

Chapter 1

Introduction: the power of narrative

Helen Fulton

In a world dominated by print and electronic media, our sense of reality is increasingly structured by narrative. Feature films and documentaries tell us stories about ourselves and the world we live in. Television speaks back to us and offers us 'reality' in the form of hyperbole and parody. Print journalism turns daily life into a story. Advertisements narrativise our fantasies and desires.

As long as human beings have had the power of speech, they have been speaking in narratives, goes the theory (O'Shaughnessy & Stadler 2002: 127). Yet there is nothing natural or universal about narrative, which is a form of representation. As such, it is historically and culturally positioned to turn information and events into structures that are already meaningful to their audiences. Since the media are now the major controllers of narrative production and consumption in the Western world, the stories that seem the most 'natural' are the ones to which the media have accustomed us.

This book is about the ways in which contemporary media structure narrative and how the processes of production and signification that characterise media narratives can be theorised. Beginning with a historical survey of narrative theory, which focuses on structuralism and its post-structuralist responses (chapters 2 and 3), the book then examines film as a major producer of narrative (chapters 4 to 9). These chapters look at the ways narrative elements such as plot, character, voice and point of view are constructed and manipulated in feature films to produce different kinds of meanings and to address audiences in specific ways.

The sections on television (chapters 10 to 13) pick up the concept of genre and the ways in which television genres are distinguished by aspects of narrative

2 *Introduction*

construction, particularly the uses of space and time. Two chapters on radio (chapters 14 and 15) emphasise the narrative possibilities of sound, rather than vision, as a semiotic code in which reality can be constructed. The final sections (chapters 16 to 19) examine the ways in which information is translated into the discourses and genres of news and magazines, and the semiotic possibilities of multimodal texts that use both written language and image.

Many of the concepts and terms appearing in bold type throughout the book are gathered together into the glossary for reference. Some of these concepts, as well as ideas and examples, occur more than once in different chapters, often deployed or theorised in different ways. The idea of genre, for example, is discussed at various stages in the book as a discursive construct, an industry marketing tool and an effect of technological strategies. By contextualising narrative within a range of analytical traditions and practices related to media texts, we hope to maximise the possibilities for deconstructing this most pervasive of representational systems.

The domain of this book is cultural and media theory. Its theoretical approach is broadly post-structuralist, which understands meaning, or the process of signification, as socially and culturally produced and situated. Post-structuralism itself is a set of theories about the relationships between text and meaning; in order to be realised as a useful analytical system, these theories need to be activated by at least a basic understanding of linguistic and visual signs. Drawing mainly on the linguistic theory of Michael Halliday, this book provides a set of techniques and terms for the semiotic analysis of media texts. At the same time, it offers a consideration of industry-related issues that affect the production and consumption of media texts.

Semiotics has had a chequered career in the burgeoning field of cultural studies, to which media studies are normally assigned, or by which they have been appropriated. The idea of semiotics as a method of analysis is perennially popular in media and cultural studies, but the large majority of its devotees ignore its inescapable grounding in language. Routinely reduced to such a vague and oversimplified form as to be useless, semiotics, fully realised as the study of linguistic and visual signs positioned in a cultural and historical context, still remains the only systematic approach to explaining how, rather than just what, texts mean. If cultural studies is not to disappear into a vacuum of superficial rhetoric and ambit claims about the hegemonic function of the media, it has to be buttressed by a theorised approach to language, signification and the production of ideology. One of the aims of this book is to provide an introduction to such an approach and to demonstrate its potential for media consumers and practitioners alike.

There are a number of common themes that recur throughout the different sections of the book and represent the theoretical positioning of its authors. The first is the idea of narrative as cultural production, something that is deliberately produced and sold as an economic commodity. The second concerns the audiences of narrative and how they are positioned as the subjects of story. Finally, the

Barthesian idea of stories as ‘myths’ we tell about ourselves and our social order, and how we are positioned ideologically, forms a detectable undercurrent to many of the chapters. These ideas can be elaborated and summarised briefly here.

Narrative as cultural production

It is a truism, but nevertheless true, that all media have a primarily economic function. Their job is to produce and disseminate commodities that can be bought and sold. Even state-owned media, such as the ABC in Australia and the BBC in Britain, although not dependent on advertising revenue, compete for market share of audiences to guarantee their funding. They also earn income from selling programs and associated merchandise such as CDs, DVDs, videos and other products, including books and clothing, which are related to their broadcast output. Commodification was theorised by Marx, who used the terms ‘use value’ and ‘exchange value’ to distinguish between the function of an object and the value it acquires as a commodity in the marketplace. In terms of film’s essential function as a medium of entertainment, a feature film by an unknown director might have much the same use value as a movie directed by Francis Ford Coppola, but the exchange values of the two films will be vastly different. Most media products have an exchange value disproportionate to their use value because they are not simply ‘used’ by audiences (paying and non-paying) but exchanged as commodities by producers, distributors, advertisers and other kinds of customers in the media marketplace.

The economic function of the media, to generate profits, undermines the idea of narrative as some kind of innate or universal structure common to all humanity. Narrative in the media becomes simply a way of selling something. This means that the economic structure of media industries determines their output, the kinds of stories they can tell. The feature film industry makes money from distribution, box-office sales and sponsorship, increasingly in the form of product placements as a kind of indirect advertising. Not only did the brand name of Calvin Klein appear on the visible waistband of Michael J. Fox’s underpants in *Back to the Future* (1985), but also it then became the subject of an ongoing joke in the film when his companion assumed this was his own name and began calling him ‘Calvin’. Only money can buy that kind of publicity.

The consequence of this economic structure is that film narratives have to be ‘commercial’; that is, they have to fit a standard pattern and set of expectations, or what is often termed a **genre**. Genres themselves are not ‘natural’ or inevitable, but have a practical function: to create a market and an audience. Movie reviews, in print or in TV programs, work to place films into generic categories for us so that we can decide which ones to see, although our ‘choice’ is already restricted by what is available and what producers have decided that we want to see.

4 Introduction

Generically coded films are not only easier to sell to audiences but are also easier to associate with merchandise and spin-off products such as books, toys and clothing. Writing about the Hannibal Lecter films as a 'franchise', Australian journalist Sandra Hall said (jokingly, one hopes): 'We don't yet have a line in Hannibal steak knives . . . but give him one more film and a cookbook will surely follow' (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 26–27 October 2002). 'Cross-over' films, such as the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, which were produced and edited in such a way as to fit into both the 'fantasy' and 'children's' genres, both of which provide lucrative pathways to related merchandise, are highly prized and much sought-after by commercial film studios.

Unlike film, commercial television makes its money almost exclusively from paid advertising in designated and clearly marked 'ad breaks' in the programming. TV programs are therefore designed and generically identified to bring together mass audiences of particular demographic types, which can then be 'sold' to advertisers who want to reach such audiences. Since audience sectors are defined and distinguished on the basis of their assumed VALS (values and lifestyle), television narratives have to display and reinforce the same sets of VALS as the desired audience. It is no accident that advertisements for toys and fast food dominate children's programs, or that advertisements for gardening products and funeral homes tend to cluster during traditional detective mystery dramas. It is not that demographically distinct audiences exist, sitting patiently in their homes waiting to be addressed, rather that generically coded programs and their associated advertisements call such audiences into being through their narrative strategies.

The print media – newspapers and magazines – are also driven largely by advertising revenue, including classified advertising. They therefore need to create media products that do not simply cater to readers and consumers but which will attract advertising around, and sometimes into, the stories themselves. 'Advertorials' embed product promotion within the editorial: that is, the actual 'stories', which are visually coded, with large headlines, bylines, columns and pictures, to look like the 'real' content of the newspaper or magazine. Many feature articles about celebrities and their lifestyles are coded to look like 'news' but are in fact indirect advertisements for their latest film or book, together with the various brands of clothing or cosmetics that they apparently use. Special supplements or weekly regular features, such as 'good food' guides or technology sections, are included not merely as a service to readers, or even as mechanisms to attract and retain more readers, but mainly to provide a tailor-made venue for advertisers to promote specific types of products.

Media narratives do not exist, then, simply to entertain us, the consumer, to tell us stories in order to amuse us, or to provide us with a service and a range of choices from which we can make our selection. They are constructed in order to support the huge business empires that run most of the media outlets, geared specifically to creating profits from the commodification of media products.

Constructing the audience

When we consider the audiences for media texts, it seems obvious that in a literal sense they are people like us, watching television, going to the movies, buying newspapers. But from a theoretical perspective, an audience is called into being by a particular discourse, or 'interpellated' by the text, to use Althusser's term. In other words, an audience doesn't exist until a text addresses it; and by the same token, texts don't simply address a pre-existing and knowable audience. They actually construct a virtual audience, defined by Pertti Alasuutari as 'a discursive construct produced by a particular analytic gaze' (Alasuutari 1999: 6). The virtual audience is the audience that is sold to advertisers. Whether or not the virtual audience is then realised as an actual group of consumers who buy the products is one of the great gambles of the free market.

As actual individuals who use media products, the extent to which we feel ourselves to be part of an audience depends on whether or not we feel addressed by a media text. Does it speak to us directly? Does it use a language we recognise as ours? Do we feel included in the world view and attitudes articulated by the text? Magazines and television genres, including advertising, use narrative to construct very distinct audiences, segmented mainly by age and gender, but these are virtual audiences who might not correspond exactly to literal audiences. Editorial discourses in 'women's magazines' might call up a virtual readership of young women, while the sexualised discourses of the advertising might speak to a literal audience of young men.

A literal mass audience is unknowable, beyond small groups of individuals, and even then empirical and ethnographic studies of audience reception, using focus groups or real people in their homes, can be made to work only by assuming that individual readers are fully aware of their reading practices and processes of signification. On the other hand, by looking at the discursive relationship between text and constructed audience, it is possible to assess the ideological role of media narratives in producing the empowered readers that we imagine ourselves to be. As the audiences for media products, we are discursively positioned by media texts as 'sovereign consumers'; that is, consumers who have the power to make our own purchasing decisions and choices, pandered to by a subservient market eager to win our patronage. This positioning, or subjectivity, is manifested most clearly in advertising, which tells the same basic story: there is a problem that can be solved by the product. The problem might be material, such as stains on our clothing that need to be removed by a stain-remover, or it might be a crisis of identity, such as the lack of a partner or the onset of middle-age (both to be controlled with cosmetics or a new car). In all cases, and regardless of the coded demographic of the advertisement, the audience is positioned as freely choosing individual consumers, consciously making choices about how to improve their lives.

Because of the connection between media narratives and economic imperatives, most media narratives work persuasively in the same way as advertisements,

6 Introduction

to interpellate the audience as coherent and unified individuals empowered to make appropriate choices on their own behalf. The crucial factor is freedom, a concept that regularly occurs in many media narratives: free choice, free competition, free market and a free subject of discourse who can move directly from sign to referent, from text to meaning, without pausing for signification. Media texts therefore appear to be both denotative, offering us a window on reality, and connotative, asking us to recognise ourselves as individuals who choose to participate in a certain lifestyle. But because the 'reality' we are shown is itself constructed, even the denotative level is also connotative, persuading us that we need to change in order to match up to the reality around us. From a post-structuralist perspective, denotation and connotation are effects of discourse, mediating reality in different ways but both equally detached from it.

Contemporary cultural studies tend to reinforce the ideology of the sovereign consumer by emphasising the power of the individual to 'make their own readings' (Fiske 1987: 236). This assumption is based on the theory that individuals represent a single coherent subjectivity, that they 'know who they are' and can choose how to respond to a text. This subjectivity is, however, an effect of discourse. We are discursively encouraged by media texts to think of ourselves as singular, unified, individual, able to resist dominant or preferred meanings and to negotiate our own. This is the kind of stable subjectivity constructed for us by most media narratives, because once placed in this subject position we are ready to be sold something. It is a position that invites us to read texts superficially, just for entertainment, to enjoy some and reject others without any effort of analysis or interpretation, in order to confirm our status as freely choosing 'private' individuals. We read media narratives as consumers – which is how we have been positioned.

Narrative as 'myth'

Roland Barthes articulated the importance of language in the formation of ideology when he described **myth** as 'a type of speech . . . a mode of signification', which he located within semiology, the science of signs (Easthope & McGowan 1992: 14). For Barthes, myths represented a **metalanguage**, a second-order or connotative discourse that enables us to speak about the first-order or denotative level of signification. Myths therefore function as symbolic, ironic or metaphorical commentaries on what we understand to be literal meanings, offering us alternative readings imbued with ideological flavour. It is easy to see how media narratives, particularly those of film and television, might operate as myths, the stories in which we encode truths about ourselves and our society.

From a post-structuralist viewpoint, there is a major theoretical flaw with much of Barthes' early work, and that is his distinction between denotation and connotation, or first-order and second-order systems of signification. Although it is undoubtedly logical that one 'signified' can also stand as the 'signifier' of another

sign, this process does not operate merely on two or three levels, but as a chain of signification limited only by social usage. In other words, there is no denotation but only connotation, since denotative language – appearing objective, unmediated, reflective – is as ideologically positioned as language that we would regard as highly connotative and subjective. The belief in a denotative level of expression is itself a piece of ideology.

The Barthesian idea of myth can therefore be reinterpreted simply as narrativised ideology, the formulaic articulation and naturalisation of values, truths and beliefs. What media narratives achieve is precisely this kind of mythologising, the presentation of ideological positions as if they were natural and normative. Yet it is the Barthesian model of the two levels of meaning, the literal and the symbolic, that structures most media narratives, either by drawing attention to double layers of meaning, as in feature films, or by an apparent omission of second-order meaning, as in objective news journalism. In analysing media texts, we need to interrogate the ideological myths that are told at every level.

The mythical function of most media narratives is to return us to a stable subjectivity, to remind us of who we are and what reality is. Classic Hollywood movies and realist television dramas reinforce such myths as the existence of innate morality and gender, the natural opposition between ‘good’ and ‘bad’, and between ‘male’ and ‘female’, as clearly defined and unproblematic categories. Their narrative structures assert myths, or ideologies, of the episodic nature of life, where natural or inevitable resolutions are reached and points of closure can be achieved. News reporting mythologises, and therefore normalises, the existence of universal truths and an objective reality that can be retrieved and represented without ideological mediation. By constructing these powerful narratives of who ‘we’ are, the media separate ‘us’ from ‘them’, those others who don’t share or understand the stories we know and believe to be true.

Media myths are, by and large, the myths of late capitalism in Western societies, which function to produce the coherent subjects of capitalist economies. As subjects, we are prepared to keep working to maintain the status quo of power as long as we have access to the media products and consumer items that construct and reinforce our identities. Media narratives tell us stories about who we think we are, and in so doing they skilfully reproduce the freely choosing consumers of global capitalism. Only by understanding the mythic nature of these narratives, constructed in language and image as signifying systems, can we begin to choose whether to accept the seamless identity laid out for us or to find its contradictions and resist.

Part 1
The basics of narrative theory

Chapter 2

Narrative concepts

Rosemary Huisman

Narrative is realised in many different media. In this book we look at narratives in film, in television, in radio and in various media of popular print culture. These could be called ‘mass media’ in that all are assumed to be shown or broadcast to a scattered and diverse audience.

I want to begin here, however, with a narrative in a very different medium: a handwritten letter from one person to another person. This is a much simpler textual situation than that of many of the media texts we will later consider, yet, in an introductory way, we can identify certain features of this letter and its relation to its social context as exemplifying more general ‘concepts of narrative’. In the comments following the letter, the concepts, when first mentioned, are in **bold**. In the latter part of this chapter and in the next, chapter 3, many of these concepts are more generally described (see also the glossary, at the end of the book).

Introducing some concepts of narrative

In 1830 Isabella Parry ‘went to live at Port Stephens on the edge of the settled areas north of Sydney’, capital of what was then the British colony of New South Wales. Isabella’s husband Edward had been knighted for his involvement in Arctic exploration; now he was appointed Commissioner of the Australian Agricultural Company. Isabella’s letters home have been preserved. On 19 December 1831 she wrote to her mother in England:

12 *The basics of narrative theory*

We have lately experienced another disadvantage of a newly cultivated country, and have witnessed what I have only heard of before, and read in Cooper's novels – I mean the burning of the woods, and it is, indeed, a fearful and extraordinary sight. For the last fortnight, the whole country around has been in a blaze, and between this place and the Gloucester, a distance of more than seventy miles, there is scarcely a blade of grass left: it is one continued black plain, and the stems of the trees are all scorched and blackened. We were in hopes we should have escaped, near the house, but, after two or three days, we saw there was but little prospect of our avoiding the general destruction. Just as we were coming home from church, last Sunday, a man came running to say that the fire had reached his house, and was rapidly approaching our garden. Immediately all hands were sent off to save the poor garden, and, I am happy to say, succeeded, though it was only by a few minutes. Edward made them set fire to a broad space all round, and this was only just completed when the fire reached the place we had burnt, and, finding no food to supply its flames, turned off in another direction.

(Clarke & Spender 1992: 45)

What is Isabella doing here? Clearly she is telling her mother a story. She and her husband have had an actual experience. Now she is telling that experience in language, the principal semiotic means humans have for signifying meaning. Because she is in Australia and her mother is in England she uses the written **mode** of language. If she and her mother were together she could have told her story in the spoken mode. But even in speaking directly to someone in the same location, the story of the experience is obviously not the same thing as the experience itself; the medium always mediates the message.

Isabella also refers to her experience of other people's stories of similar events, from both 'factual' and 'fictional' sources. Longer-term inhabitants of the colony have told her of their experience of 'the burning of the woods': in '[we] have witnessed what I have only heard of before', 'hear' implies the spoken mode of language. And she has also read such stories 'in Cooper's novels'. The author referred to here must be the American James Fenimore Cooper, born in 1789, whose books, *The Pioneers* (1822) and *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826), feature terrible 'forest fires', which threaten the small settlements of the American frontier. (I will return to the mythology purveyed in these novels.)

The novel has been the narrative **genre** most typically studied in traditional narrative studies; it is a genre of the **discourse** of prose fiction or, more generally, of literary discourse. Isabella's text here is an instance (an instantiation) of the genre of letter, a genre that can be used in different discourses. Here, writing to her mother, the discourse is 'personal', a personal letter (compare a 'business letter'). Similarly her conversations with other colonists could be classified as personal discourse, although realised in a different genre (that of conversation) and mode (the spoken mode). The names we give texts as known objects are usually the