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CHAPTER 2

Narrative Structure: Television Stories

When asked if he thought films should be a slice of life, director Alfred Hitchcock is reported to have said, no, they should be a slice of cake. We might well pose the same question about television: Is it a slice of life or a slice of cake? The images we see on the screen show us real people and objects, and the sounds we hear are taken from our real experience, with dialogue spoken in a language and idiom with which we are familiar. Often we suspend disbelief and imagine that television characters are real persons, with tangible pasts and a future toward which time is carrying them. We might muse, "I wonder what happened to Angela after *My So-Called Life* was cancelled." It seems as if we just happened to drop in on these TV people and witnessed a slice out of their lives.

But we should be aware that for all their seeming reality, the stories we watch are actually slices of televisual confections. As if making a cake, the screenwriters and directors follow storytelling "recipes" that suggest the proper ingredients and their proper amounts for creating a television program. They mix those ingredients in conventionally prescribed ways—adding a chase scene here and a romantic clinch there—to maximize viewer pleasure. Just like the frosting on the top of a birthday cake, a television narrative has been blended to satisfy our appetites.

To understand television narrative, then, we must look beyond the appearance of reality the medium promotes and understand the recipe that created that reality. We may ask of any program, "How is this story put together? What are its narrative components and how do they relate to one another?" As we begin to look at television's narratives, we will notice a limited number of basic structures, a finite set of recipes for mixing story ingredients. Historically, there have been four principal narrative modes on television:

1. The theatrical film (originally shown in theaters)
2. The made-for-TV film and miniseries (also known as the MOW)
3. The series program
4. The serial program

This chapter charts these four structures and explores the differences and similarities among them. Later chapters look at how narrative influences other aspects of television, such as reality TV and the news.

The Theatrical Film

From Antagonism to Alliance

When television experienced its first growth spurt in the years after World War II, the U.S. motion picture studios and the television industry were mutually antagonistic. TV, an upstart medium, stole the cinema's customers and undermined the studio system that had dominated North America's narrative market. Indeed, the entire world depended on Hollywood for its stories. But the 1950s would be the last decade that U.S. viewers would rely so heavily upon the cinema for their entertainment. By 1960, television had replaced the cinema as America's primary form of entertainment, and many within the film industry were bitter about this loss of control. Just as film executives resented television's inclusion into their domain, so were their counterparts in the television industry hesitant to deal with the film studios. Television producers wanted to create their own material and not have to depend upon the whims of the film industry for their product.

What began as antagonism between the film studios and the television industry soon evolved into a wary alliance. Television was hungry for narrative product; the studios controlled thousands of movies. After their initial runs, these films were warehoused, seldom heard from again, and thus not a financial asset. RKO, Monogram, and Republic—three of the smaller studios—were the first to begin leasing their older movies to television. Soon the major studios were compelled to join in. It wasn't long before newer and newer films began making their way to television more and more quickly. The ratings success of NBC's *Saturday Night at the Movies*

(1961) led to all of the broadcast networks featuring "nights at the movies." By the end of the decade there were recent theatrical films running on television just about every night of the week.

Since that time, the relationship between theatrical filmmaking and television has become more complex. Rather than disdaining television, most of today's film studios also own and operate television production facilities, blurring the economic distinction between the two media. Bringing film and television even closer together are the VCR and DVD player, which were introduced to the home market in the late 1970s and late 1990s, respectively. Indeed, in the late 1980s videocassette rental revenue bypassed theatrical box office receipts and DVD-rental revenue since then has continued that trend. Nowadays more viewers see DVDs of movies on their television sets than go to see films projected in theaters.

Although the VCR/DVD and premium cable channels (HBO, Showtime, etc.) have radically changed the way we view/consume movies, and have virtually eliminated programs such as *Saturday Night at the Movies*, theatrical films continue to play a major role in television programming. Most local stations and many cable satellite stations such as WGN, WWOR, and WTBS continue to use theatrical films to fill much of their schedule. (Television mogul Ted Turner, for example, now owns—not leases—the MGM film library, and has based his TNT and Turner Classic Movies channels on that collection.) Moreover, the narrative structure of the theatrical film is still used as a standard by which other TV programs are judged. It is important, therefore, to consider how the theatrical film structures its stories and how those structures are modified when they appear on broadcast television.

The Classical Paradigm

The theatrical cinema was not always a powerful narrative machine. Around the turn of the century film stories were in a rather primitive state. Some early movies told no stories at all: a baby is fed, a train arrives at a station, a wall falls over. Viewers were so enthralled with the mere sight of movement on the screen that characters and plot were superfluous. However, cinema viewers soon developed an obsession with narrative, and the young film industry was more than willing to provide it. When D. W. Griffith's milestone, *Birth of a Nation*, was released in 1915, the cinema had already established itself as an accomplished, mature art form, a specifically narrative art form. The popularization of sound a little over a decade later threw the industry into upheaval and forced the cinema to readjust its story-telling methods. But by 1934 American movies had settled upon a certain way of constructing stories as well as a conventional style of editing, visual composition, dialogue and music, and so on. This filmmaking method and the industry that supported it have come to be known as the **classical Hollywood cinema**, or, more simply, **Hollywood classicism**.[1] Classical narrative structure is the concern of the present chapter. Classical editing and sound are discussed later.

In order to avoid one possible point of confusion, it is important to note that "classical" film, in this sense, does not refer simply to well-established and admired films that have maintained their appeal over the decades. Calling *Casablanca* (1942) or *Gone with the Wind* (1939) a "classic" is not using the term as we will be using it here. Rather, classical in our sense refers to a specific mode of filmmaking, and can be applied to almost all films made in Hollywood since the 1930s. *Casablanca* and *Gone with the Wind* are classical films, but so are *What! No Beer?* (1933), *Ishtar* (1987), and *Deuce Bigalow: Male Gigolo* (1999), not to mention its sequel, *Deuce Bigalow: European Gigolo* (2005). Moreover, of the theatrical films shown on broadcast television, only the very rare exception is not a classical film. Nonclassical films find a home on cable channels such as Sundance, the Independent Film Channel, Bravo, and Arts and Entertainment (A&E). The foreign-language "art" and U.S. "independent" (that is, independent of the major studios) films are often aggressively anti-classical. Although they have little impact on network narrative television, one can see their influence in music videos and television commercials.

What binds together the thousands of classical films that have been made over the decades? The seven basic components of classical narrative structure are listed below. As we outline these components we will illustrate them mostly with examples from *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981). *Raiders* was chosen because it is one of the most widely viewed films in the history of the cinema (as of 2005 it was still one of the top 20 box office leaders of all time)[2] and because it exemplifies classical principles so clearly. Its exemplary status was recognized by the Library of Congress when it added the film to the National Film Registry in 1999.[3] Also, you may wish to study the film's narrative structure by examining its screenplay, which is available online.[4]

1. Single protagonist. The protagonist is the central character in a film, book, TV program, or other fictional mode. The story revolves around him or her. Classicism has usually limited a movie's protagonist to just one or, at most, two characters. Filmmakers reason that this facilitates viewer identification and streamlines the narrative action. Viewers can identify with one person more readily than with a dozen and can comprehend a single character more quickly than several mixed together at the beginning of the film.

This seems commonsensical enough, but narratives do occasionally use more than a single protagonist. Soap operas usually feature a dozen protagonists at any particular point in the story. Russian silent filmmakers such as Sergei Eisenstein argued that an entire class of people could be the protagonist. In Eisenstein's *Strike* (1924) and *Potemkin* (1925) masses of people serve as the narrative focus. Of course, there are even classical films which break this "rule" of the single protagonist, but instead of splintering the story, these films often unite several characters with a single purpose so that they function as a united force within the narrative. The four "ghostbusters" in the film of the same name (1984), for example, work together to destroy the ghosts.

2. Exposition. The exposition introduces the viewer to two components of the story:

A. The principal characters' personas, their "personalities"

B. The space or environment the characters inhabit.

Every story must have an exposition, but not necessarily at the beginning of the film. Many movies, especially murder mysteries, start in the middle of the action and then later explain who the characters are and what their space entails. Stories that open in such a fashion are said to begin *in medias res*. *Raiders of the Lost Ark* begins *in medias res*. The opening shot, beneath the credits, presents the hero as a mysterious silhouette (Figure 2.1). Shortly afterwards, he is nearly crushed by a huge rolling boulder, and is then pursued by angry natives. All of this occurs before we know who Indiana "Indy" Jones (Harrison Ford) is and why he is doing what he's doing—although a title does tell us that it is "South America 1936." Once Indy escapes from the jungle the film's exposition begins. His profession and motivation are established when we see him lecturing about archeology; and the entire story (its characters and their locations) is mapped out by the government bureaucrats who visit Indy and pique his interest in the Ark of the Covenant.

3. Motivation. In any classical story, something must catalyze events. The action must have motivation. Here the importance of the single protagonist is re-emphasized, for classical narrative is motivated by the desire of a single character to attain a goal or acquire something (or someone). *Raiders of the Lost Ark* illustrates this unequivocally: Indy desires to acquire the Ark of the Covenant. The protagonist's desire—their lack of something or someone or some emotion—catalyzes the story, provides a reason for events to happen, and establishes the narrative's central enigma.

4. Narrative enigma. Early in any classical film a question is explicitly or implicitly asked. This question forms the central enigma of the classi-

FIGURE 2.1 The opening shot of *Raiders of the Lost Ark* begins the film in the middle of the action.

cal story. In *Raiders* the questions is, Will Indy find the Ark and prevent the Nazis from using it? There may be secondary enigmas (What is in the Ark? Will Indy get together with Marion [Karen Allen]?), but every other aspect of the story stems from the one central enigma. It is essential to classical narrative that the enigma must not be solved immediately. If it were, there would be no story. Imagine how short *Raiders of the Lost Ark* would be if Indy found the Ark in the first ten minutes. Consequently, *Raiders of the Lost Ark* and all classical narratives rely upon a series of delays that forestall the solution of the enigma.

Chief among the delaying tactics of the classical cinema is the introduction of a character who blocks fulfillment of the protagonist's desire—and, thus, blocks the resolution of the narrative enigma. This blocking character is known as the **antagonist**. The antagonist can be as simple as a solitary character with whom the protagonist battles or competes—for example, Belloq (Paul Freeman), Indy's nemesis, to whom he loses an idol in the opening scene (Figure 2.2). Or, the antagonist may take the shape of the character's environment: for example, the Civil War in *Gone with the Wind* or North Atlantic icebergs in *Titanic* (1997). Some classical films even pose the antagonizing force as being within the protagonist—as in *Batman Begins* (2005), where the title character (Christian Bale) wrestles with inner demons and faces moral dilemmas. These narrative conflicts are not mutually exclusive. A film may contain a combination of them, as when, in *Ordinary People* (1980), Conrad (Timothy Hutton) deals with his internal conflicts about his brother's death at the same time he works through his antagonism with his mother (Mary Tyler Moore).

In any case, the conflict created by the antagonist delays the resolution of the enigma until the end of the film. These delays form the basis of the chain of cause–effect actions that comprise the main body of the film.

5. Cause–effect chain. Once the exposition has established the characters and their space, and the protagonist's desire has sparked the forward movement of the story, the narrative begins a series or chain of events that are linked to one another and occur over time. Events do not occur ran-

FIGURE 2.2 *Raiders of the Lost Ark*: Belloq serves as the antagonist to Indy's protagonist.

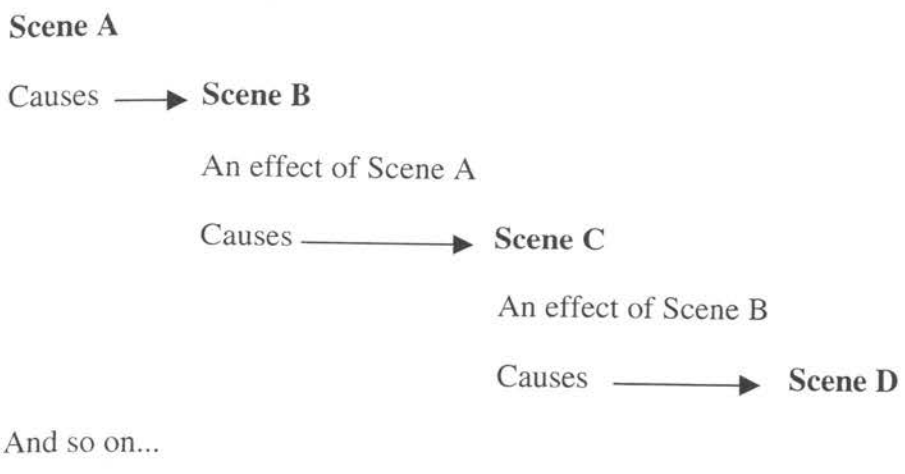

FIGURE 2.3 The cause-effect narrative chain.

domly or in arbitrary order in classical films. One event causes the next, which causes the next, which causes the next, and so on (Figure 2.3). *Raiders of the Lost Ark* illustrates this: The visit by the bureaucrats causes Indy to go looking for the Ark, which causes him to track down Marion Ravenwood to find a clue to the Ark's location, which causes him to become realigned with her and take her to Cairo, which causes them to battle the Nazis in the Cairo market, and so on. Link by link the narrative chain is built.

Each single narrative event is commonly called a **scene** or **sequence**. A scene is a specific chunk of narrative that coheres because the event takes place in a particular time at a particular place. The space of a scene is consistent, and time passes in a scene as it does in real life. Contemporary narrative theory has renamed the scene the **syntagm**. The order in which the scenes or syntagms transpire is the film's **syntagmatic structure**.

In a single scene time is continuous, as it is in life; but as we make the transition from one scene to another, the potential for manipulating time arises. Time in film does not match time in reality. If it did, it would take months to watch *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. **Story time**—several months, in this case—is rarely equivalent to **screen time**—*Raiders of the Lost Ark*'s 115 minutes. To maximize narrative impact, the duration and order of story time are manipulated as it is converted into screen time.

Most commonly, screen time's duration is shorter than that of story time. Very few films last as long as the actions they represent on the screen. Obviously, films must compress time in order to tell their stories without taxing the viewer. Only occasional oddities equate screen time with real time. For example, in *High Noon* (1952) 82 minutes in the life of a sheriff are presented in 82 minutes; *Rope* (1948) is presented as if it were one long, continuous shot; and *Time Code* (2000) shows us four screens of continuous action simultaneously. Further, screen time is not always shorter than story time. This is less common than the reverse, but certainly not unheard of. In *Fantastic Voyage* (1966), a tiny submarine passes through a human heart in 57 seconds of story time, as we are told by the characters. But this 57 seconds of story time elapses over three minutes of screen time. Thus, the duration of time may be manipulated to maximize narrative effect.

The order of screen time may be similarly manipulated. In most classical films, the events shown in the second scene occur after those that appear in the first scene; those in the third scene occur after the second; and so on—that is, the temporal structure is normally chronological. However, it is not uncommon for films to use **flashbacks** or, less often, **flash-forwards**, to rearrange a story's temporal structure. In classical film these departures from chronological order are clearly marked with special effects so that we are certain when we are shifting into the past: the image goes wavy; the focus shifts; smoke appears before the lens; or the character's voice fades out. In nonclassical films, such as those by Alain Resnais, Luis Buñuel, and David Lynch, the past is jumbled up with the present and the future in challenging and sometimes contradictory ways.

Also important to consider is the increasing intensity of events, the basic dynamic force of the narrative. As the enigma's resolution is delayed again and again, the narrative level escalates. As Indy comes closer to the Ark, his battles become more and more death-defying. Eventually, this results in the film's climax.

6. Climax. At a classical film's climax the narrative conflict culminates—necessitating a resolution. The film's central enigma, which has been delayed for 90 minutes or more, demands to be solved. At the climax of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, the conflict between Indy and Belloq peaks as Indy and Marion are tied to a stake while Belloq and the Nazis open the Ark. The central enigma (Will Indy find the Ark and prevent the Nazis from using it?) and its subsidiary (What is in the Ark?) are solved in this scene: apparently the wrath of God is contained in the Ark and consequently the Nazis are destroyed when they open it. More specifically, Indy's antagonist, Belloq, is obliterated—thus resolving their longstanding competition (Figure 2.4).

Climaxes are the most concentrated moment of the narrative conflict, but typically they are not the very end of the film. Classical films normally incorporate a short resolution to answer any outstanding questions.

7. Resolution or **denouement**. Up to the point of the resolution, the enigmas have been consistently delayed and the narrative action has con-

FIGURE 2.4 The climax of *Raiders of the Lost Ark* brings the narrative conflict to a peak.

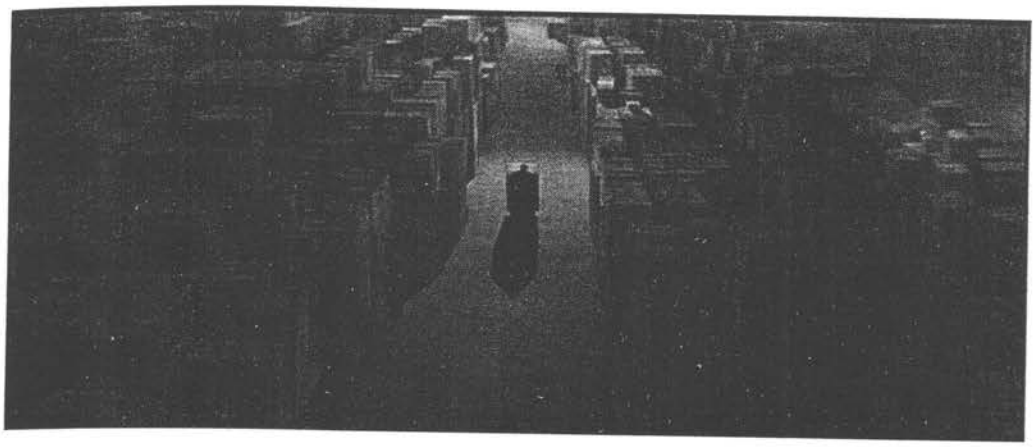

FIGURE 2.5 *Raiders of the Lost Ark*: Storing the Ark in a huge warehouse is part of the film's narrative closure.

stantly risen. In the resolution, in contrast, the enigmas are solved and the narrative action (or conflict) declines. After the apocalyptic destruction of the Nazis, *Raiders of the Lost Ark* resolves by showing us Indy and Marion getting together for a drink and, in the very last shot, the Ark being stored in an anonymous crate in a huge warehouse (Figure 2.5). The questions about the Ark's contents and the Nazis' use of it are answered. The battle with Belloq is finished. Also answered is a subsidiary question about whether Indy and Marion will reunite. There is a strong sense of **closure** at the end of this and most classical films. The enigmas that had been opened at the start of the film are now closed off, secured. The narrative's questions are answered.

If a narrative concludes without answering its questions and the ending is ambiguous or open, this is an instance of narrative **aperture**. For the most part, narrative aperture exists only in nonclassical films. Jean-Luc Godard's *Vivre sa Vie* (1962), for example, concludes with the protagonist being suddenly shot and killed, with no subsequent explanation. There are very few films that follow classical conventions up until the very end, and then tantalize us with an ambiguous finish. The horror genre contains most of these films. *Halloween* (1978), with the mysterious disappearance of the killer's body, is one example. There are, of course, economic reasons for the openness or aperture of horror films. An open ending facilitates the return of the killer in sequels. But aperture also suits the horror film's raison d'être, which is to call into question the stability of rational life. An ambiguous ending undermines the narrative equilibrium that is the goal of most classical films. The horror film does not share that goal.

Theatrical Films on Television

The transition from theater to television can have significant effects on feature film narrative. The most drastic of these effects is the shortening of a film to fit it into a television time slot. Large parts of the narrative are excised in this process. A Chicago station once ran the 118-minute *From*

Here to Eternity in a 90-minute time slot. Subtracting more time for commercials, station promotional materials, and other interruptions left about 75 minutes for the film itself. The Artists Rights Foundation tracks the time cut from theatrical films. It notes, for example, how *The Silence of the Lambs* lost 29 minutes when broadcast on the WB network. Obviously, cutting this much time from any film is going to severely affect the coherence of its narrative chain. Characters appear and disappear unpredictably and entire subplots cease to exist. The cause-effect linkage of classical films is disrupted, sometimes to the point of incomprehensibility, when films are edited in this fashion. Specific scenes that the Artists Rights Foundation noted were missing in the 1999 CBS screening of *Dead Man Walking* (1995) included:

1. Sister Helen Prejean (Susan Sarandon) entering the prison—flashback scenes of the murders which Matthew Poncelet (Sean Penn) was found guilty of committing and that he will be put to death for.
2. Four separate scenes that show Sister Helen working to get Poncelet a new trial.
3. A court room scene in which Matthew Poncelet is denied the right for a new trial.
4. A scene with Sister Helen asking the prison priest to be Matthew Poncelet's spiritual advisor. At this time, we learn she will be the first woman to advise a prisoner on death row.
5. Three separate scenes with Sister Helen speaking with the murdered victim's families.[5]

Movies shown on broadcast television are also shortened for reasons other than time concerns. Typically, broadcast standards for television are stricter than U.S. obscenity and decency laws for motion pictures. Images, language, and even entire scenes that television networks deem unfit for family viewing will be excised. *Slap Shot* (1977), *Raging Bull* (1980), and the originally X-rated *Midnight Cowboy* (1969) have all been ravaged when broadcast on commercial television.[6] Even when movies are shown on cable premium channels there is no guarantee they will not be edited. When Showtime—a pay service that boasted running films "uncut and uninterrupted"—presented *Montenegro* (1981), it removed a sexually suggestive scene involving a motorized toy tank.

Thus, various bits and pieces of theatrical films are missing when they are presented on commercial television. Of course, the portions of the film that remain are not presented without interruption—except on rare occasions (for example, the initial screening of *Schindler's List* [1993]). U.S. television inherited from radio the convention of interposing commercials within the body of movies and programs. Commercials and their impact will be considered later; but we may note here that the appearance of TV commercials within classical films adds a distracting, narratively detrimental element. Theaters used to be devoid of these distractions, but U.S.

theaters have recently begun running commercials with the films, a practice that had long been done in Europe. Still, theatrical movies are not interrupted by the commercials, as they are on television. Instead, the commercials are always shown before the feature begins.

The abbreviation and interruption of classical film narrative are not the only ways that film stories are modified on television. In somewhat uncommon circumstances, theatrical films are sometimes actually lengthened when presented on television. Network TV added 49 minutes to *Superman* (1978) and 19 minutes to *Superman III* (1983) when they were originally telecast.[7] In one of the strangest of such incidents, a 1980s telecast of *Rear Window* (1958) extended its running time by presenting the credits in slow motion and inserting a dream sequence that had not existed in the original film! The narrative effect of such alterations varies from film to film, but it is seldom beneficial.

Hence, for a variety of reasons the movies seen on television may substantively differ from the versions shown in theaters. Narrative can be a fragile component of the movies, and often is distorted beyond recognition in the transition from theater screen to television screen. However, theatrical films are not the only "movies" appearing on television. There are, of course, many films that were specifically designed for the electronic medium.

The Made-for-Television Film or MOW

Until the mid-1960s, the only movies shown on television were ones that had originally been designed for theater audiences. The early-1960s success of "nights at the movies" made networks hungry for more, cheaper films—ones that might also serve as springboards for television series. Consequently, the made-for-TV movie was born, and, within the industry, christened the **MOW** (for "movie of the week"). *See How They Run* inaugurated this new form, debuting on NBC in 1964. Since then, MOW films have been mixed with theatrical ones on networks' film programs in increasing numbers. In the 1986–87 season, for example, the networks broadcast almost 300 made-for-TV films and fewer than 100 theatrical movies.[8] Viewers seem to distinguish less and less between the two. Of the two highest-rated movies in the history of television, one is a theatrical film (*Gone with the Wind*) but the other is a made-for-television film (*The Day After* [1983]).[9] Moreover, the made-for-TV/theatrical dissimilarity is becoming increasingly difficult to maintain, because U.S. made-for-TV movies are often shown theatrically in Europe (for example, the pilot for *Twin Peaks* [1990]) and films shot for European television are sometimes shown in U.S. theaters (for example, *The Full Monty* [1997] was coproduced by Channel 4 TV [U.K.]). Also, cable-TV networks such as HBO, Showtime and MTV have frequently financed films that were initially shown in theaters before finding their way to television. In many respects, therefore, the distinction between a made-for-TV movie and the made-for-theaters movie is blurring.

Are there substantive differences in the narrative structure, then, between theatrical and MOW films? What is it about the latter that marks them as being produced specifically for television?

Narrative Structure

As we might anticipate, there are more similarities than differences between the narrative structure of the made-for-TV film and that of the theatrical movie:

1. Single protagonist.
2. Exposition establishes characters and space.
3. Protagonist's desire catalyzes story.
4. Central enigma underpins story.
5. Narrative progresses by antagonist delaying enigma resolution.
6. Conflict peaks in a climax.
7. Closure is assured in the resolution.

With so many similarities, what is it that distinguishes the two forms? The distinctions arise from the MOW's recognition of interruption as a sustaining force on commercial television. In short, MOWs are designed to be interrupted. Their narrative chain is segmented to take advantage of commercial breaks. Rather than a continuous chain of events in cause-effect relationship with one other, the MOW often (though not always) halts the action and provides a small climax just before the commercials begin. This climax does not resolve the enigma, as does the final climax of a theatrical films. Instead, it heightens the enigma, posing questions that entice the viewer to stay with this channel through the commercials to find out what happens next.

Theatrical films have these small climaxes on occasion, too, but they are not coordinated with television's commercial breaks; they don't occur with regularity every 15 minutes or so. MOW narrative structure aligns itself with the rhythm of television, taking advantage of the pauses to heighten narrative suspense. Television's rhythm also determines the length of most MOWs. To fit into a two-hour time slot with an average of 15 non-programming minutes per hour, they must run 90 minutes—with little room for variation. Theatrical films typically run 90 to 120 minutes, with the nature of the story determining the film's exact length. In contrast, the 90-minute precondition for MOWs strictly determines the length of the story, as it must be made to fit this time slot. Screenwriters and directors working within the MOW's form must plot their films with this rigid time limit in mind, just as poets must confine themselves to the rhythmic pattern of the sonnet and painters must cope with the usually rectangular shape of a frame.

Many MOWs are used as **pilots**—programs that introduce new series. This function of some MOWs affects their narrative structure, distinguishing them from the classical model. Classical films end with a strong sense of closure. Questions are answered; enigmas are solved; couples are united. Those MOWs that do double duty as pilots for projected television series cannot tolerate this narrative closure. Instead, they serve to open the narrative of the series to follow. Typically, a pilot will resolve some narrative issues, but, more important to its producers, it must establish ongoing enigmas that will underpin the program during its regular run. Thus, the two-hour pilot for *Miami Vice* (1984) establishes the characters of Rico Tubbs (Philip Michael Thomas) and Sonny Crockett (Don Johnson), and, through the death of Tubbs's brother, provides the motivation for Tubbs moving to Miami. But the pilot concludes without Tubbs apprehending his brother's murderer—as would have been typical for a classical film. There is no closure to the pilot's central enigma: Will Tubbs capture the killer? We had to wait until several weeks into the season before the murderer was punished during the run of the series. The pilot, which is frequently presented as if it were a stand-alone movie, uses a certain degree of narrative aperture to engage us, drawing us into the narrative structure of the regular run of a series.

In sum, the TV-movie shares many attributes with its theatrical namesake. The two are getting harder and harder to tell apart. And yet, those TV-movies—if they've been designed to be shown on television networks which are supported by commercials—reveal clear traits of having been "made for television." They recognizes television's interruptive form, and they have developed narrative strategies to cope with it. These strategies are even more evident in the television series, a format that is quite distinct from the movies, whether classical or MOW.

The Television Series

Early television drew upon a variety of sources for its programming material: theatrical movies, sports events, vaudeville-style music and comedy skits, and such. In many regards the infant medium relied most heavily upon its broadcasting predecessor, radio, for programming strategies and narrative forms. Indeed, the influence of radio was so strong, and the television image in the 1940s so poor, that early television was little more than radio accompanied by fuzzy, indistinct, black-and-white pictures—with the emphasis on sound rather than image. Television has changed a good deal since then, but the basic narrative form that TV inherited from radio endures to the present day: the **series**.

There are precedents for the television series in both literature and the cinema. Literary series have been published that center on figures such as Tarzan, the Hardy Boys, and Nancy Drew; and theatrical film series have featured a variety of characters: Tarzans (dozens since Elmo Lincoln first did the role in 1918), homicidal maniacs (Freddy Krueger of *Nightmare on Elm Street*, beginning in 1984), sports heroes (Rocky, beginning in 1976),

super heroes (Superman, Batman, Spiderman, et al.), and so on. Even so, the series has never been as important to literature or film as it is to television. Each year, the list of top-rated shows is dominated by series. What are the characteristics of the narrative television series, and how is the series particularly well-suited to the form of television? We can begin to answer these questions by examining the series'narrative structure.

Narrative Structure

The television series is a narrative form that presents weekly episodes with a defined set of recurring characters. Each week's episode is basically self-contained. Although they will occasionally have two-part episodes or a narrative arc that recurs, the narrative of a series does not consistently continue from one week to the next. Each episode does not begin where the previous one ended, as episodes do in the television **serial**. For example, the Nielsen ratings of the top-ten programs from a week in November 2005 (discussed in the Chapter 12; Table 12.2) include the following series: *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* (2000–), *CSI: Miami* (2002–), *Cold Case* (2003), *Without a Trace* (2002–), and *Law and Order: SVU* (1999–), (coincidentally, these are all crime dramas). The remaining narrative programs in Table 12.2 are more accurately classified as serials, not series: *Desperate Housewives* (2004–), *Grey's Anatomy* (2005–), and *Lost* (2004–). However, the series and the serial forms have gotten progressively closer to one another over the years. *Friends* (1994–2004) exemplifies this. It's a program where narrative arcs (such as Ross's [David Schwimmer] numerous marriages) do persist over the course of several episodes, but the bulk of the issues raised on it each week are resolved by the end of the episode. It is thus considered a series even though it contains some serial aspects. We'll use it as our principal source of examples as we discuss the characteristics of the series.

In some respects, the television series resembles the classical film. After all, series do present chains of events driven by enigmas. But the pressures of constant interruption and of repetition, of a weekly appearance before the viewer, force the television series to rely on some distinctly different narrative strategies.

1. Multiple protagonists. Many series center on a single protagonist: Mary Richards (*The Mary Tyler Moore Show* [1970–77]) or Jessica Fletcher (*Murder, She Wrote* [1984–1996]), for example. But it is more common for a TV series to use a pair of protagonists or even an ensemble cast of five or six main characters. Christine Cagney and Mary Beth Lacey (*Cagney and Lacey* [1982–88]) held equal narrative importance, as did the central characters on *Cheers* (1982–1993) and *Friends*. The main function of these multiple protagonists is to permit a variety of plots within the same environment. One week *Friends* was concerned with Phoebe (Lisa Kudrow) giving birth to triplets (October 8, 1998). The next week Joey (Matt LeBlanc) appeared on a PBS telethon, disappointed that he wasn't hosting it; Ross decided to move to London to marry Emily (Helen Baxendale); and Phoebe's