

Television Culture

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This "writing" by the viewer is frequently part of the gossip discussed in the last chapter, and is encouraged by the fanzines that we will discuss in the next.

Television has in the past been treated by most critics as a readerly or closed text. This approach fails to account not only for many of its textual characteristics, but also for its various modes of reception and its heterogeneous audiences. While we can certainly see in it forces of closure, these are met by the opposing desires of its audiences to exploit its writerly potential by making their "texts" out of its "work."

This same struggle between openness and closure can be seen in the larger structure of the television text, as well as at the micro level of our reading of the *Hart to Hart* extract. Two opposing ways of organizing texts and therefore meanings are relevant here. The first is one based upon logic and cause and effect. This is essentially a strategy of closure because it attempts to specify relations between incidents or elements in a narrative according to universal laws of logic that are the same for everyone and therefore make (literally) *common* sense. Classic realism is a prime example of this principle in practice: in it all actions have both a cause and a consequence, all narratives start with a disruption to the status quo which is then worked through to a resolution that completes (or closes off) the chain of incidents and leaves both the narrative and the viewer in a state of final equilibrium. There are no unexplained irrelevancies in a classic realist text, everything is logically related to everything else, and everything contributes to the sense of the narrative. Realism's construction of a web of rationally explicable connections between all its elements lies behind its self-presentation as the natural, common-sense way of making sense of the world in a scientific, empiricist, rationalist society such as contemporary western society. It shares with science the attempt to close off the meanings of the world to a unified, universal set and to exclude as "unrealistic" or "unscientific" those aspects of experience that disrupt or defy the schema. Realism and empiricism are both agents of ideological closure, but neither is totally effective.

The second organizing principle is one based upon the laws of association rather than those of cause and effect. This is a much more "open" principle for it allows of a far greater variety of associative relations and thus meanings to be made. It is also more typical of the workings of the subconscious than the conscious mind, and thus works differently, not to say disruptively, to the discipline of reason and logic. Earlier in this chapter we noted some of the textual devices (irony, metaphor, jokes, contradictions) which create the possibility for resistive readings: all of these work by the laws of association, and, as we saw, they are unable to specify with any final authority the relations that the reader should make between their different elements or discourses. The reader of an associative text is less "disciplined" than the

reader of a logical text. Of course, no text is either purely associative or purely logical, all texts contain both principles and the tension between them is part of the textual struggle between openness and closure, between domination and resistance. Television exhibits the contradictions between these conflicting principles more starkly than any other medium. As we saw in chapter 2, its typical mode is realism, which is a logical way of organizing our representation of the world; yet, as Ellis (1982) and Williams (1974) have pointed out, its typical way of organizing its texts at the macro level is essentially associative. Williams uses the term "flow" to express this principle, Ellis the term "segmentation," and the difference between the two words indicates the difference between the two approaches to what is essentially the same principle, that of association.

D Segmentation and flow

When Williams talks about the television experience as being one of "flow" he means that television is a continuous succession of images which follows no laws of logic or cause and effect, but which constitutes the cultural experience of "watching television." He glosses the phrase by contrasting it to the way we normally specify the title of a book or a film; books and films are specific texts, television is a generalized textual experience. Marc (1984) makes a similar point. Summarizing a two-year research program by an audience research firm he writes that "the viewer does not turn on the set so much to view this or that program as to fulfill a desire 'to watch television'." He quotes: "Most of us simply snap on the set rather than select a show. The first five minutes are spent *prospecting* channels, looking for gripping images" (p. 31).

The concept of flow suggests two main characteristics of television, both of which contribute to its textual openness. The first is this associative sequence of images in which any realistic sequence within films or programs is constantly interrupted by commercials, by news breaks, by promos. Williams, used to the more organically organized literary work and to the less interrupted flow of British television, was initially confused by his first experience of American televisual flow:

One night in Miami, still dazed from a week on an Atlantic liner, I began watching a film and at first had some difficulty in adjusting to a much greater frequency of commercial "breaks". Yet this was a minor problem compared to what eventually happened. Two other films, which were due to be shown on the same channel on other nights, began to be inserted as trailers. A crime in San Francisco (the subject of the original film) began to

operate in an extraordinary counterpoint not only with the deodorant and cereal commercials but with a romance in Paris and the eruption of a prehistoric monster who laid waste New York. I can still not be sure what I took from that whole flow. I believe I registered some incidents as happening in the wrong film, and some characters in the commercials as involved in the film episodes, in what came to seem - for all the occasional bizarre disparities - a single irresponsible flow of images and feelings.

(1974: 91-2)

Williams's use of the word "irresponsible" seems to derive from his literary desire for a named author to be responsible for a text, and for this responsibility to be exercised in the production of a coherent, unified text. Of course, no individual is responsible for television's flow in this sense, but that does not mean that the flow is random or unstructured. Indeed, Williams goes on to provide two levels of analysis of this flow in order to uncover its structure. His first level he calls a "long-range analysis of sequence and flow" (pp. 97-8) which consists of a discussion of an evening's typical schedules for six channels. His analysis is relatively superficial. Apart from some generalizations about homogeneity and contrast he has little to say about how the scheduling policy does, in fact, act as an "author" at this level of flow, and, unlike most literary authors, has an explicit and stated intention - to build an identifiable audience which can then be "sold" to advertisers. This institutional, anonymous author, of course, knows all too well the limits of his or her authority - the viewer is free to construct his or her own flow by switching between channels, and though "channel loyalty" exists, it is only a tendency and is never total.

Williams's "medium-range analysis of flow and 'sequence'" (pp. 100-4) is more interesting. He lists forty consecutive segments of a news program including its commercials and promos for programs later in the evening. He notes, for example, the lack of explicit connections between a news report about false claims in drug advertising and two drug commercials later on in the bulletin. He points to a similar lack of connection between promos for a western film and news stories about the Indian protest action at Wounded Knee, and between news stories about a CIA agent being released from China and American soldiers being released from "tiger-cages" in Vietnam. His regret of this lack of explicit or intentional connections in what he calls "undiscriminating sequence" is evidence not only of his literary background, but also of his lack of sympathy with the nature of television and the reading relations it sets up with its audiences. But he does discern under this sequence

a remarkably consistent set of cultural relationships: a flow of consumable reports and products, in which the elements of speed, variety and miscellaneity can be seen as organising: the real bearers of value. (p. 105)

What he does not see is that the lack of connections opens the text up - the relationship between the Wounded Knee item and the promo for the western, for instance, can be read from a progressive or a reactionary position. The textual contradictions reflect contradictory positions in society about the "problem" of the American Indians and their relationship to white power.

Budd, Craig, and Steinman (1985) also find a deep structural coherence underlying apparently disconnected segments of television's flow, and their analysis inevitably "closes" the text down to its ideological, commercial meaning. They analyze the advertisements inserted into an episode of *Fantasy Island* and trace clear links between the first ad of each commercial break and the preceding narrative sequence. For instance, a narrative sequence dealing with a mother's concern for her child's happiness is immediately followed by a commercial for a cereal which makes children happy. Similarly, the sequence in which a mother perceives a problem is followed by a commercial for an ointment which solves an itching problem, and a sequence in which the mother reunites the family across generations is followed by two commercials, one of which shows how Cream of Wheat reunites old friends and generations, and the other in which A.T.&T. does the same. They conclude that

commercials respond fairly directly to the problems, desires and fantasies articulated in the program's narrative by promising gratification through products. (p.297)

The links they describe may well be there, but they are links of association, not of cause and effect, and some of them, for instance the second, are contradictory rather than complementary.

Because sequence and flow are organized according to associative rather than logical relations, the connections are not made explicitly in the text, but are devolved to the viewer where their associative nature will allow them to be made subconsciously. These connections will then not necessarily work to unify the segments of the text (as Williams wishes them to) but may leave the contradictions between segments active and unresolved. Textual unity is an agent of ideological closure, and resisting that unification resists that closure.

The other characteristic suggested by the word "flow" is that television should be continuous and should not end. It is commonplace in the USA for television to be broadcast twenty-four hours a day, but this is still comparatively unusual elsewhere, where there is often pressure from the public (and the broadcasters) to extend the hours of transmission. This does not necessarily mean that people want to watch twenty-four hours a day, but rather that they wish to decide for themselves when to stop watching, and not to have that decision made for them by government regulation or by the economic concerns of the networks.

Altman (1986) relates the extent of the flow of television to its economic context and usefully reminds us that flow promotes and is exploited by the commercial interests of television. By disguising the boundaries between programs, it disguises potential switch-off points:

Provisionally, I would suggest the following hypothesis: flow replaces discrete programming to the extent that 1) competition for spectators is allowed to govern the broadcast situation, and 2) television revenues increase with increased viewing. (p. 40)

In support of this he argues that television programming is most discrete in eastern bloc countries, but that in quasi-state controlled, quasi-independent systems, such as those of France and Britain, a measure of flow appears in the scheduling, whereas network US television is dominated by a heavily promoted flow of images. US public cable channels, on the other hand, approximate more to the British and French situations.

In the USA two sorts of strategy have evolved to promote flow and encourage channel loyalty, one of scheduling, and one of promotion. Scheduling strategy designs the sequence and choice of programs in an attempt to build and hold a large prime-time audience whose demographics are desired by advertisers. It will typically use a strong "lead-in" program to begin prime time and attract the audience that must then be held. Then two alternative, or alternating, strategies are used. "Tent-poling" consists of placing a strong, popular program at the peak of prime time and "hanging" less popular ones on either side of it. "Mammocking" consists of suspending a weaker or newer program between two strong, well-established ones. Both strategies, as their metaphorical names suggest, aim to tie programs together into an unbroken flow and to produce equivalently unbroken viewing in the audience. This scheduling strategy is then supported by the promotional, in which "promos" for programs later in the evening are inserted early into the flow, so that later programs are tied in to earlier ones. Similarly, programs are consistently advertised in journals such as *TV Guide* as linked pairs, threes, or groups. So *O'Hara*, 8.00 p.m., and *Spenser for Hire*, 9.00 p.m., share the same *TV Guide* advertisement under the headline "Top Guns" (April 6-10, 1987), and in the same issue CBS takes a page to advertise its Monday night's flow of women's sitcoms, *Kate and Allie*, 7.00 p.m., *My Sister Sam*, 7.30 p.m., *Newhart*, 8.00 p.m. and *Designing Women*, 8.30 p.m.

Such an account of the economic purpose of televisual flow should not blind us to its textual characteristics. It is effective in the economic sphere only because its textuality appeals to popular tastes and modes of viewing.

Though Williams does not use the word "segment," his analysis reveals how segmented the television flow is. Ellis (1982) argues that it is characteristic of television to broadcast its text in relatively discrete segments, "small,

sequential unities of images and sounds whose maximum duration seems to be about five minutes" (p. 112). These segments are organized into groups like news stories, commercials, or scenes of a narrative, and the flow occurs across these segments. These segments typically follow each other with no necessary connections, and indeed, Ellis argues, news and current affairs programs have made a virtue of this necessity by deliberately mixing items. Title sequences frequently exploit this segmentation by editing together shots from the forthcoming or past programs in a rapid, highly enigmatic way. Music video is another example of exaggerated segmentation. Even drama series and serials, where the narrative requires the principles of logic and cause and effect, may be segmented into short scenes with logical links omitted. The switching between one narrative strand and another in multi-narrative programs such as soap operas is frequently rapid and unmotivated.

Segmentation is more characteristic of open or writerly texts than of closed or readerly ones. Allen (1985) finds soap opera's abrupt changes from plotline to plotline a device that opens the text up and requires an active reader:

The mere syntagmatic juxtaposition of two apparently unrelated scenes represents a paradigmatic indeterminacy for the reader: could the relationship between them be more than sequential? (p. 80)

This "indeterminacy" is, of course, a general effect of segmentation and is not unique to soap operas, though it is emphasized in them. Indeed, Allen's final question could equally well be asked of the "syntagmatic juxtaposition" in the news of the "apparently unrelated" stories of a "strike" and of rising unemployment (see chapter 15). Ellis (1982) agrees that the disruptive breaks between segments outweigh any attempts of continuity or consequence to unify the text. Syntagmatic links are agents of closure (which is why realistic narrative insists on proper consequence rather than mere sequence), and their absence opens up "syntagmatic gaps" through which the "reader inserts himself or herself into the text" (Allen 1985: 78).

Larger versions of these gaps occur between episodes, and in these the viewer "enters the text" in the imaginative and creative way that we traced earlier in this chapter and in chapter 5. These gaps quite literally make the soap opera a producerly text, for they invite the reader to "write in" their absences, and the invitation is readily accepted by many viewers, of whom Palmer's (1986) subjects are typical:

[About *Fame*] We usually get together and start talking about it, 'cause it's really good and you remember what happened, and you wonder what's going to happen next in it. (*Clara*, 11) (p. 101)

We could both tell each other about it if we missed any of the TV and we could both think of what is going to happen if it is continued. (*Philippa*, 8) (p. 101)

Advertisers, with their powerful economic motive, have been concerned to exploit this productively activity of television audiences. Martin Buckland, an executive with USP Needham, Melbourne, says:

In techniques and style, there is a trend towards advertisements in which the viewer is asked to complete the circle: the message is implied rather than stated, and it is up to the public to take the final step in understanding. This has come about because of increasing audience sophistication - largely as a result of growing up with television.

(quoted in Hewitt 1986: 14)

An ad for men's toiletries by Manege exemplifies this:

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Visual <p>ECU of bottle - woman's hand - rubbing it on man's jaw, hand slipping down man's chest, playing with the button on his denim jacket.</p>	<p>D Voice-over</p> <p>When a woman puts Manege on a man he knows that the more she puts on . . . (long pause) . . . the more life will take off.</p>
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The long pause invites the viewer to "complete the circle," to write "she" instead of "life." The "newly written" viewer-script, which says what the official one dare not, exploits the polysemy of language in its pun, for it means simultaneously "the more of his clothes she takes off" (supporting the visual message), "the more of her clothes she takes off" (the scandalous, unspeakable message), and "the more she 'flies high'" (as in the verbal message). The writing by the viewer exceeds that of the official script, for it contains three, as opposed to two, patterns of meaning and it implicates the viewer into the process of making meanings for the product. Obviously the advertiser hopes that this implication will engage the desires of the viewer and transfer them to the product. But, as I shall argue in chapters 13 and 16, the viewers' pleasures of making meanings, of "writing," are not necessarily transferred to the interests of the advertiser: many more viewers gain pleasure from advertisements than buy the products being promoted.

Segmentation allows another form of "writing" by the active viewer - zapping. Zapping consists of flicking through the channels watching snatches of each, and moving on as soon as attention or pleasure is lost. Commercial breaks often trigger the finger on the channel switcher and the US networks plan their schedules so that their ad breaks occur at the same time in an attempt to ensure both that their audience watches the ads which provide the networks' income and that they "hold" their audience through the ads. The advent of cable has nullified any effectiveness this strategy may have had. The television viewer can watch a program under roughly similar conditions

to the watching of a film, or a televisually literate viewer (and many younger viewers are particularly literate) can watch two programs simultaneously by zapping back and forth between them, using his or her televisual literacy to fill in the enlarged syntagmatic gaps produced by the practice which Palmer (1986: 79) calls "systematic switching" in order to distinguish it from the more random channel searches of zapping.

Zapping allows the viewer to construct a viewing experience of fragments, a postmodern collage of images whose pleasures lie in their discontinuity, their juxtapositions, and their contradictions. This is segmentation taken to the extreme of fragmentation and makes of television the most open productively text for it evades all attempts at closure. It is a form of scratch video that produces an individualized television text out of its mass-produced works.

The television text, then, is composed of a rapid succession of compressed, vivid segments where the principle of logic and cause and effect is subordinated to that of association and consequence to sequence. Flow, with its connotations of a languid river, is perhaps an unfortunate metaphor: the movement of the television text is discontinuous, interrupted, and segmented. Its attempts at closure, at a unitary meaning, or a unified viewing subject, are constantly subjected to fracturing forces.

D Television and oral culture

Television's distinctive textual characteristics, quite different from those of literature or film, have derived from and are inserted into a popular culture in which orality plays a central role. Television is so often treated as an inferior cultural medium with inferior textual characteristics because our culture is one that validates the literary, or rather the literate, and consequently devalues the oral. Fiske and Hartley (1978) list some of the main differences between oral and literate modes of communication:

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Oral modes <p>dramatic episodic mosaic dynamic active concrete ephemeral social</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Literate modes <p>narrative sequential linear static artifact abstract permanent individual</p>
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Chapter 15

News readings, news readers

News is a high-status television genre. Its claimed objectivity and independence from political or government agencies is argued to be essential for the workings of a democracy. Television companies applying for renewal of their licenses turn to their news and current affairs programs as evidence of their social responsibility. But the basic definition of news as factual information that its viewers need in order to be able to participate in their society gives us only half the story.

News is also a commodity. It is expensive to gather and distribute, and must produce an audience that is of the right size and composition to be sold to advertisers. In a cynical but productive phrase, news has been defined as "that which is printed on the back of advertisements." News has to be popular, it has to produce an audience. All television channels or networks use an early evening news program to lead into their prime-time schedules. This is designed to draw the male of the household into the TV audience. He is assumed to have just returned from work, finding his wife and children already watching the softer program preceding "his" news. Hobson (1980) has found that it is common for mothers to keep children quiet "while father watches the news," and in a later study (Hobson 1982) she found women who talked about "my" soap opera in contrast to "his" news. The national news is primarily masculine culture, though it often ends with a "softer" item that is intended to bring the female back into the audience. It is typically followed by a softer news magazine program, often of local as opposed to national interest, which is designed to appeal to women (see Morley 1986) and to consolidate the family audience in front of the set for the prime-time, prime-profit advertisements that are to be wedged apart by programs for the next two or three hours.

So what is this genre of news to which society and the schedulers attach such importance? It is one of the most complex and widely studied TV genres and one that mobilizes most effortlessly some of the key defining characteristics of the medium - "nowness," segmentation, repetition.

Most studies of television news concentrate on the institutional processes that produce it, or else use content analysis to reveal the categories of events

that are deemed newsworthy and the proportionate time or space devoted to each. In this chapter I study news as discourse, that is, as a set of conventions that strive to control and limit the meanings of the events it conveys. Theories of news which foreground questions of accuracy, bias, or objectivity are based on an empiricist notion of reality that lies outside the theoretical framework of this book. These questions are, however, important not because they allow us to judge the quality of the news but because of the insight they can give into the professional ideology of the news makers.

News professionals in particular and broadcasters in general are keen to separate news from fiction, and to locate it firmly in the information side of the popular but leaky classification of television programs into the macro-genres of information and entertainment. The idea that television is a window on the world, now known as the "transparency fallacy," still survives, if anywhere, in TV newsrooms. Generic distinctions between information and entertainment or fact and fiction are crucial for the producers, for they describe different sorts of ethics, different definitions of responsible programming. For the viewers, too, this distinction marks a difference in reading relations, though I shall argue later that this is not as clearly cut as it first appears. But textually, there is not a lot of difference between television news and television series or serial drama. The fondness of television for docudramas is a sign of how easily its textual forms cross the generic boundaries between fact and fiction - and the public outcry that these docudramas frequently cause evidences the public's belief in the need to keep the genres distinct. In textual terms, the news may not be all that different from a soap opera, but there are very real differences in the way that the audiences and producers understand and approach the two genres.

The viewers studied by Tulloch and Moran (1986) not only kept the genres quite distinct but they politicized the distinction. The scheduling of the soap opera *1 Country Practice* against *60 Minutes* on Sunday and *The World Around Us* on Monday split households along gender lines, with the males preferring the "factual" programs, and the females and children the soap. As Tulloch and Moran put it:

All television programs yield knowledge and ideas about the world. Father, mother and girls don't dispute that. What is in dispute is what knowledge in what form . . . Drama is concerned primarily with the private sphere, the emotional and the domestic . . . News, current affairs and documentaries are more concerned with the public sphere.

(1986:239)

A similar gender-genre difference emerged elsewhere in their study; typical was the man who considered that the masculine "factual" programs stimulated "discussion," or "conversation," whereas the feminine soaps produced only "gossip" at the level of "what's happening to Vera in the next episode" (Tulloch and Moran 1986: 236).

This "common-sense" view, for all its gender politics, that what happens on the news is determined by fact, whereas what happens in a soap opera is determined by imagination, is a good enough place to start our investigation into the nature of television news. The news tells the story of the key events of the last twenty-four hours. This simple definition introduces the contradictions that we shall explore in this chapter. For events seem to be part of nature, whereas the telling of stories and the selection of the *key* events are clearly cultural activities. The first struggle of news is to impose the order of culture upon the polymorphous nature of "the real." The news text is engaged in a constant struggle to contain the multifarious events and their polysemic potential within its own conventions. For news is as conventional as any other form of television; its conventions are so powerful and so uninspected because the tyranny of the deadline requires the speed and efficiency that only conventions make possible. The type of stories, the forms that they will take, and the program structure into which they will be inserted are all determined long before any of the events of the day occur. During the forced withdrawal of Belgium from the (then) Belgian Congo, an American journalist landed at Lusaka airport and, on seeing a group of white women waiting for evacuation, rushed over to them with the classic question, "Has anyone here been raped, and speaks English?" His story had been "written" before landing, all he needed was a few local details.

The popularity of the news is determined largely by its generic characteristics which constitute the "strategies of containment" which attempt to control "reality." In this chapter I shall model television news as a constant struggle between these strategies and the disruptive forces that are characteristic of both "the reality" that news refers to and the social differences amongst its various audiences.

D The strategies of containment

The news's way of making sense of the real and of controlling its potentially anarchic polysemy follows those two familiar semiotic axes of the paradigmatic and the syntagmatic. The paradigmatic works through the processes of selection and categorization, the syntagmatic through combination and narrativization.

D Categorization

Galtung and Ruge (1973) suggest that for an event to be deemed newsworthy it should be recent, concern elite persons, be negative, and be surprising.

Recency demands that a newsworthy event should have occurred within the last twenty-four hours, and during that time things should have happened that can be seen as an origin and as a point of achievement or closure. There is little sense of continuous history in news, and few references to previous events. Even an ongoing story is divided into twenty-four hour self-contained segments: recency and segmentation are mutually supporting characteristics.

An event should concern elite persons. This means that the people in the news will all be familiar, if not individually, then at least in their social roles. Certain political, official, sporting, and entertainment people will be familiar in their own right. In other cases, the roles will be familiar even if the individuals filling them may vary - the trade unionist, the disaster survivor, the minority spokesperson, the victim. The socially powerful tend to be familiar to us as individuals, the powerless or the voices of opposition are familiar mainly as social roles, which are filled by a variety of forgettable individuals. The elite, who appear repeatedly, bear the accumulated meanings of their past appearances. Because these are embodied in an individual they carry greater semiotic weight in our individualistic society than do the accumulated meanings of "roles," such as union organizer, victim, and so on. The social power of elite persons is underscored by the narrative power that familiarity confers.

News occurs in the public sphere (which is where elite people circulate) rather than the domestic. The domestic appears only when it is the site of extreme or violent crime, and can thus be constructed as a matter of public law and order. The public sphere is one that our society deems to be masculine and is thus peopled largely by men. News is largely about "the masculine" and aimed at a male audience, so it is hardly surprising that news stories are structured to provide a point of narrative closure that approximates that of masculine fictional narrative. News stories have to impose a closure upon the openness of ongoing events: recency must be tempered by completion.

News is negative. What is new is what disrupts the normal. What is absent from the text of the news, but present as a powerful force in its reading, are the unspoken assumptions that life is ordinarily smooth-running, rule- and law-abiding, and harmonious. These norms are of course prescriptive rather than descriptive, that is, they embody the sense of what our social life ought to be rather than what it is, and in doing this they embody the ideology of the dominant classes. This singular category of "the abnormal" means, for example, that murder and an industrial dispute can be seen as similarly disruptive, and the conceptual strategies that enable the news and its readers to construct similar ways of understanding such apparently disparate events are an important part of its ideological practice.

The unstated, ideological norms which make this conceptual strategy

possible are those of *our* society. Negative events in another part of the world do not bear the same relationship to these norms and are therefore read differently. Third World countries are, for example, conventionally represented in western news as places of famines and natural disaster, of social revolution, and of political corruption. These events are not seen as disrupting *their* social norms, but as confirming ours, confirming our dominant sense that western democracies provide the basics of life for everyone, are stable, and fairly and honestly governed. When deviations from these norms occur in our own countries they are represented as precisely that, deviations from the norm: in Third World countries, however, such occurrences are represented as *their* norms which differ markedly from ours. For the western news media, the Third World is a place of natural and political disasters and not much else.

The common complaint that our news is always "bad" ignores the fact that "the bad" is treated and read as a deviation from the norm, which is therefore constructed as "good," and that this normative assumption is all the more powerful for being unspoken. It would be interesting to know how TV news is read by its viewers in the Soviet Union, for it is a convention of Soviet news to lead with positive stories such as factories meeting their quotas or agricultural successes. It is possible that a sector of Soviet viewers read such stories cynically, that is, as deviations from the norm of industrial inefficiency. Such oppositional readings would occur when the conventions of news fail to match the conventions by which people "read" their social experience. The relationship between these two sets of conventions is interactive: the conventions by which news stories are selected and told, and thus the sense that they propose, cannot impose themselves upon an unwilling or oppositional audience.

Reading the news cynically or angrily can deconstruct its conventions and demystify their attempted ideological practice. Trade unionists who are angered by the news convention that their actions are always represented as "demands" whereas employers are said to "offer" read this convention as further evidence of the power of the dominant classes to naturalize their social interests into "ordinary" common sense. It is, of course, only convention and its relationship to social power that prevents the news reporting that the unions "offered" to work for a 5 per cent wage increase but the employers "demanded" that they accept 2i per cent. The word "offer" suggests that its agents, those who offer, are generous, take the interests of the other party into account, and are comfortably in control, whereas "demand" suggests that its agents are greedy, selfish, and having to struggle to gain control of the situation. Demand is a disruptive word which places the "demanders" within the negative forces that make news. Conventions such as these are an important part of news's struggle to contain and defuse the

disruptive forces at work in society while fulfilling its obligation to represent them.

There is, of course, a connection between elitism and negativity: the positive or "normal" actions of elite people will often be reported whereas those without social power are considered newsworthy only when their actions are disruptive or deviant. In representing the dominant as performing positive actions and the subordinate as performing deviant or negative ones the news is engaging in the same ideological practices as fictional television. We saw in chapters 1 and 8 how heroes embodied socially central values, whereas villains and victims embodied deviant and disruptive ones. Violence, which is the dominant mode of representing the relationship between heroes and villains, is thus a concrete metaphor of social or class conflict.

Conflict is as important in making a good news story as it is in making a good fiction, and its relationship to the social system is similar. News values and fictional values stem from the same society, they both bear the same need to be popular, and it is not surprising that they are fundamentally similar. We will explore more of these similarities in this chapter (see "News narrative," p. 293).

It is perhaps paradoxical that a convention of news should be its "surprisingness." But the tension between the predictability of the conventions and the assumed unpredictability of "the real" demands some recognition. The whole operation of news gathering and reporting resists this unpredictability, for news stories are essentially prewritten; all that the reporter does is fill in local details. This conventionalization of the real must never be acknowledged, however, for to do so would expose the transparency fallacy. Surprisingness is therefore valued as a sign that the unpredictability of the real triumphs over the conventionality of news, that it is, finally, reality that determines the news. Surprisingness is a necessary bedfellow to the belief in the objectivity of the news.

D Subcategories

The primary classification, whose criteria have been outlined above, is that of news or not-news. Once an event or person has been selected as newsworthy, a further categorization takes place (the sequence of the levels of categorization is analytical, not chronological). Hartley (1982: 38-9) suggests that news is subdivided into the following categories: politics, the economy, foreign affairs, domestic news, occasional stories, and sport. We may wish to modify these categories, for instance, by adding the category of entertainment, or by dividing "domestic news" (as Hartley does) into the "hard" - stories of conflict and crime in the public sphere - and the "soft" - warm-

hearted or human-interest stories. Similarly, we may wish to make a subcategory of "industrial" news within "the economy." The actual categories themselves are not hard and fast, but are indicative: it is the process of categorization as a major sense-making act that is the point at issue. Categorization constructs a conceptual grid within which "raw" events can be instantly located and thus inserted into a familiar set of conceptual relationships. Categories are normalizing agents. They also serve as simple but effective structuring principles for the building of news programs. "Industrial affairs" or "foreign affairs" categories are used to group stories and to place them in the conventional sequence of the news flow. These groupings are part of the strategy by which news masks its social process of representation and presents itself as objective, as driven by events in "the real." Thus "industry" and "foreign affairs" appear to be empirical categories based in nature, yet their operation is highly ideological. A story of an industrial dispute appears to be naturally, rather than ideologically, linked with one on employment or falling exports. Similarly stories on a famine in northern Africa, political corruption in Nicaragua, riots in Bengal, and guerrilla activity in Indonesia all appear to be naturally linked as part of "foreign affairs." Putting them in one category invites the reader to understand them in terms of their similarities rather than their differences, and the similarities, in both the industrial and foreign examples, make a sense that serves the interests of the western bourgeoisie.

But categories do not only link stories, they also separate them. Linking a story of an industrial dispute with one on unemployment is no more significant than separating it from stories of politics, of inner-city crime, or even of illiteracy rates. Categories fragment as well as cohere, and news follows the practice of the public sphere in compartmentalizing social life in order to make it both practically and semiotically more controllable. The semiotic and political practice of categorizing social life into neat compartments - the economy, education, crime, industry, etc. - is an essentially reactionary one, because it implies that a "problem" can be understood and solved within its own category: localizing the definition of problems encourages local "solutions" and discourages any critical interrogation of the larger social structure. Tracing links between categories, therefore, sees any one problem as symptomatic of the social structure and thus promotes a more radical, or socially literate, understanding.

The categorization of news and its consequent fragmentation is a strategy that attempts to control and limit the meanings of social life, and to construct the interests of the western bourgeoisie into "natural" common sense. Compartmentalization is central to news's strategy of containment.