Television as an Aesthetic Medium

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□ —*Aesthetic or literary approaches to television, this essay argues, provide an essential corrective to recent emphases on the ideological dimensions of modern media. Calling for an aesthetic anthropology that understands television shows both as manufactured artifacts and as fictional texts, the essay defines television as a contemporary American instance of* consensus narrative, *a cultural formation or institution in which society's central beliefs and values undergo continuous rehearsal, testing, and revision.*

A WARRIOR'S SWORD

"THE LIFE of things is in reality many lives," writes the cultural historian Philip Fisher. To illustrate, he traces the history of a warrior's sword: a sign of manhood and communal defense during the warrior's life, it passes after his death into the hands of the priests of his society, no longer a weapon for use in warfare but a sacred object. Now more often heard in legends than seen, kept hidden except for ceremonial occasions, the sword takes up its second, its ritualized and sacred, identity. In time, Fisher continues, the society suffers a defeat; the sword along with all valued objects is seized as loot, "converted to treasure by the victors for whom it is a souvenir that reminds them of a victory. It is an object of wealth." Finally, a "higher" civiliza-

tion destroys all the groups of this warrior society. "Anthropologists take the sword to a museum, classifying it along with cooking implements, canoes, clothing, statues, and toys as an example of a cultural 'style.' " Now it has become an artifact, a source of historical, anthropological, and aesthetic contemplation (Fisher, 1975, pp. 587–588).

We can say, I think, that the story forms of a society undergo similar, though not identical, transformations. Homer's oral epics, the plays of Sophocles, Aristophanes, Plautus, even Shakespeare, continue to be experienced as narratives and as performances in our own day, but we fool ourselves when we imagine or pretend that contemporary versions of such texts very closely resemble their original, communal enactments. Even with the story forms of our own century and native culture—the silent film, radio, movies of the studio era—there exists a gap between our contemporary mediated experience of such texts and the actuality of their originating embodiments before audiences who regarded them as objects of use and leisure, no more valuable or artistic or

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historically instructive than the jokes and conversations and social encounters that comprised the ordinary blurred continuity of their daily lives. Students of popular culture, and particularly of American television, are entangled crucially in the paradoxes of cultural transformation that Fisher's parable describes. In examining television we inevitably become part of a system or process of "museumization": appropriating television texts for historical or anthropological or aesthetic use, we transform the medium, conferring upon it something of the dignity accorded to the texts and artifacts already elevated into the culture that is preserved in museums, art galleries, scholarly books, and university curricula. The costs and dangers inherent in this enterprise, wherein the most ordinary and habitual usages of a culture are appropriated for intellectual analysis, increasingly have come to preoccupy me and surely demand closer scrutiny than they yet have received from all who think and write about American media.

BEYOND IDEOLOGY

One partial resolution or solution to the paradoxes mentioned above, however, turns on the recognition that the warrior's sword only imperfectly resembles objects whose original character was essentially aesthetic.

The adjective "aesthetic" is problematic, I realize. But I know no other word to use for the qualities I wish to identify in our popular culture and specifically in our television system. Let us first understand the term *aesthetic* in its descriptive, its cultural, or anthropological dimension. The term suggests not a valuing of aesthetic objects but a designation of their chief defining feature—their mem-

bership in a class of cultural experiences understood to be fictional or imaginary, understood to occur in a symbolic, culturally agreed upon imaginative space. The site may be a theater, the intimate, privatized spaces of our experience of television, the vast ritual amphitheaters of the ancient world, the dark communal space of the movie house—any ritualized environment where "real" experience is re-presented, re-created, symbolically displayed.

The vase paintings, dramatic rituals, or communal legends of the warrior's culture must be said to differ from the sword in this way: their fictive or imaginative, their representational or artistic qualities, are inherent from the beginning. However much is lost in their later survivals—as translated printed texts, say, of original oral performances, or as photographic reproductions or scholarly reconstructions of drawings and paintings on the shards of clay vessels—our later experience of these objects, our understanding of them as symbolic and artistic expression, may be a lesser violence than our appropriation of the sword.

For me this recognition is the ground for an argument that insists on the centrality of aesthetic perspectives in the study of most forms of popular culture, especially such forms as films, television programs, and rock concerts, all of which contain narrative or dramatic or spectacular-musical features.

The argument for aesthetic (or, in the case of narrative and dramatic forms, literary) methods seems to me particularly important to articulate in our present intellectual climate because the widespread influence of structuralist and so-called deconstructionist perspectives clearly has sanctioned approaches to popular and elite texts alike that mini-

mize or deny the difference between fictional discourse and other forms of expression. The increasing fashion in film scholarship to seek out what are said to be the ideological structures controlling cinematic discourse already has affected measurably the emerging and far more primitive academic writing devoted to television. The genuine value of such ideological emphases need not be doubted, but their limits need to be recognized more fully and acknowledged.

In the case of literary scholarship and, to a lesser degree, film scholarship, the prior existence of a complex and widely known field of argument devoted to explication and evaluation creates a steadying background, a counterpoint, for placing and judging the newer forms of ideological criticism. We are not likely, for example, to be misled, or to oversimplify, when we are told by a neo-Marxist or structuralist reader that Shakespeare's plays articulate the standard (and historically biased) Tudor view of English history. Or again, an account of Dickens' perhaps unconscious acceptance of liberal-reformist and patriarchal ideologies will not dislodge the large and persuasive body of criticism that establishes his distinction as one of the wisest and most artful of English novelists.

But the absence of such traditional forms of scholarship in the case of many aspects of popular culture, particularly in the case of television, creates special dangers. In these emerging fields of study, a scholarly discourse intent on deconstructing texts, and audiences, risks severing itself from the way such texts were conceived and experienced by those who created them and by the audiences who consumed them. Lacking a systematic history of television programming, much less a body of analysis attempting

even the most elementary aesthetic discriminations (as between, say, *Gilligan's Island* and *M*A*S*H;* or between *The Mod Squad* and *Police Story* or that fine series' culminating refinement, *Hill Street Blues*), we are unlikely to be instructed by accounts of television purporting to lay bare its ideological substructures, its hidden assumptions about sexual or familial or racial conflict.

I do not mean that searching out such meanings is wrong. But I do mean that such topics cannot be addressed meaningfully by a scholar oblivious to what I am calling the literary or aesthetic dimensions of television programs. The argument for the centrality of aesthetic perspectives in the study of television, as I conceive it, is not only, not even primarily, an argument for an evaluative criticism aiming to disclose the thematic density and formal excellence of particular programs, though that remains for me a crucial enterprise. The most compelling justification for essentially literary perspectives in television study—or, at the very least, in the study of television's fictional programming—is that such perspectives are necessary for the basic work of historical and cultural interpretation. Because television fiction is a body of drama or narrative that relies on conventions of characterization, plotting, and, especially, of genre and that employs strategies of editing and camera movement drawn from our culture's 80-year saturation in forms of visual storytelling, a scholarship oblivious or insensitive to these aesthetic ground features of the medium will be radically enfeebled. Even the simplest account of the evolution or historical development of the medium must be capable of recognizing, for example, how the genre formulas that have dominated television have altered over time, must be sensitive to the

ways in which particular performers bring particular thematic associations with them as they move from role to role, and must be alert to the nuances of tone that particular writers and creators, and even directors, introduce into television programs.

A concrete example will help perhaps to clarify the dangers of ignoring such literary perspectives. In a widely cited section of his history of American broadcasting, Erik Barnouw perceives a virtually conspiratorial fit between the corporate imperialism of John Kennedy's foreign policy and the content of prime time television. In a subsection of *Tube of Plenty* (1975), provocatively titled "Paranoid Pictures Presents," Barnouw cites the rise of spy series in the mid-1960s as proof that an aggressively self-righteous imperialism, pitting American good guys against evil communist bad guys, was being promulgated by television. Television entertainment, we are informed, was "an integral part of the [Vietnam] escalation machine" (p. 377).

But the evidence chiefly cited to support this judgment consists of six spy series, at least four of which have a subversively antic or parodic energy that undermines or radically qualifies Barnouw's view of them as forms of propaganda aiming "to harness the nation . . . for war" (p. 376). Such political themes are hard to take seriously, for example, in *Get Smart* (cited by Barnouw) in whose characteristic pilot episode an evil dwarf named Mr. Big holds the world's cities for ransom using a doomsday device, called (after its inventor) "Dante's Inthermo" (Eisner & Krinsky, 1984, p. 281).

The reductiveness of Barnouw's analysis of 1960s spy series is, as this example shows, partly a consequence of his indifference to their aesthetic character. Of the six series that comprise his chief

evidence, three are explicit parodies, *Get Smart*, *The Man from U.N.C.L.E* and *The Girl from U.N.C.L.E.*, and a fourth, *I Spy* (Bill Cosby's first star vehicle on television), is at least as interested in joking and comic badinage and in the rich improvisational intimacy of the friendship between Robert Culp and Cosby as in the conventional muscle flexing of the typical spy story. These texts scarcely can sustain the argument that they are significant Cold War propaganda. It is more plausible, in fact, to see their mocking attitude toward the whole genre of the spy narrative as instances of a countertendency in the popular arts aiming to expose the foolishness and emptiness of the conspiratorial world view embedded in straight or serious spy fiction. Barnouw cites details from a few episodes from these series, and he recognizes and even praises the improvisational energy of *I Spy*. But he cannot escape his reductive idea of television series as instruments of propaganda and so all but ignores questions of tone and atmosphere. The bizarrely improbable plots, the extravagant, almost campy, villains, and the audio-visual complexity in these programs register, if at all, for Barnouw as mere "novel surface features" in ideological fables all demonstrating that "Americans lived . . . among unscrupulous conspiracies that required a response in kind" (p. 372). His error, I am suggesting, is a literary one; he radically misreads these texts because he does not grant sufficient weight to their aesthetic qualities.

Of course, I do not mean to suggest that Erik Barnouw, more participant-observer than objective scholar (though still an indispensable authority on the economic history of broadcasting), can fairly represent contemporary schools of ideological criticism. There is an emerging, ideologically grounded scholarship

devoted to television that is far subtler and more persuasive than Barnouw's unselfconscious civic-mindedness. But I think my example instructive nonetheless, for the reductiveness in Barnouw's reading *is* characteristic of most journalistic interpretations of television and also of much social science work on the medium, even including that of George Gerbner's Annenberg School of neo-Marxist statistical interpretation, perhaps the most influential body of American academic writing on television.

Other more theoretically sophisticated perspectives, such as that of Todd Gitlin (1983) and those of Raymond Williams (1975) and other members of the British cultural studies group—suggestively represented in such collections as Michael Gurevitch and his colleagues' *Culture, Society and the Media* (1982) and Len Masterman's *Television Mythologies* (1984)—offer more nuanced, indisputably helpful readings of television's ideological substructures. Fiske and Hartley's *Reading Television* (1978), an essential book, can be said to represent the best of both the semiotic and neo-Marxist strains in recent cultural theory. But even these perspectives often are limited by an implicit anti-capitalist agenda, the assumption that a medium so embedded in the economic and political order of advanced technological capitalism must be demystified so we can see its corruption.

Such perspectives are helpful but too partial, for the medium is not uniquely corrupt: all new systems of communication and technology are controlled by the nexus of economic, political, and social forces governing the cultures where they appear. The relevant task is not merely to deconstruct or expose the ideological assumptions embedded in television texts but to explore the range of freedoms permitted the text by the cultural rules and ideological pressures that ultimately, *but not in every dimension,* confine it.

Comparative perspectives are helpful here, though rarely invoked. The Nazis, Raymond Williams (1975, p. 24) shrewdly reminds us, had systematic plans to use television as an instrument of state control. There would be no private ownership or use of television receivers in Goebbels' scheme for the medium; instead, television screens were to be placed in public spaces, refining and monstrously enlarging the state's project of ritualized mass indoctrination. Such potential alternatives to the American advertiser-based system of television ought to remind us that there will be critical differences in the nature and degree to which particular communications systems obey their cultural masters.

Moreover, to imagine such alternatives as Nazi prime time—or to think comparatively about Russian or South African or British television—is to see more clearly that what I am calling aesthetic methods of interpretation—an attentiveness to tone, to plot and character, to visual strategies, to the workings of narrative and symbolic texts—are essential to the task of describing and judging such systems. In fact, one way to explain the rare authority of such writers as Fiske and Hartley is to recognize that their accounts of television programs are far more attuned than most ideologically oriented readings to aesthetic registers of meaning. To understand our television system, I want to insist, even in its historical and ideological dimensions, we must be sensitive in part to literary matters; we must be able to read these texts in something of the way the audience experiences them: as stories or dramas, as aesthetic artifacts, whose meaning will be fully available only if we employ, along with other interpretive methods,

the strategies of reading traditionally used by critics of literature and film.

TOWARD AN AESTHETIC ANTHROPOLOGY

In estimating the importance of aesthetic or literary perspectives on television, it is instructive to compare prevailing American attitudes toward television with the attitudes held less than a generation ago toward our home-grown movies and movie makers. Many film scholars have pointed to the irony that America's recognition of her own achievement in the art of film lagged far behind that of Europe. Our genre movies finally came to seem valuable to us, the film critics have shown, only after the French *nouvelle vague* directors had legitimated for educated Americans the myths and conventions of those direct ancestors of today's police and detective series, the films of Bogart and Cagney and Edward G. Robinson.

This change in American attitudes toward the movies—more accurately, this change in the attitudes of our educated classes—is the more instructive, and grows more ironic, when we consider how its emergence is tied to the decline of the movies as a form of popular art. Through the fifties and the sixties, as critics of the American film lost their defensiveness and began to speak with the same confidence (and also, alas, often the same specialized jargon) as the literary critics, the American film itself was being supplanted by television as America's principal medium of popular narrative. (In 1951, in the early dawn of the television age, 90 million Americans attended the movies each week; by 1959 weekly attendance had fallen to 43 million; today the vast majority of Americans attend the movies only two or three times *per year*.) As the Hollywood stu-

dios and their vast machinery for star making and film manufacturing receded into history and as there emerged a generation of reviewers, critics, and, finally, university professors whose deepest experience of art had occurred in the movie houses of their childhoods, the American film came to be detached or liberated from its identity as a consumer item, a mere commercial product, and to be located within an aesthetic field.

This recognition of the essential *artistic* dimension of the Hollywood commercial movie was and remains an intellectual achievement of great magnitude, for it permitted fundamental new perspectives on the cultural history of the United States, profoundly complicating our understanding of the workings of our economic system and altering our understanding of the nature and possibilities of art itself. The most significant implication of this recognition, an implication still only partially explored by film critics and historians, is this: *capitalist greed, the crassest of alliances between commerce and modern technology, may constitute the enabling conditions of a complex narrative art.*

But, as I have already suggested, this recognition of film, the work of years and many scholars, was in certain respects a belated one. By the time it had been lodged fully in the educated consciousness, in our museums and our universities (Abbott and Costello transfigured to an artifact, joining Euripides and warriors' swords), the American film itself was no longer an habitual experience for the mass of our population, having yielded to television not only its ability to incite our contempt for manufactured entertainment but also its status as our central institution for storytelling.

It is certain that this historical distance was a necessary prelude to our recognition of the cultural importance

and aesthetic value of the movies. But it is essential to observe that television itself is now four decades old and that the respect the film scholars and reviewers routinely bestow on even the most insignificant monster movies has almost no counterpart in our discourse concerning television.

To describe television as an institution for storytelling is not, of course, to identify all of its functions in our society. But the term does identify what has always been and will no doubt continue forever to be one of television's dominant functions, and it has the further advantage of helping to expose the crude denial of history that is inherent in prevailing behaviorist and McLuhanite theories about our media culture. Television is unique, unprecedented in human history, these perspectives naively but aggressively assume: the medium has no past, no ancestors. But the moment we recognize that television has a storytelling function we open ourselves to vastly instructive continuities, we link television to a past more important than the behavior of the FCC since 1948 or even—useful as such vital history will be—the stories of Paley, and Goldenson, and the legatees of Robert Sarnoff. And we also begin to acknowledge (or should we say, recover) something of the way television actually has been experienced by viewers.

To define television as partly an institution for storytelling is, I am suggesting, not to flatter the medium nor to grant it a false dignity but simply to name one of the ways, perhaps the most significant way, it actually has functioned in American lives: as an instrument for continuity as well as change, a communication system devoted most of the time to entertaining as many of us as possible with stories and fables that earlier media and story systems had told before. To conceive of television in this way, as the best film scholars conceive their topic, as John Cawelti (1976) conceives the task of studying popular culture, is to commit oneself to what might be described as an aesthetic anthropology, requiring a simultaneous awareness of television programs as manufactured cultural artifacts *and* as fictional or dramatic texts.

CONSENSUS NARRATIVE

The perspective of aesthetic anthropology grounds our sense of television simultaneously in real experience, in the economic and cultural forces that shape it and also in a long history, a continuity of story systems—institutions of myth making and popular narrative—that extend back into Western history to at least the time of Homer. This continuity, which has a centrally aesthetic dimension, is implicit in Fiske and Hartley's notion of television's "bardic" function (1978, pp. 85–100) and is implicit also in Newcomb and Alley's account of television as a "choric" medium that speaks with a communal voice like that of the chorus in Greek tragedy (1983, pp. 31–34). Extrapolating from these sources, I would identify, in a tentative and speculative spirit, a kind of narrative system I believe is common to most societies if not to all, a recurring, distinct cultural formation to be called *consensus narrative*. I avoid the adjective "popular" to achieve a clearer neutrality and to identify as a chief feature of consensus narrative the ambition or desire to speak for and to the whole of its culture, or as much of the whole as the governing forces in society will permit. Many forms of narrative and performance will exist in most societies and will rightly be called popular, but nearly all will address particular subgroups or classes within a society, as

country music or Broadway theater or wrestling or rock concerts do in contemporary America, as bear baiting and Petrarchan sonnets and the popular ballad and public executions did in the London of Shakespeare and Marlowe.

Consensus narrative, in contrast, operates at the very center of the life of its culture and is in consequence almost always deeply conservative in its formal structures and in its content. Its assignment—so to say—is to articulate the culture's central mythologies, in a widely accessible language, an inheritance of shared stories, plots, character types, cultural symbols, and narrative conventions. Such language is popular because it is legible to the common understanding of a majority of the culture, as the legends and heroes of Troy and the complex conventions of a formulaic oral poetry confined to dactylic hexameters were known to Homer's audience, as the conventions of the revenge play and the dense verbal textures of the Elizabethan pentameter were known to Shakespeare's, and as the segmented abrupt rhythms and formal and thematic conventions of situation comedy are known to contemporary Americans.

Perhaps there are cultures, or historical eras within particular societies, when no form of consensus narrative can emerge or when several media or theaters of communication reinforce and partly contend against one another as carriers of the culture's consensus. And, of course, in any society not only its story systems but many other practices and institutions will be devoted to articulating an ideology that affirms existing cultural arrangements and values. But the central story forms in a culture have a special significance, partly because they appeal across boundaries of class and wealth and age and gender, affecting to speak to everyone and partly because

their status as entertainment and as fiction licenses forms or degrees of expression that are otherwise prohibited or denied in social practice. Systems or institutions of consensus narrative are, thus, always complex mirrors of their societies, essential artifacts to which we must turn if we wish to understand ourselves, our ancestors, and our filiations with the past. I have in mind primarily such story systems as those I have already mentioned or implied: the oral-formulaic narrative of Homer's day, the theater of Sophocles, the Elizabethan theater, the English novel from Defoe to Dickens, and, a little beyond, the silent film, the sound film, and television during the Network Era.

These, and perhaps many other story mediums, share central features: they are ritualized, habitual experiences for their audiences; they are profoundly traditional in their formal or stylistic strategies and in their recurring plots, characters, and themes; and they can be seen, I believe, to undergo a similar process of development or evolution.

Whether we consider the oral-formulaic medium that culminated in the poems of Homer or whether we examine later systems of storytelling or communication, a similar pattern of development is visible. Most simply, this pattern is one of self-discovery, where the new medium begins by repeating and imitating the forms and strategies of its ancestor systems and gradually, through accident and experiment, discovers more and more thoroughly its own uniqueness.

The novel, for example, is born as an amalgam of older forms—the romance, the picaresque tale, certain forms of religious narrative such as puritan autobiography, and various forms of journalism and historical writing. At first it combines these elements haphazardly and crudely. Then, nourished by a large and

eager audience that makes novel writing a highly profitable enterprise, the novel begins to distinguish itself clearly from these earlier forms, to combine its inherited elements more harmoniously and judiciously and to exploit the possibilities for narrative that are uniquely available to fictional stories printed in books.

The same principle can be seen in the history of the movies. They begin crudely, borrowing assumptions taken from older media such as theater and still photography and then evolving methods that exploit with greater and greater subtlety the unique properties of the motion-picture camera and the particular qualities inherent in the environment of the movie house.

The evolution of these systems of entertainment and communication is always immensely complicated by the rivalry of competing systems, by the economic structures that shape and support such systems and that are in turn altered themselves as the new media root themselves in people's lives. Improvements in technology and in methods of distribution and access further complicate the development of such media. In the case of film, for instance, decisive changes follow upon the advent of sound, the development of lighter, more mobile cameras and of more sensitive film stock; and seismic shifts in the very nature of film, in its relation to its audience and its society, occur with the birth of television. Perhaps most significant of all, media systems and institutions for storytelling alter and extend their possibilities as their audiences grow more comfortable with them, learning the special codes and conventions such institutions generate and rely upon. The distance between *Fred Ott's Sneeze* (1893)—only seconds-long, produced in East Orange, New Jersey, in the world's first movie studio—and Chaplin's *Modern Times*

(1936) is a rich, decisive emblem for these interacting processes, these enabling conditions of consensus narrative.

I believe such story systems present even greater challenges to adequately thick description than the immense complexities involved in understanding a Balinese cock fight as Clifford Geertz would have us understand it. In his suggestive essays in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973) Geertz offers powerful arguments for the centrality of aesthetic perspectives in the reading of all forms of cultural ritual, urging us to bring to the cock fight the same respect for complexity and the same attentiveness to dramatic ritual as we bring to a reading of *Macbeth* (pp. 448–453). There can be no rational dissent from this expectation, but I wonder if forms of narrative, at least the most coherent and significant of them, are not more taxing still in their claims on the interpreter, because they do not merely embody cultural assumptions and values; they consciously articulate, examine, and judge such matters themselves. Narrative and dramatic texts, that is to say, do not merely express or display a culture's notions of masculinity, risk, nobility, or the power of fortune or catastrophe as the cock fight (among other things) does for Geertz's Bali; such story forms will in addition be *about* these topics, will try to examine and to understand them, as *Macbeth* examines and understands these and other aspects of its culture.

Insisting on this distinction between art and artifact, I am clinging, I recognize, to an outmoded humanism, which wants still to believe that there is a significant difference between art and entertainment, art having value for us not only as a cultural artifact but also intrinsically, because it is beautiful and wise. In this perspective, to supply some concrete examples, Thomas Heywood—

Shakespeare's popular contemporary, whose *A Woman Killed with Kindness* (1603) is one of the originating melodramas of the English-speaking world—is an entertainer, as worthy as the cock fight of our sustained historical or anthropological attention, but Shakespeare is an artist who demands, and rewards, a wider, deeper, and ultimately less specialized attentiveness. Or again, Wilkie Collins is a superior entertainer who sustains a rich suspense in his stories of Victorian crime and mystery, a writer whose assumptions about social class, marriage, crime, and punishment are culturally or historically revealing, but Dickens is an artist whose equally suspenseful mysteries articulate in addition a complex understanding of these defining Victorian and modern themes.

Increasingly, though, I find myself reluctant to press this distinction too austerely because the margins separating art from entertainment are so difficult to locate and because so many artworks— and especially so many instances of consensus narrative—are partial achievements, arresting and powerful intermittently, but lapsing often into incoherence or easy stereotypes or mechanical formulas of plot and character. Because movies are a collaborative and commercial art, as many film critics have come to acknowledge, the perfect masterpiece is very rare. But the intelligence and energy of the performers, the craft or art of the director, the cinematographer, or the editor may redeem banal scripts, complicate and subvert stereotypes, and offer us complex pleasures.

So to acknowledge the partial excellence of consensus art is not a retreat from the archaic evaluative humanism I am defending; it is just a necessary qualification. Our understanding of television will be crippled, I am suggesting, if we refuse to describe and evaluate the differences between Gilligan and Hawkeye Pierce, for example, or between *I Led Three Lives* and *I Spy*.

In any event, the most crucial feature of consensus narrative is shared by all members of the class, even the least artistic: consensus narrative is always a deeply collaborative enterprise. Such stories are created by an elaborate web of transactions or interactions or contested collaborations: between the text and its audience, which brings to the story experience an essential historical and aesthetic literacy; between the individual text and its ancestors and competitors in the same genres; 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.

This communal and collaborative dimension of consensus narrative helps to explain why such story forms are confined by the dominant pieties of the cultures they inhabit and explains their apparent lack of originality, their formulaic character. But it also explains their special power to articulate what my old humanist teachers would have called the wisdom of the community. This crucial aspect of consensus narrative is, in my view, minimized or often entirely denied by most of the ideologically grounded scholarship devoted to film and television. The dominant ideology that is said to govern these and other forms of consensus narrative is neither so rigid nor so oppressive as current semiotic and neo-Marxist perspectives seem to assume, and the relationship between the audience and the text is more complex,

more active, and more vital than such perspectives acknowledge (Abercrombie & Turner, 1978; Newcomb & Hirsch, 1984).

The conservatism of consensus narrative, that is to say, makes it a chief carrier of the lore and inherited understanding of its culture, as well as society's idealizations and deceptions about itself. That inherited understanding is no simple ideological construct but a matrix of values and assumptions that undergoes a continuous testing, rehearsal, and revision in the culturally licensed experience of consensus narrative. If consensus narrative is a site or forum where the culture promulgates its mythologies of self-justification and appropriation, it is also the "liminal space," as the anthropologist Victor Turner names it, where the deepest values and contradictions of society are articulated and, sometimes, understood (1967, pp. 93–111; 1977, pp. 94–130).

Some lines from Shakespeare wonderfully illustrate this principle and can stand as an emblem for the collaborative and communal wisdom of consensus narrative. In act four of *Cymbeline* two young men sing a haunting dirge over the corpse of one they believe to be a comrade:

Fear no more the heat o' the sun
  Nor the furious winter's rages;
Thou thy worldly task hast done,
  Home art gone, and ta'en thy wages;
Golden lads and girls all must,
As chimney sweepers, come to dust.

These lovely, simple lines link human death with the cycles of nature, a commonplace idea, I suppose, but brought alive, renewed, by the very clarity and directness of the phrasing, by the decisive, end-stopped rhymes and by the odd mingling of the familiar or the much spoken with the abrupt muscular economy of the stressed syllables that begin each line and with the tetrameter rhythms. Though the specific decisions are no doubt Shakespeare's, we can hear in the Biblical phrasing a collaborative energy that aligns the poem's sentiments with a long tradition of proverbial and religious understanding. The last two lines quoted above are the most memorable and potent in the poem, I think, because they are the most humanly specific and disturbing, extending the text's argument to the ambiguously consoling recognition that wealth and station, even youth itself, must come home to the grave. "Golden lads and girls all must, As chimney sweepers, come to dust." The beauty and genius of these lines belong not only—perhaps not even mainly—to Shakespeare but to the culture that speaks with and through him. For as Hugh Kenner (1971, p. 122) reports, even today in Shakespeare's native Warwickshire, dandelions, those common weedy yellow flowers that appear in early spring, are called "golden lads" in their first blooming and then are called "chimney sweepers" when they go to seed, their sturdy yellow caps transformed to a delicate spume of white filaments, the entire flower metamorphosed into the smallened image of a chimney sweeper's broom. The metaphoric richness of the lines is not compromised by this colloquial meaning; on the contrary, the poem achieves a stunning enhancement or deepening of its argument when we know that the very terms used to describe human mortality actually name the phases in the life of a common flower. Here, as so often elsewhere in his work, Shakespeare recovers and speaks the familiar wisdom of his culture, the wisdom of consensus narrative.

A FABLE FOR OUR MEDIA CULTURE

I began with a fable about a warrior's sword and want to end, as a way of complicating my argument one last time and also as a way of crystallizing and completing it, with another fable—this one transcribed from my imperfect memory of a science fiction short story I read as a teenager perhaps 30 years ago.

Millennia from now, the planetary archeologists of an advanced civilization come across a dead earth, whose ruins they sift for artifacts of a vanished culture. In one promising site, yielding other fragments of a highly technologized society, the Centuran archeologists discover a flat metal canister containing a spool of semi-transparent celluloid inscribed with images or signs. Inferring projections after laborious study, the aliens construct one and project the film: *Tiny bipeds in rapid and spasmodic motion. Projectiles, machines, perhaps vehicles, racing and careening through a dizzyingly colored and rapid visual field. Explosions. Frantic collisions—acts of aggression? sexual encounters?—between bipeds and between bipeds and vehicles.*

These frantic images, we are told, will baffle generations of Centuran scholars, who will construct elaborate theses concerning the civilization inscribed in the celluloid artifact and whose deepest powers will be spent in a fruitless effort to decode the hieroglyphs that appear in its final frames: "A Walt Disney Production."

The author of this wry fable intended a simpler irony than we can enjoy. He meant, I am sure, to expose the absurdity and inadequacy of the popular culture as an expression of our civilization. Writing in the 1950s, he expects a response to Hollywood entertainment no longer possible in our age of film archives and Ph.D. programs in film history. Of course, he is right in a way that should still haunt us, but I believe anyone who thinks seriously about our media culture must have a different sense of the task of deciphering the world according to Disney. And we ought to see also—I hope the foregoing has helped us to see—that the key missing element for our Centurans, the clue or solution to the mystery of their film, would be an awareness of aesthetic conventions, a power to read that alien text with something of the literate eye of an American moviegoer of the studio era.

The best understanding of television, I am trying to say, will be reached by those among us who can achieve something of the outsider's objectivity or partial neutrality but who can remain also something of a native informant: alive to the lies and deceptions inscribed in and by the medium, aware of its obedience to advertising and the ideology of consumption, yet responsive also to its audiovisual complexity and to its status as America's central institution for storytelling.   □

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