evening on a given channel, a syntagmatic chain that selects from this paradigm might follow this order: closing credits of *The Cosby Show*; cereal commercial; Armed Forces commercial; continued closing credits of *The Cosby Show*; trailer for upcoming special; trailer for the next evening's programs; commercial for local automobile dealer. On a larger scale, we might think of an individual episode as one element in the syntagmatic chain of the chronological airing of an entire series over a period of weeks and years.

Because television in the United States is often broadcast twenty-four hours a day and because it is so discontinuous, combining many different segments of short duration, determining the beginning and end of these "syntagmatic chains" presents special problems for the TV critic. Does it make sense to analyze an individual episode apart from its place in the entire series? Can we ignore the commercial breaks when writing about the experience of watching a television program? One of the biggest dif-

[handwritten margin notes: "PARADIGM - GROUPINGS of choices" and "SYNTAGMATIC CHAINS"]

ferences in television programming among different countries has to do with the organization of its syntagmatic relations. Europeans often express shock when they see U.S. television for the first time; they are bewildered by the continual interruptions, the brevity of the program proper, and the plethora of various advertisements. Raymond Williams coined the term "television flow" after such an experience. On the other hand, Americans watching German public television for the first time often find the pace slow because the units that compose the daily schedule are longer in duration and fewer in number. On the evening newsbreak, for example, news readers may read copy for fifteen minutes, uninterrupted by on-the-scene accounts from other reporters, commercials, or previews. When soap operas produced in the United States, such as *Dallas*, are shown on such a noncommercial station, the precommercial "mini-climaxes" (zoom-ins for facial close-ups, music building to a crescendo) appear strange when they are followed not by a commercial but by the next scene of the program. Such an example could be described as a change in the syntagmatic chain—and a decrease in the number of paradigmatic sets used to construct it.

Syntagms and paradigms can be found in relationships between texts as well as within a single text. A generic paradigm of "TV game show" might include *Wheel of Fortune, Let's Make a Deal, The $64,000 Question, Queen for a Day, What's My Line?, Jeopardy!, Double Dare,* and *Remote Control.* A television genre critic would need to provide a rationale for this grouping and analyze similarities among the programs. A syntagmatic arrangement of game shows might be based on their sequence in programming—their place on the TV schedule, with morning shows first and evening shows later. Another kind of syntagm might be based on their chronological appearance in the course of TV broadcast history, with an older show like *Queen for a Day* preceding a more recent one like *Remote Control.* Paradigmatic associations are *synchronic*: we group signs together as though they had no history or temporal order. Syntagmatic relationships tend to be *diachronic*: they unfold in time, whether it be a matter of seconds or of years.

The meaning of every television program is influenced by syntagmatic and paradigmatic relationships. *America's Funniest Home Videos* acquires some of its meaning by its differences from (as a comedy competition using home videos) and similarities to (presence of studio audience, prize money, host) other TV game shows and contests. It also derives meaning from its position on the weekly TV schedule (some viewers may not consider it a game show because it is broadcast on Sunday evenings during prime time

synchronic
diachronic

—thus violating recent expectations as to when a game show will be encountered) and its place on the time line of broadcast history (it offers itself as a new kind of programming, and television publicity is notoriously amnesiac about its own past).

Saussurean linguistics is a synchronic model for the study of language; that is, it insists that sign systems are to be studied as they exist at one point in time. This is partly a consequence of its working methods: one of the principles of semiotics is that the *langue* (the total sign system) can be inferred from studying *parole* (individual utterances or signs). Saussure argued that one can learn the whole system from an individual case. And it is true that verbal language—as a system of paradigmatic and syntagmatic rules—changes very slowly. Although the vocabulary might be somewhat different, a Shakespeare play written four hundred years ago is still "readable" today as an English-language *parole*. Semiotics was founded, then, on a static model of the sign. Some of the gravest shortcomings of semiotics as a theory are a consequence of this: it inherits the tendency to ignore change, to divorce the sign from its referent, and to exclude the sender and receiver.

These characteristics limit the usefulness of semiotics in the study of television. Because television is based on weaker codes than those that govern verbal language, it is, as a system of communication, unstable; it is constantly undergoing modification and operates by conventions rather than by hard-and-fast rules. In semiotic terms, communication involves *encoding* and *decoding*. Each *parole* (instance of communication) is *encoded* in a particular communication system (written Spanish, Braille, Morse code). The message is *decoded* by someone who is competent in that particular code. Unlike verbal language, with which any user of the system can produce meaningful utterances, television is a communication system to which most of us have access only as viewers and listeners, not as producers/encoders. Historically, television production has been for the most part restricted to a specialized, professional elite, those with access to costly technologies and large and highly specialized division of labor. Public-access television and home videos employ different conventions of sign production and require different decoding skills from their audiences.

LANGUE
PAROLE
WAYNE'S WORLD

Structuralism

Structuralism has proven a very useful tool in studying television because, as a method, it characteristically sets aside questions of aesthetic worth or value to concentrate on the internal rules for the production of tele-

vision meaning. As developed in linguistics and anthropology, structuralism sought to understand a language or a culture on its own terms and urged the analyst to put aside judgment and evaluation. Journalistic television criticism has often been so interested in critical dismissal that careless generalizations and faulty descriptions have been the rule rather than the exception. The application of structuralist methods has made television criticism more rigorous, more accurate in describing its object, and less evaluative. As do semioticians, structuralists study things synchronically and are interested in the system as a whole more than in particular manifestations of it. Rather than studying forms of language, as semioticians normally do, structuralists study the way that a cultural system produces a set of texts or signs, which could be anything from folktales to kinship relations to dietary rules. Characteristically, a structuralist analysis proposes binary oppositions such as individual/community, male/female, nature/culture, or mind/matter and argues that every element within the system derives its meaning from its relationship to these categories. A structuralist analysis often leads to a description of the worldview of a culture—its organizing principles for making sense of relationships among people who live in the same society and between people and their material environments.

The work of Robert Hodge and David Tripp on children's animated series provides a good example of the usefulness of semiotics and structuralism in the analysis of television, as well as the problems and further questions raised by such methods. Hodge and Tripp argue that cartoons—widely considered one of the lowest forms of television—are surprisingly complex. The reason children are fascinated by cartoons is not because they have been turned into television zombies but because they are understandably engaged by the complex blend of aesthetic, narrative, visual, verbal, and ideological codes at work in them. Though cartoons are characterized by a great deal of repetition and redundancy, Hodge and Tripp argue that their subject matter and their way of conveying it is complicated stuff. Children use cartoons to decipher the most important structures in their culture. To make this point, Hodge and Tripp analyze the titles sequence of the unexceptional 1978 cartoon *Fangface*, an animated series about the adventures of werewolf Sherman Fangsworth and his teenage companions Kim, Biff, and Pugsie. Generically, the series was based primarily on a comedy-mystery type of story (sometimes called the "Let's get out of here" adventure formula) found in many examples of cartoons from *Scooby Doo* (1969–80) to *Slimer and the Real Ghostbusters* (1986–).

Hodge and Tripp base their analysis on a single twenty-minute cartoon. This starting point is significant in that it is the typical founding gesture

of the semiotician to gather a small, manageable, and synchronic (contemporaneous) text or set of texts for analysis and, using the text as a basis, try to establish the conventions governing the larger system (in this case the series *Fangface* and the larger system of children's animated television). Compared with other studies of children's television, Hodge and Tripp's work seems startling new. For, in fact, cartoons have only occasionally been subjected to any kind of literary analysis, and never to the painstaking detail Hodge and Tripp expend on *Fangface*. Instead, child psychologists and media sociologists have tended to use the methods of quantitative content analysis to "measure" the children's cartoon during a fixed block of hours in the broadcasting schedule.

Content analysts count how many acts of violence occur, how many male and female characters there are, how many minority characters appear, how often villains speak with a foreign accent, and so on. The virtue of a structuralist/semiotic analysis in this case, then, is that it focuses on both syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations. These combinations and structures are usually lost in content analysis, in which the meanings of discrete units of information within a television program are not thought to depend on the context in which they appear. This is another important principle of structuralism: the meaning of each sign within a text derives from its relationship to other signs in the same system. As Terry Eagleton puts it: "Structuralism proper contains a distinctive doctrine . . . the belief that the individual units of any system have meaning only by virtue of their relations to one another. . . . [Y]ou become a card-carrying structuralist only when you claim that the meaning of each image is wholly a matter of its relation to the other[s]."[19]

In this essay, I will limit myself to recounting Hodge and Tripp's discussion of the fifty-second opening of *Fangface*, which they describe as "highly compressed, using rapid, small-scale syntagms." In most cases, these openings will be "the most salient memory children will have" of a program and its characters. In the first image, Fangface appears wearing a red hat. He licks his lips and smiles. Hodge and Tripp analyze the image this way:

> The picture itself is a syntagm, consisting of a face of an animal with a hat. How do we categorize the two elements, to make up a meaning? Or what categories are implied by meanings that we assign it? The hat looks odd, on Fangface's head. To express the oddness, we can point to the animal nature of Fangface, and the human, cultural quality of the hat. . . . In the paradigmatic dimension the options are a pair of categories *nature/culture* (or *animal/human*, which is a more specific instance of the broader pair), which is the source of the im-

age's meaning. We can translate this meaning into words—Fangface is both animal and human, both nature and culture. This meaning, of course, also underlies the concept of a werewolf. Fangface's hat is odd in another way: it faces backwards. Here one set of paradigmatic categories concerns the position of a hat. This pair backwards/forwards constitutes a single structure. Forwards signals, among other things, conformity, normality; backwards, therefore, signals the opposite: abnormality, non-conformity.[20]

In this passage, Hodge and Tripp have introduced the binary opposition (nature/culture) and proceeded to organize the elements of the television image into paradigmatic sets. Even at this early point, they acknowledge that their description of this one image is partial and incomplete. They have not discussed Fangface's tooth (single like a baby tooth, but big and powerful like adult permanent teeth), or the color of his hat (red, contrasting with other primary colors and with brown, a secondary color).

Hodge and Tripp continue with a description of the next three shots, which follow a bolt of lightning and the title "Fangface":

The sequence is clearly organized by a movement from outside to inside, from nature (as a dangerous threatening force) to culture, the house and the bassinet and the baby protected within by both, . . . starting with a shot of the moon (outside, nature) then showing the
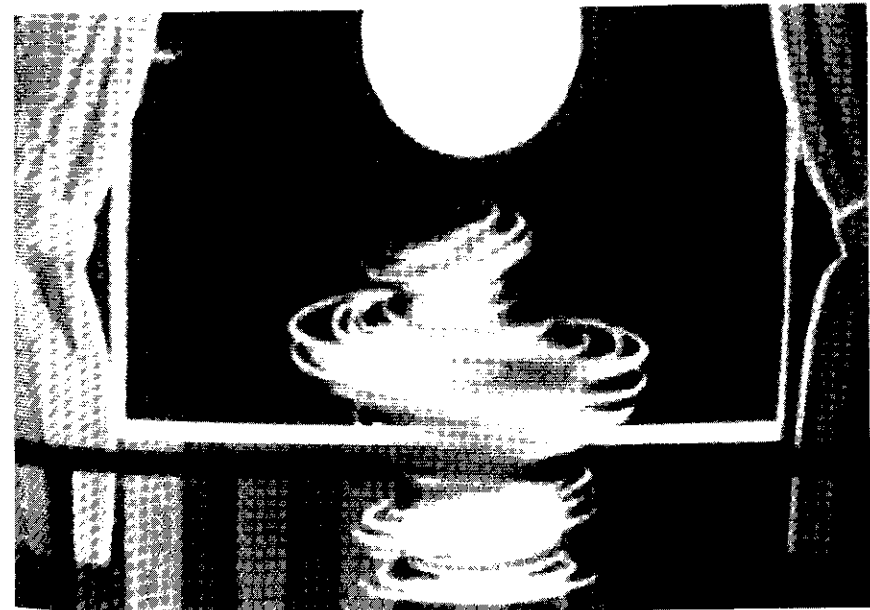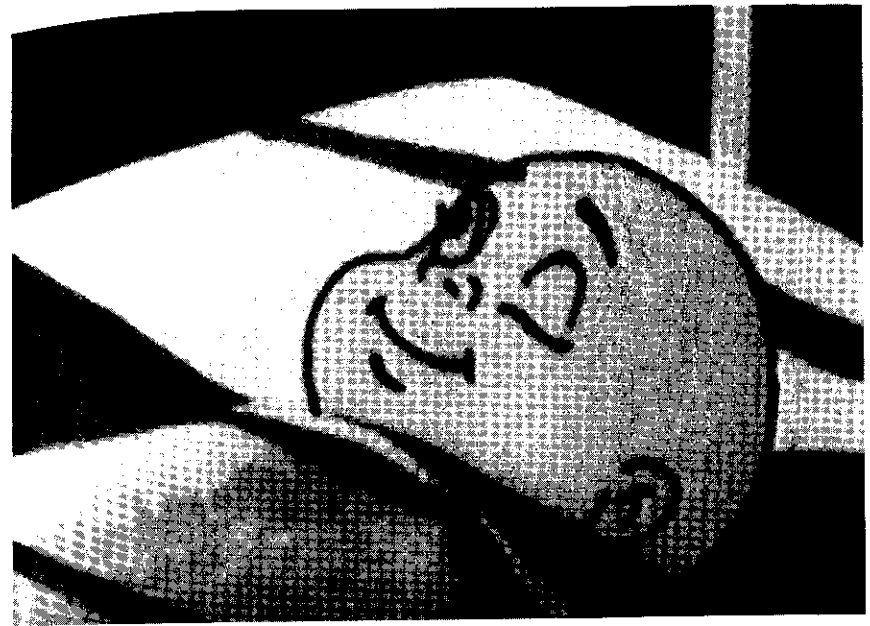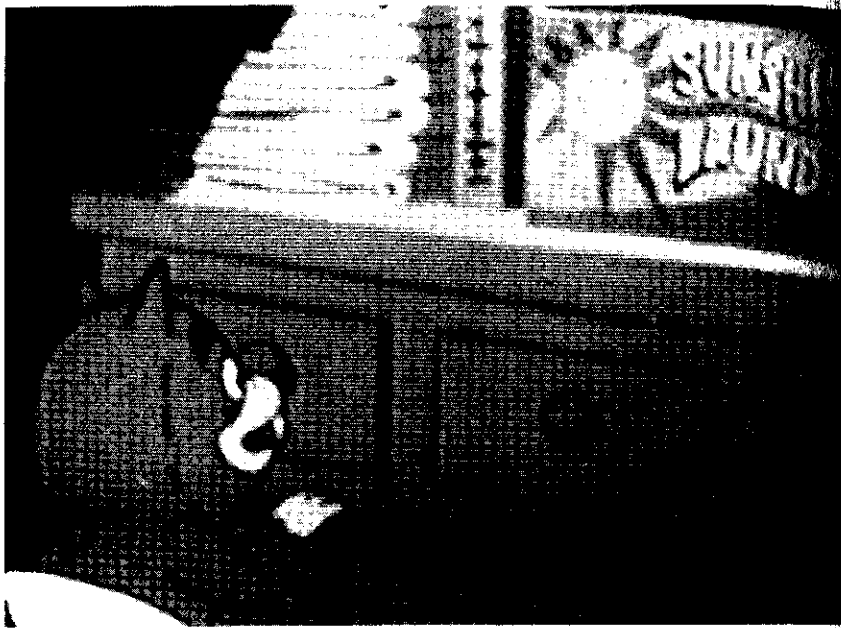
baby at the window (not threatened by nature). The baby spins rapidly, like a whirlwind (nature) or like a machine (culture), and turns into a baby werewolf (nature). However, this werewolf is not a threatening figure. It has a cute expression, and wears a nappy (human culture). Then, with the soundtrack saying "only the sun (nature) can change him back to normal," we see a picture of the sun with alongside it the words "Sunshine Laundry."[21]

A zoom-out reveals that the sun that changes Fangface back into Sherman Fangsworth is not the real sun but a picture of the sun on a box of laundry detergent in the kitchen. To Hodge and Tripp, this signals another ambiguous rendering of the nature/culture split, in this case between the sun belonging to nature—one of the stars—and the sun used for the purposes of a commercial trademark and located in the domestic sphere (culture). So far, Hodge and Tripp have covered only the first nine shots of the titles sequence. This is one of the perennial problems plaguing the semiotician, especially the semiotician of television, in which each segment, each image, can produce an enormous (some would say preposterous) amount of analytical text.

Hodge and Tripp's analysis of the verbal track is more concise. The voice-over in this opening sequence explains: "Every 400 years a baby werewolf is born into the Fangsworth family, and so when the moon shined
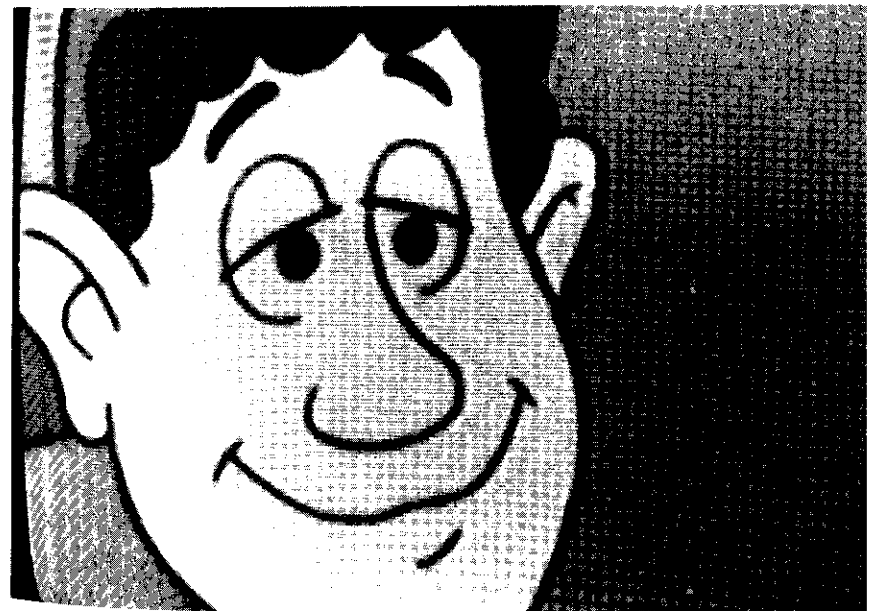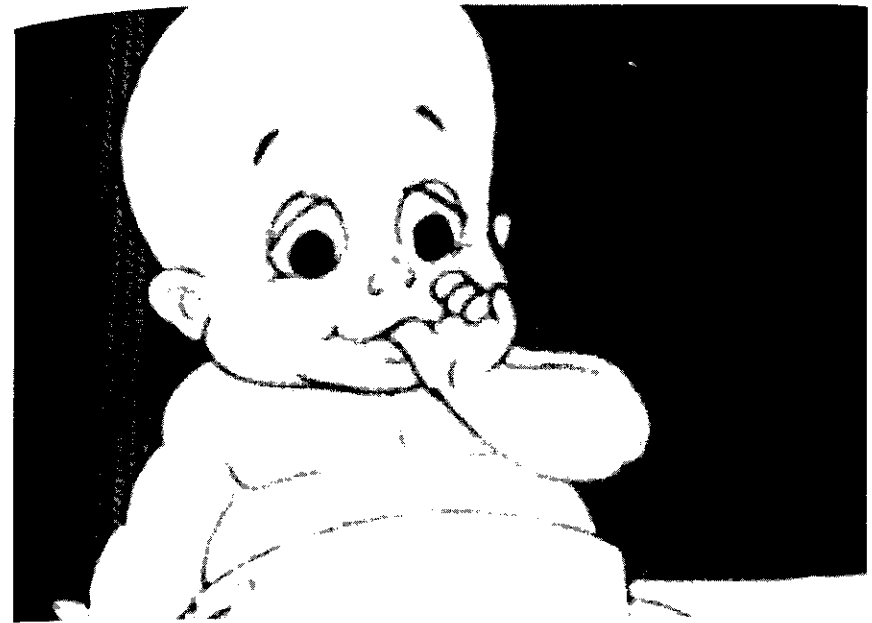
on little Sherman Fangsworth he changed into Fangface. A werewolf! Only the sun can change him back to normal. And so little Fangs grew up and teamed with three daring teenagers, Kim, Biff, and Pugsie, and together they find danger, excitement and adventure." The verbal track is used for conveying time, causal relationships, and exposition—for example, the tale of Fangface's origins. Following Barthes, Hodge and Tripp find that the verbal channel anchors the meaning of the visual. But Hodge and Tripp note that even the verbal track offers some "interesting illogicalities." They focus on the use of "so" to suggest a causality where none logically exists between being a werewolf and growing up and teaming up with "three daring teenagers." However, most viewers would never notice this contradiction unless the words of the *Fangface* opening were printed out for them to read. The words alone do not reveal the strong parodic connotation of the "voice of God" style in which the opening is read and the announcer's voice—deep, booming, masculine, and middle-aged.

Despite the length and detail of many structuralist analyses, critics of the method have accused structuralists of ignoring stray meanings in the text and of closing off potential interpretations. The organization of all the various elements here into one class or the other, nature or culture, is an example of this flaw. But Hodge and Tripp do not impose a singular, unifying meaning in the television opening: "The pattern throughout this sequence is built up of different arrangements of primary opposition: nature-culture; human-animal. The result is not a single consistent message about the relations between the two. Sometimes nature is seen as threatening, sometimes as compatible with culture. Fangface is the focus of both ambiguity and ambivalence."[22]

Is Hodge and Tripp's analysis relevant to other cartoon examples? Does it have a usefulness beyond the specific example of *Fangface*? It may be helpful to attempt to extend this kind of analysis to a more recent example of the television animated series, *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*. In the series opening sequence, the main characters are revealed to be a group of four teenagers, as in *Fangface*. The turtles do not undergo any physical transformations (from human to werewolf); rather, they personify the combination of nature and culture. The turtles are green amphibians "in a half-shell" (nature), but they are also mutants who speak, walk on two feet, bear the names of Renaissance painters, and wear clothing (culture). Each of them wears a masklike scarf over his eyes (in blue, red, orange, and purple) and matching sweatbands around his knees, wrists, and ankles. Each also wears a belt around the waist that secures different martial arts weapons (threatening), and the theme song informs us that they are a "fear-

[handwritten margin note: DIALECTIC MONTAGE]

some fighting team" against the evil Shredder. Yet they have big cute eyes and are not yet grown up (safe). The theme song repeatedly offers the combination of *Ninja* and *teenager* (as in the line, "Splinter taught them to be Ninja teens"), a paradox that emphasizes the oppositions of old/young, discipline/rebellion. *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* seems to reinterpret the nature/culture split as freewheeling, nonconformist American adolescence (nature) versus strict, conformist Japanese adulthood (culture).

Hodge and Tripp find that the nature/culture axis is a highly significant one in the world of *Fangface*, and our brief analysis suggests that it might be applied to *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* as well. Lévi-Strauss found that the same binary opposition underlay the mythological systems of South American tribal cultures. Is nature/culture a binary opposition so basic to narrative that it will always figure in the structuralist's findings? Are structuralism's categories predetermined for the critic by the body of work that has gone before? Or are they so general that the same categories will be found everywhere, in all kinds of texts, thus becoming too general to be valuable as a critical tool? The answers to these questions seem to be both yes and no.

There is a suspicious resemblance between Lévi-Strauss's findings and those of Hodge and Tripp, despite a great divergence in historical and cultural settings. But one can also look at the larger field of children's literature, animated television, and commercial culture and find that the nature/culture division, or the blurring of the two, is a central characteristic of children's media. Animal characters who dress in clothes, talk, and walk on two feet have appeared with ever greater frequency in children's literature throughout the twentieth century: all of them can be seen as negotiating in some ways the nature/culture, animal/human oppositions. Television animation is especially fond of such characters, and they are often treated by journalists and experts on childhood as a new, bizarre, and grossly commercialized example of collusion between toy manufacturers and the television industry. Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles are just the most recent example.

Many of the licensed characters that proliferated in children's television in the 1980s lend themselves to a structuralist analysis using the nature/culture pair: My Little Ponies (horses in pastel colors and makeup); Thundercats (tigers, lions, and cheetahs operating high-tech spacecraft); Ghostbusters (the spirit world tamed by the technical gadgetry of ecto-blasters and proton packs). But how do we explain specific manifestations of the binary opposition? The figures of the werewolf in *Fangface* and Splinter (who is simultaneously a Japanese Ninja master and a rat) in

Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles are products of different historical moments and different racial ideologies. Does the use of the binary opposition nature/culture to analyze these cartoons obscure important differences by being too universalist?

Terry Eagleton has remarked that one of the primary drawbacks to structuralist research is that it is "hair-raisingly unhistorical." To take just one example, the history of children's television and animation lend some important information for an understanding of *Fangface*, although Hodge and Tripp, like most structuralists, do not concern themselves with this context. The animated television series found on Saturday morning television and throughout syndication today are very different from "cartoons" in the sense of animated motion picture shorts by Disney and Hanna Barbera —Donald Duck, Bugs Bunny, or Tom and Jerry. A historical approach could trace these important changes: "limited" animation techniques (fixed backdrops and restricted character movement) were developed in the 1950s for animated television series like *Fangface* in an effort to cut time and costs; these new series then adapted storytelling conventions from the television series and the comic book. Interviews with children suggest how important it is to understand television in such "intertextual" frames. Many children, on seeing *Fangface* for the first time, whispered "Scooby Doo" and "Incredible Hulk" to one another during the opening sequence—

they immediately recognized the show's similarity to other television texts.

A historical approach to the animated television series would also allow us to contextualize and explain the kinds of changes that can be observed in different series from the 1970s to the 1990s, between series like *Fangface* and *Scooby Doo* and contemporary examples like *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*. In the 1970s, the groups of four adventurers were usually made up primarily of human beings, with a token female making one of the four. By the 1990s, many programs had few humans and no females among the group. The settings changed from the small town and the countryside to Manhattan and Tokyo. The villains have been transformed from the cold war's mad scientists, complete with Russian or German accents, into Japanese technocrats; the generic references are no longer to the mystery story and horror film but to the martial arts movie, although both the series discussed here retain many of the conventions of science fiction. All of these comparisons need to be pursued by someone studying the cartoon from the perspective of genre criticism or narrative or ideological analysis. If we pursue a structuralist analysis alone, we might simply arrange the different elements in *Fangface* and *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* into nature/culture oppositions and conclude that they are very similar, whereas a critic better versed in the history of the animated series and the different cultural and political contexts in which they were made might see the differences between the types of series and be better able to explain these differences.

Post-structuralism

The classical structuralist does not look beyond the text to "real" readers, viewers, and listeners to verify whether others find the same kinds of meanings that s/he does. Television studies, over the past fifteen years, has become increasingly preoccupied with this omission and with other limitations of semiotics and structuralism. Although they continue to use the concepts of text, signification, and code, TV scholars have also sought to address the problem in various other ways. Hodge and Tripp's larger study, which includes many different kinds of audience studies in addition to textual analysis, reveals the influence of *post-structuralism*. For example, they showed the *Fangface* episode to groups of children, held discussions with them about the episode, and compared the children's verbal and nonverbal responses to their own semiotic analysis. In another study, they asked teachers to keep a diary recording the (rather infrequent) in-

stances when children mentioned television at school. In the first study, Hodge and Tripp acknowledge the role of the unconscious in shaping the children's and their own interpretations of the text. In the second, they recognize that meanings are influenced by the social institutions—in this case, school—that control and censor children in certain ways.

Throughout their work, Hodge and Tripp recognize that their own analysis is partial and is formed by their own position as adults, academics, and men and by their own subjectivities. In this, they part company with the neutral and objective voice of the semiotician and insist on the necessity of being self-critical about their research. Hodge and Tripp freely admit that they are imposing a logical, rational organization of meanings on the text and, in doing so, are likely to exclude other possible meanings. The meanings they find in Fangface may not be thought of as "residing" in the text at all but are, rather, a product of their own interaction with the text. They allow for the options of chaotic or idiosyncratic meanings in the children's decoding of *Fangface*, as well as for the possibility that children will ignore many elements in the cartoon simply because they are irrelevant to them.[23]

Semiotic analysis tends to "neaten up" the texts it studies: some elements are picked out for significance and others are excluded, repressed. Post-structuralism emphasizes the slippage between signifier and signified —between one sign and the next, between one context and the next —while emphasizing that meaning is always situated, specific to a given context. What gets excluded in a structuralist analysis, and why, has been the subject of such post-structuralists as Jacques Derrida and Julia Kristeva. Theories of psychoanalysis and of ideology, under the influence of post-structuralism, focus on the gaps and fissures, the structuring absences and the incoherencies, in a text like *Fangface*.

Hodge and Tripp are not ready to discard signification altogether or to argue that "anything goes" in interpreting cartoons. They go on to study *Fangface* through empirical tests in which they screen the cartoon opening for children and discuss their understanding of it. They are well aware of the limited and partial nature of the responses that children (and adults) will make about television: how these will be created by the context—the classroom, the home, the laboratory—in which the children are speaking; how gender, race, and age differences within the group will influence the discussion. This brings us to another important insight that Hodge and Tripp adapt from the post-structural critique. We know television through talking and writing about it, through *discourse*. Emile Benveniste used the term discourse to refer to "every utterance assuming a speaker and a hearer, and in the speaker, the intention of influencing the other in some way."[24]

Foucault Discourse

Competing Discourses

In its current usage, discourse carries the stronger implication of speech governed by social, material, and historical forces, which disallow certain things from being said or even thought while forcing us to say certain other things. The term has been used by scholars frequently throughout the 1980s, often in a rather vague way. Many scholars use it in Michel Foucault's sense to refer to a set of complex, multilayered texts that determine and limit what can be said or known about certain subjects and therefore serve particular interests in the power structure of society. Foucault focused on questions of power and knowledge in various discourses—many of them scientific ones—about sexuality, mental illness, and criminality.

In society various discourses about television compete with one another; each is informed by and represents a specific set of interests. For example, in writing about children's television, competing and contradictory discourses are produced by industry producers, such consumer protection groups as Action for Children's Television, and academic "childhood professionals" such as educators, pediatricians, psychologists, and social workers. Each of these groups contributes to a discourse that allows certain things to be said and rules out other things—or makes them unimaginable. The discourse of child experts usually assumes a certain normative view of what children are like (naive, impressionable, uncritical), of what television should do (help children learn to read and to understand math and science), of what is an appropriate way to spend leisure time (being physically and mentally active, *doing* things), and of what television viewing is (passive and mindless). These ideas derive from larger medical, religious, and social science bodies of thought.[25]

Discourse is not "free speech." It is not a perfect expression of the speaker's intentions. Indeed, we cannot think of communicative intentions as predating the constraints of language at all. When Hodge and Tripp interviewed children about *Fangface* and other television shows, they found, in analyzing videotapes and transcripts of the discussion, that in many instances boys silenced girls, adults silenced children, and interviewers silenced subjects—through nonverbal censure of some remarks (glances, laughter, grimacing), by wording questions and responses in certain ways, or by failures to comprehend each other's terms. We can never think about the meaning of television outside of these contexts. As Hodge and Tripp put it, "Verbal language is also the main mediator of meaning. It is the form in which meanings gain public and social form, and through discussion are affected by the meanings of others."[26] They remind us that the entire topic of children and television is circumscribed by spoken and written discourse. No matter how complete the textual analysis of television, no matter how well designed the audience study, it "would still be partial because it would still be located in particular social and historical circumstances."[27]

Perhaps the best way to think of semiotics and structuralism is as a kind of useful exercise for making sure that we know our object before venturing out into other models of study. As a descriptive method, it makes sure we have spent sufficient time with a text before moving on to a series of questions regarding audience activity and the play of television as discourse.

Semiotics frequently speaks of a text as though its meanings were pre-given and would be understood in precisely the same way by everyone. At worst, it operates as though all meanings are translatable and predictable through the work of a gifted, scientifically minded semiotician, whose own unconscious and subjectivity have no effect on the analysis produced. Structuralism challenges traditions in Western philosophy that are based on the notion of the individual as a transcendent, self-present, free agent who exists apart from any social or ideological constraints. Contrary to this position, structuralism is based on a model in which individuals are at birth subjected to the structures of culture and society. However, the flaw in the structuralist model, as post-structuralists have been quick to point out, is that it is inevitably idealist in the philosophical sense that ideas are seen as relatively independent, primary forces that determine reality, rather than as the products of human beings in particular material circumstances. In semiotics and structuralism, signification becomes a kind of pure mental activity divorced from the material world. The post-structuralists have emphasized the contingency of meanings as derived from cultural texts such as those of television, the instability of the signifieds linked to signs, and the importance of the unconscious "structured like a language" in the formation of the subject.

Semiotics is extremely useful in its attempt to describe precisely how television produces meaning and its insistence on the conventionality of the signs. For if signs are conventional, they are also changeable. But semiotics remains silent on the question of how to change a sign system. Stubbornly restricting itself to the text, it cannot explain television economics, production, history, or the audience. Still, semiotics and structuralism, even with their liabilities, have raised questions about theories of gender, of the subject, of psychoanalysis, of ideology—and about the practice of all cultural criticism—that have been usefully applied to television in a wide range of critical practices discussed in the chapters that follow.

NOTES

1. Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), p. 100.

2. Fredric Jameson, *The Prison House of Language: A Critical Account of Structuralism and Russian Formalism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1972), p. 105. In a similar vein, Raymond Williams discusses the borrowing of the term *structural* from the sciences and the problems that created (*Keywords* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1976], pp. 254–55).

3. Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976), p. 16.

4. Ibid., p. 17 (Eco's italics).

5. See the description of television coverage at the White House in Thomas Whiteside, "Standups," *The New Yorker*, 2 December 1985, pp. 81–113.

6. Margaret Morse, "The Television News Personality and Credibility," in *Studies in Entertainment: Critical Approaches to Mass Culture*, ed. Tania Modleski (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), pp. 55–79.

7. Eco, *Theory*, p. 7.

8. Roland Barthes, "Myth Today," in *The Barthes Reader*, ed. Susan Sontag (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), pp. 93–149.

9. Herbert Zettl, *Television Production Handbook* (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1984), p. 596.

10. Richard Dyer makes this point in "Entertainment and Utopia," in *Movies and Methods II*, ed. Bill Nichols (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), pp. 226–27.

11. John Ellis, *Visible Fictions: Cinema, Television, Video* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982), p. 130.

12. Roland Barthes, "Rhetoric of the Image," in *Image/Music/Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), p. 38.

13. Ibid., p. 40.

14. Rick Altman, "Television/Sound," in Modleski, *Studies in Entertainment*, pp. 39–54.

15. Umberto Eco, "Innovation and Repetition: Between Modern and Post-Modern Aesthetics," *Daedalus* 114 (Fall 1985): 162.

16. Eco, *Theory*, p. 214.

17. Christian Metz, *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema*, trans. Michael Taylor (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 106.

18. See Roland Barthes, *Elements of Semiology*, trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (New York: Hill and Wang, 1968), pp. 58–59.

19. Eagleton, *Literary Theory*, p. 94.

20. Robert Hodge and David Tripp, *Children and Television: A Semiotic*
Approach, pp. 26–27.

21. Ibid., pp. 26–27.

22. Ibid., p. 28.

23. Morley makes this point, which has been increasingly taken up by cultural studies, in *Family Television: Cultural Power and Domestic Leisure* (London: Comedia, 1986), p. 30.

24. Emile Benveniste, *Problems in General Linguistics* (Coral Gables, Fla.: University of Miami, 1971), p. 209.

25. See Ellen Seiter, "Sold Separately: Aspects of Children's Consumer Culture" (tentative title), publication forthcoming.

26. Hodge and Tripp, *Children and Television*, p. 71.

27. Ibid., p. 27.

FOR FURTHER READING

The secondary literature is a good place to start in this difficult field. See Terence Hawkes, *Structuralism and Semiotics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977); Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983); or Rosalind Coward and John Ellis, *Language and Materialism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977). After that one might tackle some of the primary texts: Roland Barthes, *Elements of Semiology*, trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (New York: Hill and Wang, 1968); Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976); and Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Wade Baskin (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966.) A useful introduction and a couple of brief, primary texts by Claude Lévi-Strauss and Jacques Lacan may be found in Jacques Ehrmann, ed., *Structuralism* (New York: Anchor Books, 1970).

The problem of verbal and visual codes in media is taken up by Roland Barthes in *Image/Music/Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977). Barthes' entertaining observations about popular culture are collected in *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972). Umberto Eco has written specifically about television in "Interpreting Serials," in *The Limits of Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), pp. 83–100, and in a number of essays entitled "Reports from the Global Village," in *Faith in Fakes* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1986), pp. 133–80. E. H. Gombrich supplies invaluable background on the importance of nonrepresentational codes in images in *Art and Illusion* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1972).

A good introduction to semiotics as applied to television criticism may be

found in John Fiske and John Hartley, *Reading Television* (London: Methuen, 1978); the differences between broadcast television and film are provocatively described in John Ellis, *Visible Fictions: Cinema, Television, Video* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982). An exhaustive application of semiotics to television that also offers an excellent discussion of its limitations is Robert Hodge and David Tripp, *Children and Television: A Semiotic Approach* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1986); Hodge and Tripp's work is highly recommended reading for everyone, even those uninterested in the special topic of children's television. Another useful book is Roger Silverstone, *The Message of Television: Myth and Narrative in Contemporary Culture* (London: Heinemann, 1981).

Television scholars John Fiske, Margaret Morse, and David Morley consistently have used semiotics and structuralism in their work. Fiske's "Moments of Television: Neither the Text nor the Audience," in *Remote Control: Television, Audiences and Cultural Power*, ed. Ellen Seiter, Hans Borchers, Gabriele Kreutzner, and Eva-Maria Warth (London: Routledge, 1989), pp. 56–78, discusses the difficulties in defining television as a text as well as the opportunities for "unlimited semiosis." Margaret Morse offers detailed formalist analyses of various nonfiction television genres in "Talk, Talk, Talk—the Space of Discourse in Television," *Screen* 26, no. 2 (1985): 2–15. David Morley links semiotics and structuralist analysis of television news to the audience members in *The "Nationwide" Audience: Structure and Decoding* (London: British Film Institute, 1980); "Texts, Readers, Subjects," in *Culture, Media, Language*, ed. Stuart Hall, Dorothy Hobson, Andrew Lowe, and Paul Willis (London: Hutchinson, 1980); and "*The 'Nationwide' Audience*: A Critical Postscript," *Screen Education* 39 (Summer 1981): 3–15.

To date, film has been analyzed more carefully by semioticians than has television; some central works that may prove useful are Christian Metz, *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema*, trans. Michael Taylor (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974); and *Language and Cinema*, trans. Donna Umiker-Sebeok (The Hague: Mouton, 1974); Jurij Lotman, *Semiotics of Cinema*, Michigan Slavic Contributions no. 5 (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1976). Bill Nichols relates semiotic issues to ideological analysis in *Ideology and the Image* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981). A lucid case study of a film that uses structuralist methods and attempts to combine these with a historical, Marxist, and psychoanalytic interpretation is Charles Eckert, "Anatomy of a Proletarian Film: Warner's *Marked Woman*," in *Movies and Methods II*, ed. Bill Nichols (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987). Reading Eckert's response to the critics of this article and his own second thoughts about the method can give us a sense of the reception of structuralism by U.S. film scholars in the 1970s (see "Shall We Deport Lévi-Strauss?," *Film Quarterly* 17, no. 3 [Spring 1974]: 63–65).

2

NARRATIVE

THEORY

AND

TELEVISION

sarah kozloff

hereas our ancestors used to listen to tall-tale spinners, read penny dreadfuls, tune in to radio dramas, or rush to the local bijou each Saturday, now we primarily satisfy our ever-constant yearning for stories by gathering around the flickering box in the living room. Television is the principal storyteller in contemporary American society.

But what kind of storyteller is it? In what ways are stories presented on television similar to those transmitted through other media? How can approaching television as a narrative art deepen our understanding of individual shows or of the medium as a whole? How can looking at television help us with our research on narrative itself?

The same decades that have brought the invention, birth, and increasing maturity of broadcast television have also played host to the development of a new critical field, *narratology*, or more simply, *narrative theory*. This theory has its roots in the Soviet Union of the late 1920s, specifically in the work of the Russian Formalists and Vladimir Propp; it has since been fed by the studies of a diverse, international group of linguists, semiologists, anthropologists, folklorists, literary critics, and film theorists. Although several people have made outstanding contributions, the field does not rest on the work or the authority of any founding figure(s). Moreover, although the practitioners come from different disciplines and study various questions in a diverse selection of texts, the field has been (comparatively) free of heated dispute. Topics have been raised, sifted,