

# R e w r i t i n g   N e w h a r t : A   D i a l o g i c   A n a l y s i s

by Jimmie L. Reeves



Bob Newhart as Dick Loudon on The Newhart Show

*Considering the monumental number of stories told on television, it is no wonder that these stories develop through formulaic repetition and invocation of references, stereotypes, and clichés. This is necessarily the way in which popular cultures works. Meaning develops according to a delicate operation of similarity and difference. In this process, a single story gains significance both through its identity with the stories that precede it and through its disruption of these stories.*

Christopher Anderson<sup>1</sup>

From its birth as a 121-word premise through its adolescence as a 49-page script to its coming-of-age as 25 minutes of prime time television, *Newhart's* "Camp Stephanie" story takes shape in collaborations organized around a well established rewriting routine. Through an

analysis of various transformations of the "Camp Stephanie" story, I hope to demonstrate a theory of production that emphasizes the dynamic operation of this rewriting in television's storytelling process. I will base this theory of production on what James W. Carey describes as "a ritual view of communication." According to Carey, a ritual view defines communication as "the symbolic process whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired, and transformed." Unlike the more traditional view of communication underlying most empirical research ("the transmission view"), the ritual view is concerned with the negotiation and representation of *meaning*, rather than the exchange of information. In Carey's words: "A ritual view of communication is not directed toward the extension of messages in space but the maintenance of society in time; not the act of imparting information but the representation of shared beliefs."<sup>2</sup>

## The Dialogic Aspects of Rewriting

*All words have the "taste" of a profession, a genre, a tendency, a party, a particular work, a particular person, a generation, an age group, the day and hour. Each word tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life; all words and forms are populated by intentions.*

M.M. Bakhtin<sup>3</sup>

Critical scholars in the United States and Europe have adapted the ritual view of communication to the study of television's central place in modern, technological societies. For instance, in Britain, John Fiske and John Hartley take a ritual view when they describe television

as a "bardic mediator." According to Fiske and Hartley, "the bardic mediator tends to articulate the negotiated central concerns of its culture, with only limited and often overmediated references to the ideologies, beliefs, habits of thought and definitions of the situation which obtain in groups which are for one reason or another peripheral."<sup>4</sup> In an American response to the bardic model, Horace Newcomb and Robert S. Alley attempt to rewrite the ritual view into a less hegemonic formulation. With their term "choric," Newcomb and Alley relate television's cultural significance to the "role of the chorus in Greek drama":

*The chorus expresses the ideas and emotions of the group, as opposed to those of individuals. Its focus is on the widely shared, the remembered, the conventional responses that take into account the notions of the socially approved—because socially tested—notions of heroism, epic event, and collective memory. Dependent on widely recognized 'types' rather than on the unique, the choric forms render for their audiences patterns of experience within which to couch new problems and issues. They aid in the maintenance of society, but also, in the repair and renovation of that society.<sup>5</sup>*

Ultimately, I will argue that it is in and through the dynamics of the rewriting ritual that television achieves and maintains its status as a "bardic" or "choric" communicator.

Although rewriting is a key "ritual" contributing to the production of almost every type of popular television discourse, its chief expression in the prime time domain of the three major broadcast networks involves the phenomenon of "consensus narrative." As David Thorburn observes, consensus narrative attempts to "speak for and to the whole of its culture, or as much of 'the whole' as the governing forces in society will permit." In fact, the strongly heterogeneous impulse of consensus narrative distinguishes it from other modes of popular entertainment that appeal to particular, though large, segments of society. Heavy metal music, romance novels, televised professional wrestling—all are fringe forms designed to attract a loyal and profitable fragment of the mass audience. Consensus narrative, in contrast, operates at what Thorburn identifies as "the very center

of life of its culture."<sup>6</sup> So, even though both consensus narrative and these fringe forms reside in the realm of popular entertainment, consensus narrative is clearly constrained by an entirely different set of cultural and economic forces.<sup>7</sup>

As a generative mechanism for consensus narrative, prime time television's rewriting ritual is supremely a *dialogic* phenomenon. The process is dialogic because it has a *multidimensionally open orientation*.<sup>8</sup> Not only directed toward the story or series at hand, the rewriting also takes into account other texts (i.e., previous texts, competing texts, future texts) and other contexts (i.e., the MTM tradition of "quality," the legal climate, the ratings). The ritual is multidimensional because the rewriting operates along several planes of discourse. On the most observable plane, each episode of a popular television series can be treated as a rewriting of the narrative patterns established in previous episodes. From the earliest moments of scripting to the final moments of post-production editing, the necessity to rewrite the series activates, informs, directs, and inhibits the collaboration. Put in show business terms, the rewriting conforms to the age-old imperative that the show, indeed, must go on. Thus, *Newhart's* "Camp Stephanie" story can be seen as a rewriting of the chain of texts collectively known as the *Newhart* series.

This is, however, only the most basic aspect of television's rewriting ritual. Rewriting also can be said to operate along planes of discourse that extend well beyond the production of a single story. For example, every television series can be understood as a rewriting of the conventions associated with a particular generic tradition. Here, *Newhart* represents a rewriting of the situation comedy formula. Along an entirely different dimension—namely, the viewing "strip"—rewriting informs the work of network programmers: for, in a sense, programmers are engaged in a rewrite ritual when they routinely revamp the prime time schedule. In the language of word processing (a language dedicated to rewriting), programmers *delete* certain programs, *insert* others, or *move* still others to different nights and/or time slots. At the level of grand network strategy, uprooting *Newhart* from its current slot on Monday night and moving it to Thursday night opposite *The*



The Newhart writing staff (left to right): Douglas Wyman, David Tyron King, Tom Seeley, David Mirkin, Norman Gunzenhauser and Arnie Kogen.

*Cosby Show* would constitute a significant rewriting of *Newhart*'s place in the flow of television discourse.<sup>9</sup>

Although it certainly ruptures the framing of this case study, the rewriting metaphor can even be extended to make sense of the dialogic relationships existing between consensus narrative and the stratified, heterogeneous audience. Here, Terry Eagleton's thoughts concerning readers rewriting literature are also relevant to viewers rewriting television:

*... 'Our' Homer is not identical with the Homer of the Middle Ages, nor 'our' Shakespeare with that of his contemporaries; it is rather that different historical periods have constructed a 'different' Homer and Shakespeare for their own purposes, and found in these texts elements to value or devalue, though not necessarily the same ones. All literary works, in other words, are 'rewritten,' if only unconsciously, by the societies which read them; indeed there is no reading of a work which is not also a 're-writing.' No work, and no current evaluation of it, can simply be extended to new groups of*

*people without being changed, perhaps almost unrecognizably, in the process . . . .*<sup>10</sup>

Indeed, this "reading as rewriting" is perhaps more profound when considered in relation to television discourse.

At times, the audience can rewrite a television program in refreshingly creative ways. For instance, groups of college students have reportedly revised the old *Bob Newhart Show* into a drinking game called "Hi, Bob": while watching syndicated reruns of the series, the participants pass around a bottle of beer, taking a swallow each time a character refers to Dr. Hartley as "Bob," and downing the entire bottle each time a character says "Hi, Bob."<sup>11</sup> However, at other times, as demonstrated in a famous audience study by N. Vidmar and M. Rokeach, the audience can rewrite a program in rather disturbing ways. According to Vidmar and Rokeach, "prejudiced" viewers rewrite Archie Bunker in heroic terms, applauding Bunker's bravura in the face of cynical liberalism and dismissing the many resolutions

of *All in the Family* that cast Bunker as an absurd, villainous fool. In other words, in dialogue with viewers sharing Bunker's bigoted attitudes and beliefs, *All in the Family* is "changed, perhaps almost unrecognizable, in the process."<sup>12</sup>

### Rewriting as Process: From Pitch Session to Final Draft

*Dick:* What's the TV Marketplace Convention?

*Michael:* Dick, Dick. Try to learn something about the industry you work in. That's where we buy old TV shows to put in our new fall lineup.

*Dick:* Ah, out with the old, in with . . . the old.

*Michael:* A word of advice, Bev. Stay away from that colorized version of *Father Knows Best* . . . I hear Bud turned out green.

#### —Dialogue from "Camp Stephanie"<sup>13</sup>

This case study is based almost entirely on testimony, notes, and production documents provided by David Tyron King.<sup>14</sup> King (along with Norm Gunzenhauser and Tom Seeley) acts as a story editor for *Newhart*. In this capacity, King was able to participate in almost every stage of preproduction and production of the episode. Although the first draft of the "Camp Stephanie" script was written by freelance writers Robin Pennington and Don Hart, who were not regular members of the *Newhart* staff, the production history of "Camp Stephanie" is only marginally atypical. In fact, the slightly out-of-the-ordinary status of the episode has facilitated this study. Because the freelancers had to formally present or "pitch" their ideas to *Newhart*'s creative team, early moments in the process are documented in ways that would normally be lost to a critical postmortem.

According to King, getting a pitch meeting is the first and by far the most difficult step in selling a freelance script.<sup>15</sup> In the case of *Newhart*, only seven outside writing teams were invited to present their ideas in 1986, and only three of those pitch sessions resulted in script assignments.<sup>16</sup> Being invited to conduct a pitch session involves a series of complex negotiations between the writers, their agents and the production company. These

negotiations often include the submission of sample stories meant to showcase writing ability and/or talent. Known in the industry as "spec scripts," these sample stories serve as a kind of portfolio for novice writers. In terms of their significance to rewriting as a theory of production, spec scripts by Pennington and Hart represent a kind of "pre-text" for the "Camp Stephanie" story. The Executive Producers for *Newhart*, Doug Wyman and David Mirkin, were so impressed with spec scripts submitted to them through the freelancers's agent that Pennington and Hart were invited to conduct a pitch session on 22 May 1986. At that meeting, Pennington and Hart presented nine brief story ideas.<sup>17</sup>

After the meeting, *Newhart*'s writing staff convened to discuss the relative merits of each story idea. During this early collaborative moment, the influence of other texts was clearly evident in the staff's screening and evaluating of the proposed stories. One idea was aborted because it was not "quite deep enough for an A story": an "A story" being the main plot; a "B story" being a sub-plot. Three of the story ideas were rejected because of their similarity to other stories planned for the upcoming season. Another was rejected because it was, in King's words, "a little morbid for *this* episodic comedy." Involving the death of a conventioner staying at the program's fictional Stratford Inn, the story did not represent an *appropriate* rewriting of *Newhart*.<sup>18</sup>

Three of the remaining four ideas were rejected because of character considerations. And it is here that this sense of the "appropriate" that governs the staff's evaluation of story ideas is perhaps most clearly articulated. For instance, in one of the pitched stories, Michael Harris (Peter Scolari's yuppie television producer) tenders a marriage proposal to Stephanie Vanderkellen (Julia Duffy's yuppie maid). According to King's notes, the story was passed over because the staff wanted to avoid "the Stephanie and Michael getting married question": "America's Yuppie Sweethearts shouldn't progress past dating. At least not this season."<sup>19</sup>

This attention to character considerations, while surely a major factor in the scripting rituals of any show, is of particular importance to series associated with MTM. As Jane Feuer suggests in her excellent work on the MTM

style, MTM's emphasis on character is a crucial component of the company's reputation as a producer of "quality TV." With series like *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, *Rhoda*, and *The Bob Newhart Show*, MTM literally rewrote the situation comedy formula to accommodate more complex characters. In Feuer's words:

*"Character ensembles," "motivation," "a set of little epiphanies," have transformed the problem/solution format of the sitcom into a far more psychological and episodic formula in which—in the hand of MTM—the situation itself becomes the pretext for the revelation of character.*<sup>20</sup>

*Newhart*, a series that clearly embraces this aspect of the MTM style, represents a subtle variation on MTM's "character comedy" theme. Indeed, Michael Pollan even describes *Newhart* as a "rerun" of the old *Bob Newhart Show*:

*Instead of playing a shrink, this time Newhart portrays a prosperous writer of how-to books who has moved from New York City to Vermont to operate a colonial inn with his wife, Joanna (played by Mary Frann). The change of venue has had virtually no effect on Newhart's persona (he's a tad less excitable, if that can be imagined), and the ensemble of urban eccentrics that surround him in Chicago has been replaced, almost one for one, by rural counterparts.*<sup>21</sup>

The change in setting, though, does have a very real impact on the thematic of *Newhart*, as Pollan suggests later in his essay. Where *The Bob Newhart Show* basically used Newhart's character as an instrument for commenting on the insanity of urban life, *Newhart* uses essentially the same character to investigate themes traditionally associated with such "hayseed" comedies as *Petticoat Junction*, *Green Acres*, and *The Beverly Hillbillies*. In Pollan's words: "*Newhart* may be slightly more sophisticated than these shows, but like them it derives from the age-old frictions produced when an urban sensibility is introduced into a rural setting (or, in the case of *The Beverly Hillbillies*, the reverse)."<sup>22</sup>

The change from Newhart-as-psychologist to Newhart-as-author/TV host/innkeeper also has an impact on *Newhart's* character orchestration. Dr. Robert Hartley, Newhart's psychologist character in the old series, represented an expert type, a professional practitioner of a specialized realm of knowledge. In contrast, Dick Loudon (Bob Newhart's character in the new series) represents a relatively new social category specific to modern technological societies—the well informed type. An intelligent, sensitive, pragmatic entrepreneur who really doesn't qualify as an expert at anything, Loudon speaks to and of a valued mode of being in the common sense world of Reagan's America.<sup>23</sup> In keeping with his performance of the Hartley character, Newhart/Loudon gets laughs by, in Newhart's words, "listening to people and having to be nice to them no matter what they do":

*The recurring theme. . . is that the person through no fault of his own, is put in the middle of a situation and forced to sort it out. There's a put-upon quality to him. Those stories have always worked best for me.*<sup>24</sup>

As a "put-upon" well-informed type, Loudon, like Hartley, is supported by a strong wife who essentially represents middle class normalcy, or contemporary common sense. According to the ongoing orchestration of the series, this central couple is beset on one flank by a group of rural oddballs who exemplify either naïveté or ignorance: George Utley (Tom Poston), as well as the brothers Larry, Darryl and Darryl (William Sanderson, Tony Papenfuss, and John Voldstad). In relation to the Loudons, these rural characters represent non-knowledge or obsolete knowledge.<sup>25</sup> On the other flank, the Loudons are beset by their *doppelgangers*, the narcissistic Michael Harris and Stephanie Vanderkellen. Like the Loudons, Michael and Stephanie represent modern urban sensibilities. Unlike the Loudons, Michael and Stephanie inflect that sensibility in the direction of militant consumerism rather than pragmatism. Therefore, in *Newhart's* character constellation, the Loudons, like Eddie Albert's character in *Green Acres*, are constantly required to react to and mediate what is presented as the innocent vulgarity of rural life and the foolish superficiality of city life.



*The Newhart cast: (Above) Peter Scolari as Michael, Julia Duffy as Stephanie, Tom Poston as George, Mary Frann as Joanna, and Bob Newhart.*

After their deliberations, the *Newhart* staff decided to commission Pennington and Hart to develop the following three paragraph premise:

*Joanna agrees to take care of a friend's 10 year-old daughter, Kimmy. Kimmy takes an immediate liking to Stephanie and starts following her all over. When Kimmy tells Stephanie that she was counting on a camping trip with a small group of girls (Girl Scouts) and her mother, Stephanie agrees to take them. She consults with the others on what to do during the camping trip. The only thing they agree on is telling scary stories.*

*Stephanie takes them camping near the Inn. When everything is going wrong, she starts a campfire and prepares to tell stories.*



*(Above) William Sanderson as Larry, Tony Papenfuss and John Volstad as Darryl and Darryl.*



*Stephanie and the Ranger Girls*

*When Dick and Joanna come down for breakfast the next morning, they find Stephanie and the girls camped out in the living room.<sup>26</sup>*

Note that the premise takes shape according to classic three act structure. The relatively long opening paragraph is primarily concerned with exposition—setting up the situation that disrupts normalcy. The middle paragraph is one of complication where the comedic potentials of the situation are explored. In the third, the situation resolves itself and normalcy is restored.

Interestingly, the next phase of the rewrite began without the benefit of Pennington and Hart's input. After deciding to develop the premise, Gunzenhauser, Seeley and King elaborated on the basic structure of the story, or, as King puts it: "The three story editors went into a little room and spent about four hours hammering out the basic beats of the story." On 29 and 30 May, Pennington and Hart were summoned to meet with the full staff to work out a rough story outline.<sup>27</sup>

The rough outline represented a major transformation of the story, both in terms of writing format and story structure. The title, "Camp Stephanie," first appeared on this rough outline and the notes were recorded in a form that resembles script format. Each of eight proposed



*In the "B story," George gives Dick a carving of Mt. Rushmore featuring the faces of Bob Newhart and Mr. Greenjeans.*

scenes was marked off with a "slugline," a conventional method of establishing setting and story time. For example, one slugline, "E - INT. LOBBY - NIGHT," indicates that what follows is the fifth scene (scene E), that it is an interior set (INT.), that the location is the lobby, and that the scene should be lit so that it appears to take place at night. Although the body of the scene in the rough draft did not strictly conform to standard scripting format, the story was disclosed using character dialogue broken up with very brief action paragraphs.<sup>28</sup>

Perhaps more importantly, the basic structuring of the story underwent a major revision. Only the middle paragraph of the premise survived into the rough outline. The initial set up of the situation was relocated to the "Vermont Today" set rather than at the Inn. Michael, trying to "score points" with one of his female superiors at the television station, volunteers Joanna to act as a substitute Girl Scout leader. Michael then unsuccessfully attempts to manipulate Dick into accepting responsibility for notifying Joanna of her new duties. Where the premise only implicated Joanna, Stephanie and Kimmy in the expository scenes, the rough draft also implicates Michael and Dick.<sup>29</sup>

According to King, the opening was changed from the original premise primarily because of character consid-

erations. The staff felt that making Michael an active agent gave the story more complexity. In King's words: "Michael was brought in to add an additional undercurrent to the story. He is torn between his job and his girlfriend." Furthermore, the staff felt that the premise did not provide adequate motivation for the Stephanie character: "We had to devise a reason for Stephanie to want to take on the girls, as she is not prone to doing anything out of the goodness of her heart. The idea of Stephanie seeing the whole thing as a chance to be idolized was agreed upon."<sup>30</sup> With the new set up, the story was, in fact, better able to tap into familiar conflicts between the down-to-earth pragmatism of the Loudons and the consumerism of the Michael/Stephanie couple. Michael becomes the foolish agent who instigates the revival of the conflict.

Although the middle segment of the premise survived with only minor changes, the resolution didn't. In the rough outline, the Girl Scouts, after a night camping with Stephanie, are converted from the Loudons's pragmatic view of life to Stephanie's preppie pretensions. The final scene is presented here in its entirety to illustrate both the format and the style of the rough draft:

**INT. - INN - THE NEXT MORNING**

*Dick and Joanna are having breakfast. Joanna expresses concern that Stephanie might not be a good influence on the girls.*

*Dick: Don't be ridiculous. What could happen in one night?*

*Stephanie and the girls ENTER. They are all saying ooh, ick.<sup>31</sup>*

In the rough outline, the *Newhart* staff also provided a B story featuring George Utley. At this stage, the B story was tacked on at the end of the A story. Later, the B story was integrated into the A story, intermittently interrupting the main action.

On 4 June 1986, Pennington and Hart submitted a 14-page formal outline. According to King, the freelancers were "smart in that they didn't stray too far from the

TAG

INT. DINING ROOM - (NEXT) MORNING

Joanna and Dick are having breakfast. Joanna expresses concern that Stephanie might not have been the best influence on the girls. Dick doesn't think there's any reason to think the girls will take after Stephanie. Stephanie and the kids troop in. The girls are all wearing make-up and look like miniature Brooke Shields'. Stephanie: "What's for breakfast?" Joanna says oatmeal. The girls, in unison: "Ooo, ick." On Dick's reaction, we:

FADE OUT:

THE END

figure A

notes they were given."<sup>32</sup> In the formal outline, the story was broken down into Act One (three scenes); Act Two (four scenes); and a "Tag," or short closing scene. Typically, the formal outline marks off each scene with a slugline, but the body of the scene is written in standard prose style. The dialogue is integrated into the prose paragraphs and the action is written in the third person using the present tense.<sup>33</sup>

Basically, Pennington and Hart integrated the B Story into the main action of "Camp Stephanie" and elaborated on story details rather than on story structure. For instance, they opened the story with Dick conducting his interview show, "Vermont Today." His guest is Rudy Marquette, "inventor of the Perpetual Pencil—it never needs sharpened."<sup>34</sup> The Tag, meanwhile, both illustrates the format of the formal outline and indicates how closely Pennington and Hart followed the rough draft (see figure A).<sup>35</sup>

On 5 June, Pennington and Hart met with the staff for two hours to discuss the formal outline. Unfortunately,





In keeping with other MTM "warmedies," Newhart features a television show within a television show.

King does not have a record of this meeting because the freelancers took their own notes. However, he does remember that some of Pennington and Hart's ideas in the formal draft were vetoed by the staff. For instance, the inventor of the perpetual pencil didn't survive the meeting. And, according to King, a good number of "new lines" (character dialogue) were suggested by the staff.<sup>34</sup>

On 19 June 1986, the freelancers delivered the first draft of the "Camp Stephanie" script to the Newhart staff. This moment marked the end of Pennington and Hart's involvement in the rewriting process. This was also a moment that highlighted the story's status as a commodity. Pennington and Hart were paid very handsomely for what essentially amounted to about four weeks of work and 49 pages of script. According to King's cryptic notes:

*For this, they received 11,400+ dollars plus about \$6000 + more when it reruns in the spring plus thousands more when it shows in Great Britain next fall plus regular*

*checks when Newhart enters syndication in the Fall of '87. This script may be worth over \$40,000 in the first five years for the writers.<sup>35</sup>*

The first draft was true to the organization of the formal outline. At this point, however, the action and dialogue were conformed to standard television script format. Although the scenes were still marked off by sluglines, the action description was all in upper case and organized in single-spaced paragraphs. The dialogue (which constitutes roughly 90% of a typical television script) was double-spaced, indented 10 spaces from the left margin, centered on the page and typed using standard capitalization. A character's name was centered above each block of dialogue, literally marking off narrative territory dominated by the words, the voice, the intentions and the actions of a particular character.

This organization of standard television script format according to clearly defined "character zones" speaks to the dialogic essence of television discourse. As Bakhtin suggests, the multiple and competing meaning systems operating within a living language invade a creative work by way of such "highly particularized character zones":

*These zones are formed from the fragments of character speech, from various forms for hidden transmission of someone else's word, from scattered words and sayings belonging to someone else's speech, from those invasions into authorial speech of others' expressive indicators (ellipsis, questions, exclamations). Such a character zone is the field of action for a character's voice, encroaching in one way or another upon the author's voice.<sup>36</sup>*

In the "Camp Stephanie" script, character zones encroach on the intentions of the freelance writing team by enforcing certain predetermined ways of expressing the world. Certainly, the writers do not author Stephanie and Michael's Yuppie dialect; nor are they the originators of Bob Newhart's stardom. Instead, the writers are involved in something akin to ventriloquism—they script the story through the voices of others. As Bakhtin puts it: "The author does not speak in a given language (from which he distances himself to a greater or lesser degree), but he speaks, as it were, through language, a

language that has somehow more or less materialized, become objectivized, that he merely ventriloquates."<sup>30</sup>

This standard format also speaks of the particular working conditions of television studio production—working conditions that are, again, best understood in terms of television's rewriting ritual. Perhaps the most noticeable characteristic of this format is the considerable amount of white space on the page (see figure B).<sup>40</sup> Just as the "invisible cuts" of realist editing techniques tend to mask the labor involved in constructing a conventional visual narrative, the white space on the script masks the labor involved in television's rewriting ritual. Indeed, the abundant marginal space is there for one reason: to facilitate rewriting. The writing staff used this white space to make marginal notes for the next revision. Even more importantly, the director and other members of the production staff used this space to break down the script into shots for their rewriting of the story from the print narrative to a televisual narrative. Directorial commands, camera directions, lighting notations—all were eventually inscribed on the white space of more advanced versions of the television script.

The white space of Pennington and Hart's draft, though, was the exclusive domain of *Newhart's* writing staff. In *Newhart's* production cycle, the next revision following the writers's draft is called the "greens" because it is copied on green paper. King reports that it takes anywhere from one to four days to turn the first draft into greens. In the case of "Camp Stephanie," the process occupied three days and was completed on 8 July 1986. King's account of this intensely collaborative phase both acknowledges how white space facilitates the rewrite process and disproves any notion that sole authorship of "Camp Stephanie" can be attributed to Pennington and Hart:

*What happens is, each staff member makes notes on what he perceives to be the good and bad points of the script. The margins are filled with comments, suggestions, alternative lines, etc. and the entire staff sits around a 15 by 25-foot room and rewrites the script from page one . . . . Note that most of the writers' draft came from the notes [the rough outline] given by the staff and that almost all of the freelancers' original lines and ideas*

49.  
JOANNA EXITS TO THE KITCHEN, THEN IMMEDIATELY RE-ENTERS AND SITS.

JOANNA

Sorry, Michael, stove's broken.

MICHAEL REACTS, THEN EXITS.

DICK

Guess we'd better have George take a look at that stove.

DICK AND JOANNA LAUGH.

JOANNA

You know, Dick, I was thinking... I hope Stephanie hasn't been a bad influence on those girls.

DICK

Honey, there's no reason to think they're going to take after her.

STEPHANIE AND THE GIRLS ENTER. THE GIRLS ARE ALL WEARING MAKE-UP AND LOOK LIKE MINIATURE BROOKE SHIELDS'.

STEPHANIE

Hi, Dick, hi, Joanna. What's for breakfast?

JOANNA

Oatmeal.

GIRLS

Oatmeal? Ooo, ick.

ON DICK'S REACTION, WE:

FADE OUT.

THE END

*are discarded at this phase. There's no room for artistes in the freelance biz.<sup>41</sup>*

The open orientation of the rewriting process is particularly evident in this revision. Many of the lines were modified to account for specific ways that actors/characters speak or express their world through language. Even Bob Newhart's famous self-conscious stammering<sup>42</sup> is scripted through the use of ellipses into several of Dick Loudon's lines (e.g. "Yeah, you're

figure B



*The Ranger Girls: "a 'pretext for the revelation of character.'"*



*Newhart gently critiques consumerism and even television.*

another . . . guy who carves wood."<sup>43</sup>). Interestingly, more of the humor in the greens is intertextual in nature. Drawing on the audience's knowledge of other mass media texts, the staff identified one of the faces that George carves into a block of wood as that of Mr. Greenjeans.<sup>44</sup> At another point, the staff added a moment where Stephanie rejects one of Michael's compliments that compares her to Sleeping Beauty:

*Stephanie:* (FISHING) She's not real.

*Michael:* Then who's that gorgeous actress you're so much prettier than?

*Stephanie:* Jessica Lange?

*Michael:* That's the one.

*Stephanie:* Michael, you always say the perfect thing.<sup>45</sup>

The influence of at least one other area of consideration is also evident in the greens revision: the legal context. Most notably, the name of the camping group was changed from the Girl Scouts to the Ranger Girls, a change meant to avoid potential lawsuits. As King puts it, "a very real part of this business is the fear of lawsuits."<sup>46</sup>

This fear is manifested in the standard operation procedures of *Newhart's* rewriting process. According to King, every script, upon reaching the greens stage, is submitted to a research service (in this case, de Forest Research, Inc.) that investigates any possible legal conflicts. Because the staff anticipated the conflict with the Girl Scouts, the research report did not identify any major problems with "Camp Stephanie." Even so, the research report, at times, is much more than a formality. King reports that in one episode the staff had to change two character names, a hotel name and a book title because of conflicts identified in the research report.<sup>47</sup>

Up to this point, the rewriting has primarily focused on the written rather than the spoken word. However, this emphasis began to shift in the next revision (dated 16 July). Before rewriting the greens, the staff came together, divided up the parts, and read the script aloud in what King describes as "a stop and start rereading . . . to see how it will sound." Predictably, the changes instituted during the staff's oral performance of the script were restricted to the fine-tuning of dialogue.

According to King, the resulting revised first draft was used both in the first production meeting and in the first reading by the *Newhart* cast.<sup>48</sup>

On the Thursday and Friday before the "Camp Stephanie" taping, the staff held auditions for the Ranger Girls in the Executive Producer's office. Although casting activities may not seem immediately relevant to rewriting *Newhart*, the story editors take an active role in the auditions.<sup>49</sup> In selecting the children who will speak as Ranger Girls, the staff is, indeed, involved in a form of cultural interpretation. After all, each casting decision represents an attempt to give bodily form to a familiar social language or worldview as it is expressed by the characters in the narrative. Clearly, not every female child actor represents an "appropriate" rendering of the Ranger Girl (Girl Scout) type. Consequently, this interpretive activity is properly considered part of the rewriting process because it entails rewriting the social concepts lurking behind the construction of characters into concrete, human forms.<sup>50</sup>

The "Camp Stephanie" story went from the "preproduction" phase into the "production" phase during the week beginning Monday, 28 July 1986. On that Monday, the *Newhart* cast sat around a table and read the script aloud. That night, the staff undertook yet another revision of the story to accommodate any problems or questions raised during this first cast reading. The last major revision took place on Tuesday night after the cast went through what King calls a "rough runthrough." According to King, this is the "big rewrite night": "... we lock ourselves in a little room with a secretary and enough Chinese food/pizza/barbecue/Mexican food to feed an army and fix whatever doesn't work."<sup>51</sup> Although the writing staff's involvement was not yet over, the script that resulted from this rewrite constituted what is called the final draft.

In fact, the staff took a surprisingly active role in the production of the "Camp Stephanie" script. After another cast run through on Wednesday, the staff compiled a list of specific notes regarding the performance and visualization of the story.<sup>52</sup> Some of these notes suggest specific readings of lines. For instance, one note refers to a line on page 16 of the final draft and suggests

that "Stephanie's 'Okay' should be read like-it's your funeral-she's surprised and thinks it's a bad choice not to have a flood of questions [on] how to be like her." Other notes actually suggest places for the director to cut to a specific camera perspective. Consider this note referring to a line on page 11 of the final draft: "If Stephanie could be a single shot, we could cut Michael's line at bottom of 10...."<sup>53</sup>

On Wednesday night, the staff also prepared a revision of the final draft that the actors would get on Thursday morning.<sup>54</sup> This moment marked the end of the writing staff's official part in the rewriting of "Camp Stephanie": a process that began over two months before when Pennington and Hart pitched the premise; a process that involved at least eight distinct versions of the story (as summarized in the chronology below); a process that the director continued in supervising the translation of the script into a television text; a process that extended into post-production and beyond as video editors undertook their own rewrite of the director's text.<sup>55</sup>

As one small planetoid in television's expanding discursive universe, *Newhart* exploits the familiar terms and enduring framework of situation comedy to investigate the American ideal of small town life. In the process, the series often proposes gentle critiques of consumerism, snobbery, provincialism and even television itself. Although "Camp Stephanie" is not a particularly noteworthy episode, the story does represent an appropriate rewriting of *Newhart*. The situation with the Ranger Girls is but a "pretext for the revelation of character." In keeping with what Feuer identifies as the MTM "warmedy" tradition, "Camp Stephanie" tempers the ridicule with sympathy. According to Feuer, in MTM "warmedies":

*Even the most stereotyped characters . . . have their moments of self revelation . . . . The most ridiculous MTM characters—the group members and Howard on The Bob Newhart Show—are rendered pathetic rather than thoroughly risible. Infantile, narcissistic characters are never expelled from the family.*<sup>56</sup>

This strategy, though, doesn't quite succeed in "Camp Stephanie." It fails partly because Stephanie's fleeting

moments of self-revelation are not believable or satisfying, and partly because the Ranger Girls's final conversion to Stephanie's value system is equally unsatisfying and inconsistent with their development in earlier scenes.

## REWRITING CULTURE

*... Capitalist greed, the crassest of alliances between commerce and modern technology, may constitute the enabling conditions of a complex narrative art.*

-David Thorburn<sup>27</sup>

With all its faults, "Camp Stephanie" still qualifies as consensus narrative, and this case study tends to support Thorburn's observation that "consensus narrative is always a deeply collaborative enterprise":

*Such stories are created, or constituted, by an elaborate web of transactions or interactions or collaborations: between the text and its audience, which brings to the*

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**Television's storytelling is constantly involved in a process of symbolically rewriting the conflicts and contradictions of modern life.**

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*story-experience a critical historical and aesthetic literacy; and between the individual text and its ancestors and competitors in the same genres; and between the text and the rules and constraints as to subject matter and form imposed by the dominant economic and social order; and even between or among the community of creators—teams of oral singers, performers, directors, technical specialists, writers, producers—who actually produce the text.*<sup>28</sup>

In a very real sense, Thorburn's "elaborate web of transactions or interactions or collaborations" is the living dynamic that I endeavor to describe with the term "rewriting." As a part that stands for the whole (in a metonymic sense), "rewriting" represents a generative ritual that influences every stage of the production

process. As a sign that stands in for another (in a metaphorical sense), "rewriting" suggests a rich way of thinking about how the flow of television discourse contributes to the social construction of reality.

As this case study indicates, to focus solely on the collaborations "between or among the community of creators" without considering other influences, both intertextual and extratextual, is to close off the text from history and culture. But, despite attempting to consider these other influences, this study has, by necessity, reduced and misrepresented the complexity of the *Newhart* staff's ongoing collaboration: for between 21 July and 21 November, the staff had to devise 12 other episodes to join "Camp Stephanie" as part of *Newhart*'s 1986-87 season.<sup>29</sup> This means that the staff must work on several stories, in various stages of completion, at the same time. In other words, in series television, rewriting is an overlapping cyclic process that requires the precise coordination of creative personnel in an efficient routine. Considering "Camp Stephanie" in isolation clearly does not begin to account for the logistical, intellectual and creative demands of television's assembly-line storytelling.

Day in and day out, commercial American television acts as an efficient exhibition system for a complex narrative art—an art that is, admittedly, inspired and sustained by the profit motive. But in its routine communication and commodification of shared beliefs, television's cascading collection of stories does much more than merely record or reflect social reality. Speaking to us always of "the appropriate," TV's story industry is engaged in an ongoing rewrite—or re-vision—of the American Way. In other words, television's storytelling is constantly involved in a process of symbolically rewriting the conflicts and contradictions of modern life into terms that are comprehensible and forms that are meaningful to a vast, heterogeneous audience.

In promoting a theory of production that emphasizes the openness and complexity of the rewriting ritual, this study challenges orthodox critical traditions, especially those still embracing the myth of originality. Rather than attempting to decipher a text according to the intentions of a sovereign ego, or approaching television production

in terms of individual creativity, the proposed theory of production investigates "the genius of the system."<sup>60</sup> Surely, this genius is better expressed in the constant compromise called rewriting than in the romanticized ideal called authorship.

#### "Camp Stephanie" Chronology

- 22 May Pitch session: the staff selects a premise.
- 29/30 May Second meeting with Pennington and Hart: the staff dictates a rough story outline.
- 4 June Pennington and Hart deliver the formal story outline.
- 19 June Pennington and Hart deliver the first draft.
- 8 July Staff completes the first revision (the "greens") of the first draft.
- 16 July After the staff conducts an oral performance of the greens, they complete another revision that will be used for the first production meeting and the first cast reading.
- 28 July After the first cast reading, the staff again revises the first draft.
- 29 July "The Big Rewrite Night": the writing of the final draft.
- 30 July The staff completes the final version of the script, the revised final draft.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Christopher Anderson, "Reflections on Magnum, P. I.," in Horace Newcomb (ed.), *Television: The Critical View*, 4th edition (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1987), p. 119.

<sup>2</sup>James W. Carey, "A Cultural Approach to Communication," *Communication 2* (1975), pp. 1-22.

<sup>3</sup>M.M. Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. Caryn Emerson and Michael Holquist, ed. Michael Holquist (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1981), p. 293.

<sup>4</sup>John Fiske and John Hartley, *Reading Television* (London: Methuen, 1978), p. 89.

<sup>5</sup>Horace Newcomb and Robert S. Alley, *The Producer's Medium* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1983).

<sup>6</sup>David Thorburn, "Television as an Aesthetic Medium," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 4:2 (June 1987), pp. 167, 168.

<sup>7</sup>For a discussion of the relationship between prime-time and fringe television, see Jimmie L. Reeves and Horace Newcomb, "Fringe Television: A Challenge to Prime-Time Criticism," *Southern Speech Communication Journal* 52:4 (Summer 1987), pp. 339-348.

<sup>8</sup>This dialogic view of television's rewriting ritual is derived from the translanguistics of M.M. Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," pp. 259-422. For a discussion of how Bakhtin's work applies to critical approaches to television discourse, see Horace Newcomb, "On the Dialogic Aspects of Mass Communication," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 1:1 (1984), pp. 34-50.

<sup>9</sup>For a discussion of the "viewing strip" as text, see Horace Newcomb and Paul M. Hirsch, "Television as a Cultural Forum," in Horace Newcomb (ed.), *Television: The Critical View*, p. 463.

<sup>10</sup>Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1983), p. 12.

<sup>11</sup>Karen Stabner, "For Bob Newhart, Affection is Still the Essence of Successful Comedy," *New York Times* (26 December 1982), sec. 2, p. 25.

<sup>12</sup>N. Vidmar and M. Rokeach, "Archie Bunker's Bigotry: A Study in Selective Perception," *Journal of Communication* 24:1 (1974), pp. 36-47. Although Vidmar and Rokeach's study assumes a

"transmission view of communication," their findings actually support this ritual view of television. But rather than explain the multiple readings of Bunker's performance in terms of selective perception, a ritual view explains it in terms of the dialogic operation of human discourse. Meaning is not inscribed on a text and transmitted to a passive audience; instead, meaning arises in the dialogic collision of a value-laden text and an active audience stratified by conflicting worldviews.

\*Robin Pennington and Don Hart, "Camp Stephanie," *Newhart*, unpublished final draft, 30 July 1986, p. 3.

\*David Tyron King is a recent graduate of the Univ. of Texas and a former student in one of my scriptwriting classes. Without King's unselfish contributions and cooperation, this study would not have been undertaken.

\*When King provided the scripts and production documents associated with the "Camp Stephanie" story, he also included extensive handwritten notes on the rewriting process. I will refer to the notes as: King, "Notes," unpublished correspondence, September 1986.

\*Ibid.

\*Ibid.

\*Ibid.

\*Ibid.

\*Jane Feuer, "The MTM Style," in Newcomb (ed.), *Television: The Critical View*, pp. 55, 60.

\*Michael Pollan, "Bob Newhart: Prime Time's Bland Eminence," *Channels of Communications* 5:3 (October 1985), p. 66.

\*Ibid.

\*This phenomenological view of social typification—a view that organizes social types according to the social distribution of knowledge—is derived from Alfred Schutz and Thomas Luckmann, *The Structures of the Life-World*, trans. R. Zaner and H. Englehardt (Evanston: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1973). For an analysis of how the well-informed, the expert, and layman types relate to television stardom see Jimmie L. Reeves, "Television Stardom: A Ritual of Social Typification and Individualization," *Sage Annual Review of Communication Research* 15 (1987).

\*Stabner, p. 25.

\*For a discussion of television's role in maintaining common sense by processing out obsolete knowledge see Roger Silverstone, *The Message of Television* (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1981).

\*Robin Pennington and Don Hart, "Pitch: Number 9," unpublished notes for *Newhart* pitch session, 22 May 1986, p. 4.

\*King, "Notes."

\*Robin Pennington, Don Hart and *Newhart* Staff, "Rough Outline," unpublished production document, 29 and 30 May 1986, pp. 1-8.

\*Ibid.

\*King, "Notes."

\*Pennington, Hart, & *Newhart* Staff, "Rough Outline," p. 7.

\*King, "Notes."

\*Robin Pennington and Don Hart, "Camp Stephanie," unpublished formal story outline, 4 June 1986, pp. 1-14. According to one of King's notes, "The best length for an outline is usually 10-12 pages."

\*Ibid., p. 1.

\*Ibid., p. 14.

\*King, "Notes."

\*Ibid.

\*Bakhtin, p. 316.

\*Ibid., p. 299.

\*Robin Pennington and Don Hart, "Camp Stephanie," unpublished first draft of television script, 19 June 1986, p. 49.

\*King, "Notes."

\*Pollan, p. 66. According to Pollan: "His [Newhart's] reactions are among the best on television; he's got the courage Jack Benny had to ride out several long beats of silence and then get a laugh with little more than a quiet, uninflected 'oh.' In fact, Newhart's comic vocabulary is pretty much limited to that 'oh,' an 'I see,' a 'humm,' a quick stammer, and a raised eyebrow, all of which he deploys with unerring timing."

"Robin Pennington, Don Hart, and *Newhart* Staff, "Camp Stephanie," the greens, unpublished first revision of the first draft, 8 July 1986, p. 7.

"Pollan, p. 66. Interestingly, Pollan compares Bob Newhart/Dick Loudon and Tom Poston/George Utey to Captain Kangaroo and Mr. Greenjeans: "In fact Newhart and the Captain have a lot in common. Both are serene, well adjusted to a fault, a little boring, but always dependable. Like the Captain, Newhart surrounds himself with characters who are a little better off in the personality department, but also a little ridiculous. (George Utey, his handyman, with the plaid shirts, coveralls, and funny hats, is a dead ringer for Mr. Greenjeans.)"

"Robin Pennington, Don Hart, and *Newhart* Staff, "Camp Stephanie," the greens, p. 32.

"King, "Notes."

"Ibid.

"Ibid.

"Ibid.

"Bakhtin, p. 365. This view of character as the embodiment of a social language is derived from Bakhtin's discussion of "the speaking person in the novel." According to Bakhtin: "... the novelistic plot serves to represent speaking persons and their ideological worlds. What is realized in the novel is the process of coming to one's own language as it is perceived in someone else's language, coming to know one's own belief system in someone else's system."

"King, "Notes."

"Ibid.

"*Newhart* Staff, "Director's Notes," unpublished production document, 30 May 1986.

"King, "Notes."

"As Linda Anne Borgeson has discovered, the rewriting process extends well beyond the prime-time exhibition of a television series. Borgeson analyzed an episode of *Remington Steele* as it appeared during its prime-time run and then later during its fringe run on *CBS Late Night*. She found that the commercial interruptions were repositioned in the late night airing of the episode. According to Borgeson: "This repositioning of the breaks may not ultimately change the meaning of the program,

but it does give us different narrative. The telling of the story is affected by choice of emphasis, and with this shifting pattern of fragmentation, viewer attention is directed toward certain elements of the narrative, which may change the way we remember it." Linda Anne Borgeson, "Unraveling the Fringe Schedule: Repetition, Restoration, and Rejuxtaposition in Late-Night Television," Unpublished thesis, Univ. of Texas at Austin (1986), pp. 65, 66.

"Feuer, pp. 62, 63.

"Thorburn, p. 166.

"Ibid., p. 170.

"*Newhart 1986 Production Schedule*, unpublished production document.

"This phrase is borrowed, secondhand, from André Bazin, "La Politique des Auteurs," an editorial appearing in *Cahiers du Cinéma* in 1957 and quoted by Thomas Schatz in *Hollywood Genres* (New York: Random House, 1981), p. 3.

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