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Television as Myth and Ritual

Every nation and culture finds a way to continually retell its folktales and myths. If once we did this around camp-fires and through wandering bards, today we recast our traditional stories in modern clothes through our most popular medium, television. Throughout the world the highest audience ratings are for folktale-like soap operas that embody our historical contests, heroes and villains, and, usually, happy endings. The American-produced *Dallas* and *Dynasty* are set in the old 'wild West' states of Texas and Colorado – but extended into new frontiers of high finance and international intrigue. The BBC's *EastEnders* celebrates the mythic Cockney, working class community of East London. In the *telenovelas* of Mexico and Brazil one detects a continuation of classical Latin American folktale themes.

In recent years, media researchers have focussed more on the role of TV myth and folktale forms in creating whole national cultures. The broad mythic dimension of TV is the context for understanding TV's influence on individual attitudes and behaviours. While TV violence, for example, may influence direct imitative behaviours in some individuals, reproducing myths of violent national expansion or male dominance may shape the values of virtually everybody in the society. To study whole cultures, media studies are borrowing concepts such as myth, folktale and ritual from cultural anthropology and applying these to TV.

This issue reviews research on television as myth and ritual at three levels: 1) the mythic functions of television in a culture, 2) the folktale and mythic structure of television programming, and 3) the audience's experience of television as a quasi-religious ritual.

REVIEW ARTICLE

I: The Functions of Television Myth in Our Cultures

Roger Silverstone. *The Message of Television: Myth and Narrative in Contemporary Culture*. London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1981.
Myles Breen and Farrel Corcoran. 'Myth in the Television Discourse'. *Communication Monographs* 49 (June 1982), pp.127-136; 'Myth, Drama, Fantasy Theme and Ideology in Mass Media Studies', in Brenda Dervin and Melvin J. Voight (eds.) *Progress in Communication Sciences*, Vol. VII. Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing Corporation, 1986, pp.195-224.

Myth, Silverstone notes, does not refer to primitive, fable-like explanations of natural events that modern science has done away with. All cultures, primitive and modern, have their grand narrative histories that explain the origins of a people and present their ultimate destinies and ideals. If the Judeo-Christian biblical account explained origins in terms of an Adam and Eve and the progress of a chosen people, today we are more likely to explain our mythic origins in terms of universal evolution and to project our utopian dreams in the form of continual technical, scientific, and social progress. Humans are inevitably myth-makers, because we are not just a mechanical part of history but we are *constructors* of history in terms of our values, intentions and aspirations. Every culture has its area of practical, 'scientific' explanation of the world as it is, but every culture also has its area of explanation of how life and history *should* unfold and how we want to make it develop. Myths gather up pieces of the science of the day, common sense, philosophical presuppositions, literary imagination and weave all this into an

orderly 'map' of our collective future. In our myths we find the meaning of life and inspirational symbols for everyday challenges.

Television is Part Folktale, Part Myth

Folktale and myth are often seen as two different levels of story telling. Folktales are intended to entertain with suspenseful, often fictional narrative plots; they deal more with ordinary people like us than with archetypal heroes. Myth responds to basic human questions about the meaning of suffering, life and death with a logical resolution. Myth often has a kind of sacred, ritual significance inspiring a certain reverence and belief in a cosmic order.

Horace Newcomb, in his interviews with TV producers, found that most simply wanted to attract audiences with an entertaining story.¹ Producers know that we come to an evening of TV to relax and they tend to translate news, documentary, sport, etc. into folktale formats to entertain us. But producers also know that we

bring with us, in the back of our consciousness, nagging worries about how rising crime rates or economic depression may affect our personal lives. Deeper mythical themes respond to these perennial human anxieties. To continue attracting audiences, however, old stories and myths must be given a new twist by portraying age-old issues in terms of immediate, contemporary life. Thus, the relaxation of TV is not just the suspenseful folktale, but being able to come away from TV sustained in our belief and hope that, after all, there is some order and meaning in the world.

Underlying the apparently trivial police and adventure shows of TV is the mythic hope that ultimately good will triumph over the criminal bestiality lurking in all of us, and man-made civilization will bring order to chaotic wilderness. The French media researcher, Jean Bianchi, points out that series such as *Dallas* and *Dynasty* have a world-wide attraction because they reaffirm the universal myth of family solidarity and extol personal loyalty over individualistic greed.²

Reaffirming National Cultural Myths

Television tends to be organized in national networks oriented to the tastes, interests and historical memories of national audiences. The most evident dimension of TV's mythic discourse lies in national cultural traditions.

A national mythology is often forged in the heroic, difficult moments when a people are founding a new nation through seemingly superhuman struggles. The stories handed down may have a historical basis, but they become myths as leaders and the media select those historical facts to fit a collective dream of the kind of nation the people are trying to create now and in the future. As Breen and Corcoran point out, Americans today are not reminded that a large proportion of Americans in 1776 were content to stay British. Few French school children know that the Bastille contained only seven prisoners when it was stormed. Russians are not familiar with the bloodless entrance into the Winter Palace in 1917, nor are the Irish reminded that passers-by jeered at the Proclamation of the Irish Republic at the Dublin Post Office in 1916. We accept these myths as *facts*, partly because without these collective symbols we would cease to be a united people and because they summarise in dramatic, story form what it means to be Nicaraguans, Tanzanians or Iranians. When new national challenges are presented—repelling invading enemies, surviving natural disasters, summing up courage to open new frontiers or rebuild a shattered economy—the traditional origin myths are retold to strengthen national solidarity and determination with the slogan, 'We can do it again'.

In times of crisis political figures such as Roosevelt in the depths of the American 1930s economic depression or Churchill in the World War II blitz of London established themselves as significant leaders precisely because of their striking use of mass media to unite a nation around affective symbols of national mythology. Television makes events such as royal weddings, presidential elections and inaugurations, the funerals of charismatic national figures or spectacular space voyages, a ritual reliving of national myths in which virtually the whole nation participates.³

Michael Real shows how the television rendition of the 'Super-bowl', the annual American championship football contest, brings together all of the great myths underpinning American culture.⁴ As a sport competition for yardage of territory in a limited field, football reproduces the American ethos of competitive struggle for property. The announcer's intonation emphasizes that success lies in short bursts of ferocious physical action, interspersed with quiet 'huddles' of scheming to outwit the opponent and ensure the celebrated American value of coordinated team-work. In the background elder statesmen of football build players into heroic archetypes by recounting their struggle to the top from humble beginnings. Football glorifies the myth of physical aggressiveness

and male dominance with totemic names such as rams, bears and redskins. Women are brought on as 'cheesecake decorations' to cheer their male protagonists to victory from the sidelines. Myth tends to elevate natural, physical time into sacred time. Today in America the yearly cycle is not marked by harvests and religious commemoration but by the media sports season. Mingled with the exuberant spectacle are symbols of national patriotism: openings with the solemn intoning of the national anthem, presence of national political leaders and the omnipresent American flag. Commentators continually remind audiences that behind a successful team is high finance and a Madison Avenue public relations organisation and that players are the 'organisational' property won in competitive bidding for astronomical prices. Sports magazines and newspapers support TV with before and after interpretation, evaluation and background information. But the TV event is a live, here-and-now ritual re-enactment of American myths in which millions participate directly while the print media can only talk about the event.

Linking National Myths to Cosmic Myth

If national myths are concerned largely with national histories, cosmic myths are histories of the world which incorporate all known reality.⁵ The myth of universal evolution with its dream of continual progress in every dimension of life is a cosmic myth. Religious philosophers merge a Christian or Muslim theological 'history of salvation' with theories of universal evolution to form an even broader mythic history. Such grand cosmic myths become explanations of the fundamental nature of reality and carry myth into sacred, eternal time with all the overtones of cosmic destruction if the laws of nature are disturbed.

Most national myths seek a foundation in cosmic myth with the interpretation that the origin and destiny of the nation is simply an unfolding and fulfillment of basic theological or philosophical conceptions of inalienable human rights or the classless human community. Thus, national holidays recalling the national myths are also quasi-religious holidays and national events such as presidential inaugurations are clothed with mythic religious significance.

The programmes of TV blend all of these levels of myth into a single narrative story. A news report on government response to economic problems carries overtones that these policies are framed within a general political philosophy designed for the good of mankind. Nature documentaries link accounts of bugs and birds with the inexorable cycle of the laws of nature. Relatively arbitrary decisions and observations are given an interpretation of objectivity and facticity because they are rooted in the metaphysical nature of our world.

Fitting New Information into Familiar Myths

Contemporary scientific cultures generate new data at a dizzying speed, and global information networks put us into constant contact with radically different cultures. Media researchers agree that one of the major functions of television is to gather up day by day the strange and unfamiliar and translate this into the audience's mode of perceiving the world. Myth refers not just to classical history-like explanations, but to a dynamic, ongoing process of human reasoning located in social institutions such as the university, popular religion, and the literary world of novelists and drama. The mass media, however, link these various myth-making institutions with the world of everyday culture.

For Silverstone, TV's myth-making activity serves as a point of integration for three horizons of culture: 1) common-sense, everyday knowledge which virtually everybody in a society share and must have to cope with the daily problems of life; 2) specialized knowledge which may be familiar to groups of experts and professionals but is esoteric to people outside these groups; and 3) that area of experience which is so far beyond the limits of cultural

acceptability that it is typed as untrue, irrational and nonsensical. The boundaries of taken-for-granted, unproblematic, common-sense knowledge are continually being expanded as new specialized information is brought into the fund of common-sense knowledge, and the organization of common-sense knowledge around basic values is constantly being redone. For the ordinary person, the area beyond the boundaries of common sense is chaos, mystery and the irrelevant. But in the borderline areas where the realm of the probably true, but esoteric, and the realm of the mysterious meet the realm of common sense, there is an area of uncertainty, risk, anxiety and questioning.

TV is broadcast to an audience that potentially includes everybody in a nation—rich and poor, people of all educational levels and different sub-cultures—and increasingly it is produced for international markets. The discourse of TV must be cast in terms of both shared, common-sense knowledge, with affective symbols instantly recognizable, and the commonly accepted mythic philosophies of life. But TV producers are also driven to present 'the new', and the documentary, news, and drama programmes are constantly reaching into the realm of the esoteric and mysterious, responding to current questions and anxieties and attempting to interpret this in common-sense terms all can understand and emotionally identify with. In the translation process, TV resolves contradictions and merges the new into multifaceted, connotative symbols of national culture such as Real describes in his analysis of 'Superbowl'. TV adapts myths just enough so that people are not too disturbed and makes the common myths continue to 'work' as maps for behaviour in an ever-changing cultural world.

Creating Exemplary, Archetypal Role Models

Religious and educational institutions have long had the function of transforming ordinary people into saints and heroes who are concrete embodiments of mythic ideals. But such institutions and more traditional print media are time-bound in that they conserve the identity of their heroes in spite of cultural change. TV, however, is less time-bound because it is a daily commentary on continuing events, and TV's vividly realistic, iconic representation tries to make viewers present in the events. TV is sensitive to newly emerging heroes of popular culture and provides role models closer to our life situation. A typical drama series establishes its central heroes in contest with some form of good and evil in the opening episodes, and then in succeeding episodes these characters, in the context of the dramatic plot, debate current public anxieties and provide models of how issues might be resolved on the basis of specific mythic presuppositions.

Helping People Manage Social Conflict

When a nation is filled with a vague worry that something is going awry in the society, and it is difficult for ordinary citizens to spot the precise cause of the evil or whom to blame, the mythic discourse of TV recasts the puzzling events in terms of a familiar problem such as a 'threat to democracy' or 'a disturbance of law and order'. TV then defines vague value issues in terms of concrete heroes and villains. For this, TV has long-established codes of camera angles, interviewing techniques and familiar symbols which juxtapose polar iconic images and make powerful non-verbal statements about 'them' and 'us'. As anthropologist Levi-Strauss has shown, the principal personages and images of myth always stand in bipolar opposition to each other. As the story unfolds, the TV discourse introduces mediating characters who represent a higher wisdom and a synthesis of values above the polar conflict. In an ongoing news story, there are ambassadorial figures who help bring about a resolution, explain the causes of conflict to the nation and at least put enemies in categories of tolerance. Soap opera series often have a major mediating character: the avuncular doctor, lawyer or private detective. In *Dallas* the kindly mother, Miss Ellie,

reconciles the warring Ewing brothers. Finally, TV frames the story of a political issue or a human problem of drama in terms of a search for a resolution of the conflict and celebrates the re-establishment of order—unless, as in soap opera series, TV producers wish to continue as long as audiences can sustain advertising income.

Changing Our Myths

At times the myths of heroic national courage and invincibility wear thin after the challenge that fostered them has passed, and it may become apparent that the myth of an embattled people defending human values has, in fact, become a sense of 'manifest destiny' and a rationale for imperialistic exploitation of other minorities or cultures. More sophisticated audiences grow bored with continuous mythic happy endings that seem less than realistic in new circumstances. The comic and satirical media, debunking minor myths or proclaiming a new realism, serve to maintain the credibility of the media and adapt the major myths to new cultural values.

Television as Class Ideology

One of the most heavily studied mythic functions of TV is the tendency of the TV narratives to transform mythic traditions into ideologies that systematically mask the exploitative interests of powerful elites. Elite alliances often have the power to influence the formation of mythic world views through the institutions of education, religion and the media so that unjust social relations gradually appear to be the natural, irrevocable course of history. The iconic realism, day-to-day immediacy, and public credibility of TV cover over the highly selective interpretation that is so sensitive to elite influences. Once a particular ideological world-view is established as 'natural', all new information is fitted into the framework by newscasters as the fair and objective report. Social control can be exerted without physical violence simply by typing all protest and questioning as outside common sense and within the realm of the irrational 'looney left'.

Much of the research which attempts to use conceptions of myth to analyse the illusion and falsity of ideology in advertising, news reporting and soap opera melodrama takes its inspiration from the method of demythologising proposed by French semiologist, Roland Barthes. Barthes points out that myth, whether of the bourgeois right or the Stalinist left, depoliticizes and camouflages social conflicts and inequities precisely because its mode of thought always seeks to resolve contradictions and find harmonies at a higher order of 'natural', 'sacred', or 'eternal' cultural objectives.⁶ Barthes himself, however, warned that spelling out mythical meaning may put one in complicity with myth-makers. Political myth-makers, notes Jonathan Culler, in his commentary on Barthes, now publicly glorify and mythologize the art of image-making.⁷ Advertisers easily incorporate the liberated, 'demythologised' woman into the symbolism of products. The danger of demythologising is that it simply substitutes one conception of nature for another. Barthes suggests that the quest for social justice should avoid mythologising itself by keeping close to the language and actions of the poor and the oppressed, and Himmelstein proposes that this can be done through a kind of alternative, oppositional, community-based media that is the 'voice of the voiceless'.⁸

Some media scholars, such as Silverstone, would question the analysis of cultural myths as simply a form of political ideology. Myth and TV are ideological, but culture is a more basic constitutive element of all human activity. Nevertheless, given the fact that power relations influence our cultural constructions so deeply, the question remains how we can ever gain a more 'just' and 'human' perspective outside the subjectivities of culture.

Subverting Myth by Parable

Dominic Crossan in his book, *The Dark Interval*,⁹ suggests that the genres of narrative form a continuum from *myth* at one pole through *apologue*, *action*, *satire*, to *parable* at the opposite pole. Myth (as Silverstone and others assert) *establishes* a world of cultural meanings by putting meanings into an orderly history marching toward man-made objectives. *Apologue* begins to realize that myths are arbitrarily constructed, but attempts to defend and shore up tottering myths with new arguments. *Action* refers to stories of people who realize myths are threatened by problems and contradictions, but seek to resolve these by heroic feats against evil. *Satire* attacks the absurdities of constructed rationality, but without the courage to totally and definitively transcend myth. Only *parable* is willing to step outside the secure world of myth by asserting that all myths are arbitrary, partial, short-sighted and absurd if they are taken as the final word of human wisdom.

With examples drawn from sources as diverse as Kafka's *Parables and Paradoxes* to the parables of Jesus, Crossan shows that the classical structure of parable is to begin the story by setting up expectations of an ending based on our standard cultural conventions. But the parable presents an outcome which is such an unusual combination of reasonableness and unconventionality that we begin to question the reasonableness of our cultural standards. In Kafka's story, 'Before the Law', the doorkeeper states to the man seeking entrance to the door of Law, 'No one but you could gain admittance through the door since the door was intended only for you. I am now going to shut it'. In Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan, it is not the Levite or priest—the culturally esteemed helpers of the unfortunate—who interrupt their journey to Jericho to assist the man attacked and left by the roadside, but the Samaritan whom the culture defined as without values or human sensitivity.

Parables, suggests Crossan, state that all our rationality may be foolishness and all our stories are relative. If myth always wants to transform the world in our own image, parables say that we should also embrace the paradoxes, failures, and strange mixture of good and evil if we are to love the world, 'warts and all'.

In the popular arts, the paradoxical 'reversal of expectations', which is at the heart of the parable form of narrative, is more often, associated with the films of a Godard (*Alphaville*, *Pierrot le Fou*) Altman (*Nashville*, *The Wedding*) or Kubrick (*A Clockwork Orange*). Many TV critics, however, have suggested that the American independent producer of prime-time TV series, MTM, has used plots and production techniques in series such as *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, *Lou Grant* and *Hill Street Blues* which systematically reverse audience expectations as a form of cultural questioning.¹⁰ *Hill Street Blues*, which uses the classical 'police, law-and-order' genre, is taken as one of the best examples of this. The series has attempted (in its best moments) to portray the police not as invincible and unerring heroes, but with all their human weaknesses, interpersonal competition and emotional conflicts. Offenders appear as people struggling for a humane existence, and the audience is left with the nagging doubt that perhaps those defined as criminals may have more nobility and wisdom than the police who wear uniforms and have the dubious mandate of defending an often self-righteous, exploitative propertied class.

The parable form of TV is not easy to achieve with genres of soap opera or situation comedy that have evolved to entertain audiences with myth. Parable must tread a fine line between simple realism, grotesque cynicism, moralistic platitudes or political harangue to suggest alternative human values. At best, TV may enable us to catch fleeting glimpses of parable.

II: How Television Tells Stories

Silverstone and others argue that the specific language of TV, which producers must master and audiences learn, is that of *narrative*.¹¹ The raw cultural materials that TV uses—personal lives and development efforts of nations—are already 'stories' that people are 'writing' in their day-to-day actions, but TV rewrites the world in terms of a folktale-like plot with well-defined heroes, villains, contests and victorious outcomes.

Why is TV a Narrative Language?

The narrative discourse of TV has emerged out of a folktale tradition as old as humankind, but more directly from the nineteenth century transformation of the daily media from a forum for elitist debate into popular *entertainment*. The founders of the cheap 'penny newspaper' in the 1830s created a mass market by adapting to newspaper formats the popular oral, face-to-face, leisure-time entertainment. The exchange of gossipy stories about sensational crimes, the human weaknesses of the aristocratic, major political debates and reports of the battles of war became the 'news' of the popular press. All forms of story telling, from heroic adventures to ghost tales, entered the popular press as short stories or serialised novels. New communication technologies—recorded sound, film, radio and TV—in their search for a mass market adopted the same entertaining, story-telling format.

Oral Language has a Narrative Structure

Secondly, TV is broadcast to a whole nation and must be cast in a language of familiar symbols, folktale plots and national or cosmic myths that are instantly understandable to all in the audience. In the terminology of British sociolinguist Basil Bernstein, TV uses a public, 'restricted' language, that is, restricted to a discourse

common to all. Like the conversation of a family or folk community, TV must presuppose the living cultural memory of a national or international audience and is full of unexplained allusions, symbols and non-verbal iconic references that are taken for granted. As McLuhan and others have noted, TV is an *oral* medium and, like other oral discourse, is held together by narrative formulas which can be memorised. The classic example is the singer of an epic ballad who can recount a long story entirely by memory because the details are suggested by the structure of the complete story. In contrast, with written or print media information is stored and memory is dispensed with. Written media make it possible to record lists of precise data and long abstract arguments which are impossible to memorise. TV is like an ongoing conversation of the local, national and international community in which the latest news, drama, sports and fashions are but the latest episode of a continual cultural story.

The Narrative Language of Moving Pictures

Like cinema, TV has a specific 'language' to convey meaning based on a combination of sound, music and especially moving pictures. As French semiotician of film, Christian Metz, points out, the units of film language such as a shot or sequence are given specific meaning only through their integration in a complete narrative plot. Unlike natural language, in which words can have a dictionary meaning apart from the context of use, the units of film language are each unique and have a virtually endless connotative significance depending on their location within the sequence of the moving pictures. The finished plot gives each film shot its particular meaning.

Story Telling is a Deceptively Complex Art

Silverstone uses the structuralist analysis of folktales and narrative proposed by Vladimír Propp¹² and A. J. Greimas¹³ as well as the interpretations of mythic narrative to explain how TV succeeds in constructing a story. In Silverstone's view there are three levels in TV narrative: 1) the thematic *content* taken from everyday life; 2) a suspenseful *chronological* ordering of events that moves action through a framed period of time to a satisfying resolution of a question or problem; and 3) the cultural *logic* that makes actors, events and situations in the constructed story representative symbols of the tensions and problems experienced by audiences so the logic of symbolic transformations in the story suggests possible solutions to current cultural issues. Silverstone also implies a fourth level, the application of archetypal mythic formulas of good triumphant over evil that are often universal, trans-cultural attempts to give meaning to the ultimate mysteries of human existence.

Silverstone illustrates this method of analysing TV stories by applying it to a thirteen-episode TV drama, *Intimate Strangers*, screened by the British commercial channel each Friday evening in the autumn of 1974 and viewed by an audience ranging from 4,344,000 to 5,874,000 homes throughout Britain.

Level 1: The Content of Everyday British Life

The theme of *Intimate Strangers*, though not a simple formulaic Hollywood adventure show, was potentially an engaging drama for many urban, middle-class Britons, because it touched upon problems so typical of their lives. In the first episode, the apparent hero, Harry, a middle-aged editor in a London publishing house, caught in the pressures of competitive careers in a competitive industry, has a heart attack and nearly dies. The doctor orders Harry to give up his job. This destruction of his life ambitions brings family economic crisis, throws his superficial marriage relationship with Joan into confusion, and creates emotional tensions that alienate the children, themselves beginning to contemplate marriage. In succeeding episodes, Harry's repeated attempts to find work are humiliatingly defeated. Harry and Joan separate, dally with sexual relationships outside marriage and plan divorce. Their house is to be sold. Ironically, the emotional arguments of Joan and Harry and fumbling attempts to alternately blame and help each other bring a new level of frank communication between them. Slowly, with the help of conversations with intermediaries such as Joan's female doctor, Harry and Joan rebuild their lives together. Harry gives up his career aspirations to take over a little bookshop in suburban London that has been managed, significantly, by a frail elderly woman, and Joan asserts her female independence by taking a job outside the home. Harry and Joan sell their house in London and, in the closing helicopter shot, the couple are shown in the midst of an open field pacing off the outlines of the cottage they plan to build in an idyllic village on the outskirts of London.

Level 2: The Folktale Narrative

Vladimír Propp, in his study of the formal structure of Russian folktales, proposes no less than thirty-one essential functional parts that move a plot to its completion. The most essential are the *problem*, villainy or 'lack' which rupture the order and equilibrium of life and demand a solution; the *hero* and *villain*; the *despatcher* who gives the hero the legitimating mandate of the community; the various *helpers* and *intermediaries* who often represent the wisdom, values and mythic formulas of the culture; the *object of the hero's search*, which reflects priority values of the culture; the *tests* and *contests* which bring out the hero's values; the final *triumph* of the hero; the *reward* of the hero with the princess; the final communal *celebration* of re-establishment of socio-cultural solidarity and order.

A psycho-social drama such as *Intimate Strangers* reveals much of

the folktale structure, but also has profound nuances reflecting a contemporary world-view of good and evil. The story is set in motion by three intimately related problems: a *physical* disorder, Harry's heart attack; a *social* disorder, the breakdown of a marriage relationship; and a *cultural* disorder, the collapse of Harry's career. Villainy is never personified, but is attributed vaguely to the socio-economic 'system'. The disorders of this 'system' are portrayed as internalised in the personalities of Harry and Joan so that these two people are both heroes and villains. The tests, too, are psychological. The wise intermediaries are doctors and personal friends who have experienced similar marital traumas. The heroes never attempt to challenge the 'system' but simply reject it for an alternative life-style.

Level 3: The Cultural Logic of TV Symbols

In his analysis of mythic narratives, Lévi-Strauss argues that the apparently fantastic stories of princes being turned into frogs are not haphazard dreams but are symbolic representations of basic social and cultural issues. Myths take common objects in the lives of people—animals, geographical locations, heroic persons—and organise these symbols within dramatic narratives as binary oppositions so that these symbols represent deeper conflicts of values and meaning that the culture is facing. The story of the myth first presents the oppositions and then, through the action of mediators, brings these symbols into harmony indicating a logical resolution in the deeper construction of meaning. A cultural conflict is often symbolically portrayed with not just one set of binary opposites but through a series of parallel codes: geographical codes (near-distant, high-low); physical codes (life-death); social codes (male-female, high and low status); economic codes (production-consumption); etc.

Thus, in *Intimate Strangers* geographical locale has a symbolic significance that British audiences can recognise and identify with from the experience of their own lives. The 'city' is the savage jungle and source of economic conflict, physical ill health and family breakdown. The 'garden' in the back of the home and the natural beauty of the country Lake District in the North of England are places where Harry rests and restores his health as well as where Harry and Joan meet to begin reconciliation. In the social code, certain places and activities are symbols of masculinity—the city and the world of economic competition—or femininity—the home, the kitchen, the garden where Joan likes to work and a small bookshop run by an elderly lady. The symbolic transformations—Harry's rejection of the 'city', spending time in the garden, taking over the bookshop, and Harry and Joan's move to the country—are the transformations of personal values and social roles presented in this drama as one solution to tensions in British society.

Level 4: The Mythic Formula

Intimate Strangers provides an early 1970s counter-culture plot resolution with a reversal of male and female roles and a rejection of capitalistic competitive ambitions. It also reaffirms the archetypal trans-cultural mythic quests for family unity and the return to nature. Silverstone also suggests that 'the story of Harry has, albeit in its entirely mundane way, something of the Christ myth about it. It is a story of his (near) death and resurrection, of construction of a new life and the treading of the steady path towards utopia.'

All of these levels are brought together in a single interwoven, seamless narrative by what Silverstone calls the 'rhetoric' of TV, the persuasive invitation to accept the plausibility of the story because it resolves contradictions and helps both producers and viewers make sense out of their cultural situation. If one of these levels is somehow missing or badly constructed, then the story is less satisfying, less convincing and less an invitation to re-enact the story in our own lives.

III: Television As Ritual Experience

Horace Newcomb and Robert Alley. *The Producer's Medium: Conversations with Creators of American TV*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1983. Victor Turner. *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play*. New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982.

In the mid-1970s the cultural studies school of media research began to question the then dominant analysis of media as the transport of messages from a source to impress effects on relatively passive receivers for purposes of socialisation and social control. Researchers began to see audiences as much more active, selectively taking symbols and themes from the media in the process of making sense out of life and constructing their own worlds of cultural meaning.¹⁴ James Carey proposed that the media might be better understood as a collective *ritual* which draws together creative artists, producers, critics and various sectors of a national audience in a common effort to express, reflect upon and celebrate the shared beliefs of a culture.¹⁵ George Gerbner also suggested that today TV, in its ritualised and repetitive dramatisation of symbols, norms and values plays a role similar to popular religion.¹⁶ Since the 1970s media researchers have been exploring the subjective experience of TV in terms of concepts of ritual experience developed by anthropologists such as Victor Turner.

The Link Between Ritual and Theatre

In the view of Victor Turner, the contemporary performative arts such as theatre, rock concerts and mass media entertainment have evolved out of ritual and communal celebration of pre-industrial societies and provide a similar cultural experience. Turner insisted that the meaning of ritual is not repetitive action, but a mechanism for change or transition in personal lives or in communities.

Turner and others found, for example, that in rites of initiation into adulthood or kingly leadership, there are three stages: 1) the initiates are taken out of the routine of daily pragmatic concern with short-term goals; 2) they enter into a symbolically created world of mythic history and values; 3) they return to the community to assume new roles imbued with a new vision. Turner described stage two of the transitional experience as 'liminal', from the Latin *limen* or threshold, because it took the initiates to a 'threshold' between two worlds: a world of *communitas* or utopian communal sharing, equality and human love in contrast to *societas*, that is, a world of authority, social ranking and economic competitiveness. The liminal state is one of free-ranging, subjective expressiveness, at times deeply poetic and ecstatic, in contrast to focussed rationalistic coping with immediate life problems.

Turner also observed the stages of disengagement, liminality and return in the seasonal communal celebrations of agrarian societies, in religious pilgrimage, religious novitiates and in 'retreats'.¹⁷ He termed monastic communities and the roles of creative artists or the academic world as liminal. Theatre has much of the essence of liminality, namely, 'a free and experimental region of culture, a region where not only new elements but also new combining rules may be introduced.'

Leisure as a Space for the Liminal

Industrial societies, Turner notes, sharply divide our lives into periods of work, when we do the bidding of factories and bureaucracies, and *leisure*, when our time is our own and imagination and emotions can roam free. Current research shows that leisure is not just physical rest from work, but the time when we have the freedom for more intimate family and community relations and, especially, time to explore alternatives in values and personal identities.¹⁸ For example, the period of 'youth', when we are deciding on careers, marriage and life values, is culturally a time of greater leisure. Today, public entertainment, tourism, the performative arts and especially TV are major leisure-time activities that provide an imaginative space to leave behind everyday routines and examine broader meanings of life.

Bernice Martin, in her studies of the utopian counter-cultural movements of the 1960s, concluded that permanent states of pure liminality are difficult to maintain and that most cultures 'frame' liminal experience in periods of festive holidays or periods of leisure when emotional, imaginative expressiveness is permitted.¹⁹ Martin, like media researchers Elihu Katz and Horace Newcomb, sees TV as one of the major forms of 'framed' liminal experience today.

How is TV Liminal?

Newcomb observes that TV is a fictional world or a highly selective, constructed presentation of documentary and news that distances us from real life but also offers a running commentary and discussion of that life. In the TV experience, we relax our established expectations of rationality, enter into other possible worlds of meaning and then return to our 'real' world with somewhat changed perspectives that enable us to modify that world.

Turner felt that the performative arts of modern societies provide a liminal experience that is far more diverse, optional and critical of culture. The liminal today is also more subjective and playful than the prescribed ritual and communal celebrations of pre-industrial societies. He therefore termed the experience of contemporary performance and the mass media as 'liminoid' rather than strictly liminal.

Newcomb, in contrast to Turner, argues that TV, as a popular art is at its best when it is a national *communal* experience.²⁰ Newcomb would admit that Western societies since the age of Romanticism have tended to characterise the artistic as daring innovation and a lyric expression of the artist's unique, subjective feelings. TV, however, has a cultural role similar to that of the chorus in Greek drama. The chorus had the function of providing a commentary on the dramatic action in a form that represented the ideas, emotions and questions of the audience. TV is 'choric' when it presents widely shared cultural experience and memories that audiences can enter into, question and criticise because it is, in varying degrees, *their* life. In Newcomb's view, 'lyric TV', which emphasises the subjective experience of the artist, is often not so successful either with the critics or the audience because it does not speak the public language of TV.

The Future of Analysis of TV as Myth and Ritual

Until recently, media research has used the concepts of cultural anthropology primarily to study the programming content and production processes of TV. The 'text' of TV is taken as a collective cultural product of society and a reflection of the dynamics of cultural production in that society. There has been relatively little audience-level research to test the assumption that audiences actually do experience TV in mythic terms or as a form of ritual. This would require using not just the concepts of the cultural anthropologists but also the field research methods of ethnographic description, participant observation and in-depth interviewing. In fact, a significant trend in media research is the use of forms of audience ethnography. One can cite, for example, the participant observations of how families use TV²¹ or the gathering of in-depth life histories of followers of a TV programme to determine how viewers pick out elements of a TV programme to construct their own cultural world-views.²² This promises an important new stage in TV research that will balance the incompleteness of quantitative audience survey methods.

Robert A. White
Issue editor

Footnotes

1. Horace Newcomb and Robert S. Alley. *The Producer's Medium: Conversations With Creators of American TV*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1983.
2. Jean Bianchi. *Comment comprendre le succès des séries de fiction la télévision? Le cas 'Dallas'*. Ecully-Lyon: Laboratoire CNRS-IRPEACS, 1984. pp. 54-57.
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18. John R. Kelly. *Leisure Identities and Interactions*. London: George Allen and Unwin, 1983.
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20. Roger Silverstone, 'The Right to Speak: On a Poetic for Television Documentary', *Media, Culture & Society*, Vol 5/2 (April 1983), pp.147-149.
21. David Morley. *Family Television: Cultural Power and Domestic Leisure*. London: Comedia Publishing Group, 1986; James Lull. *World Families Watching Television*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1988.
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Current Research on Television as Myth and Ritual

AUSTRALIA

Myles Breen (School of Communication and Liberal Studies, Mitchell College of Advanced Education, Bathurst, NSW 2795) has been studying the expression of Australian national mythology in TV.

John Hartley (School of Communications, Murdoch Univ, Murdoch, Western Australia 6150) is continuing research demonstrating that TV news uses the same narrative structure and repertoire of semiotic devices as TV fiction drama. His recent publications include, with **Martin Montgomery**, 'Representations and Relations: Ideology and Power in Press and Television News' in Teon Van Dijk (ed.) *Discourse and Communication*, Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter.

John Tulloch (Macquarie Univ, North Ryde, NSW 2113) has recently completed a book on the Australian programme, 'A Country Practice', examining how the codes of professional media production influence the presentation of social issues such as unemployment in a way that questions many public myths but still attracts a wide cross-section of the audience.

CHILE

Valerio Fuenzalida, Maria de Luz Hurtado, Giselle Munizaga (CENECA, Santa Beatriz 106, Santiago) have conducted structuralist (Greimas) analysis of American, Venezuelan and Chilean TV series and how Chilean viewers reconstruct mythical themes of police series according to Chilean perceptions of law and order.

DENMARK

Kim Christian Schrøder (Roskilde Univ Centre, Postbox 260, DK-4000 Roskilde) has used V. Turner's concept of liminality to analyse how Danish viewers interpret and enjoy the American programme *Dynasty*.

FRANCE

Jean Bianchi (Département de Communication, Institut Catholique de Lyon, 10, 12 rue Fochier, F-69002 Lyon) has conducted research on the interpretations of the mythical dimensions of American (*Dallas*) and French soap opera series by French viewers and has helped to organise a network of European research on TV series.

GERMANY

Rothar Mikos (Institut für Semiotik und Kommunikations Theorie, Free Univ of Berlin, Altensteinstr. 40, D-1000 Berlin 33 Dahlem) has been analysing popular myth in TV series and advertising and is now studying how TV myths are interpreted by viewers and integrated into the rituals of everyday life—work, leisure, family life, etc.

Wolfgang Preikschat (Deutsches Archiv für experimentelle Videokunst, Schumannstr. 15, D-6000 Frankfurt) just published *Videos—Poiesis der Neuen Medien*, a study of metaphorical quality of the electronic image, and is continuing research on the patterns of symbolic representation in the transformation of knowledge or information into audiovisual expression in other fields such as science.

INDIA

Usha V Reddi (Dept. of Comm and Journalism, Osmania Univ, Hyderabad 500 007) and **J S Yadava** (Indian Inst of Mass Comm, D-13 Ring Road, New Delhi 110 049) have used audience ethnography to study how families use TV.

ISRAEL

Elihu Katz (Faculty of Social Sciences, Hebrew Univ, Mount Scopus, Jerusalem) and **Daniel Dayan** (Hebrew Univ, now at Annenberg School of Communications, U. of S California, University Park, Los Angeles CA 90089) have developed concepts of media events as ritual celebrations using Turner's theory of liminality.

JAPAN

T Makita (Radio & TV Culture Research Inst, NHK, 2-1-1 Arago, Minato-Ku, Tokyo 105) has finished a content analysis of Japanese TV dramas.

MEXICO

Jorge Gonzalez (Programa Cultural, Univ de Colima, Apdo Postal 294, Colima, 2800) and **Gabriel G. Molina** (Dept. of Comm Studies, Univ de las Américas, Apdo 100, Puebla, 72820) are studying: 1) structuralist analysis expressions of folk communication in religious art and customs, fiestas and folktales; 2) how the production of *telenovelas* in TELEvisa incorporates folk themes; 3) how different segments of the TV audience reconstruct the meaning of *telenovelas* in terms of their own folk culture.

NETHERLANDS

Uta Meier (Inst for Mass Comm, Katholieke Univ, 6500 HK-Nijmegen), as part of a larger study of 'TV as Creation of Culture' at this university, is analysing how audiovisual codes mediate particular conceptions of feminine sex roles in TV drama and talkshows.

PERU

Max Tello Charun (Facultad de Ciencias de la Comunicación, Univ de Lima, Apdo Postal 852, Lima 100) is studying how *telenovelas* express the Latin American tradition of melodrama and audiences identify with characters, plots and mythic ideals.

UNITED KINGDOM

Sonia Livingstone (Dept. of Experimental Psychology, Oxford Univ, Oxford OX1 2JD) has been using a combination of semiotic-structuralist analysis and social psychological concepts of personality to study viewers' interpretations of gender, social power and morality expressed in character portrayals of American (*Dallas*) and British (*Coronation Street*) soap operas.

Roger Silverstone (Dept. of Human Sciences, Brunel Univ, Uxbridge, Middx UB8 3PH) has extended his study of the mythic and rhetorical aspects of TV to audience ethnography analysing how families use the materials of TV to construct their own cultural interpretations in the context of everyday life.

UNITED STATES

Elizabeth Buck (Inst of Culture and Communication, East-West Ctr, 1777 East-West Road, Honolulu, HI 96848) is preparing a book on how mythic-narrative representations of native Hawaiian identity in Hawaiian music (chant, hula and contemporary pop music) have been modified with changing socio-economic conditions. She is also seeking contributors to an edited book on the role of media in national mythic identities.

Farrell Corcoran (Dept. of Communication Studies, Northern Illinois Univ, De Kalb, IL 60115) continues studies of TV as myth and ideology.

Stewart Hoover (School of Communications, Temple Univ, Philadelphia, PA 19122) has recently completed *Mass Media Religion: The Social Sources of the Electronic Church* based on life-history approaches to audience ethnography and interpreting the para-church phenomenon in terms of V Turner's conception of ritual liminality and *communitas*.

Douglas Kellner (Dept of Philosophy, Univ of Texas, Austin, TX 78712) in recent articles examines how TV is developing a deeper identity with the dominant myths of capitalist society and is destroying the possibility of alternative critical decoding through intermediate structures of ethnic groups, social class and community identities.

Jack Lule (Faculty of Communication, Univ of Tulsa, Tulsa, OK 74104) has been using the hermeneutic approach of Ricoeur, the dramatism of Burke and myth interpretation of Levi-Strauss to analyse the mythic structure of international news.

Eric Rothembuhler (Dept. of Communication Studies, Univ of Iowa, Iowa City, IA 52242) has conducted research on 'living room celebrations' of national ritualistic 'civic religion' media events such as Olympic games using the media event theory of Katz and Dayan, and Turner's concept of liminality.

David Thorburn (Director of Film and Media Studies, M.I.T., Cambridge, MA 02139) is developing an aesthetic theory of TV based on the analysis of the traditional myth and story systems (consensus narrative) of our cultures.

Additional Bibliography on Television as Myth and Ritual

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