

# 3 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 Jesse Pinkman after *Breaking Bad* ended." It seems as if we just dropped in on these TV people and tasted a slice of their lives.

But we should be aware that, for all their seeming reality, the stories we watch are actually slices of television 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 three principal narrative modes on television:

1. the theatrical film (originally shown in theaters)
2. the series program
3. the serial program.

This chapter charts these three structures and explores the differences and similarities among them. It also briefly considers how television's convergence with video-on-demand (VOD) services is necessitating new narrative forms. Later chapters look at how storytelling 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 antagonized each other. 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. While film executives resented television's intrusion into their domain, their counterparts in the television industry were 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 only become more complex. Today's theatrical film studios and television networks are mostly owned by the same few transnational media corporations, blurring the economic distinctions between the two media. And, technologically speaking, film and television were brought even closer together when theatrical film releases began to be offered on **videocassette**, **DVD**, and **Blu-ray disc (BD)** players, which were introduced to the U.S. home market in 1976, 1997, and 2006, respectively. And, of course, most recently the predominant method for distributing theatrical films is via VOD portals such as Netflix, Hulu, and Amazon—as well as cable and satellite television's own VOD options (see Chapter 2). In fact, ever since the late 1980s, when videocassette rental revenues first surpassed theatrical box-office receipts, the bulk of the money earned by a "theatrical" film has been acquired after a film's theatrical run has ended.

In today's complicated media environment, a theatrical release of a film still manages to command the lion's share of the marketing budget and to set audience expectations for it. After a movie makes a big splash on its theatrical release (or doesn't), it is then distributed through other platforms according to a specific schedule. **Release windows**, as they are called in the industry, are the limited times during which a film is available fairly exclusively on those specific platforms and in other ancillary markets. They used to be rigidly fixed, with movies only appearing on television screens months after their theatrical release; but the blurring of the divisions between film and television has disrupted those old standards. Moreover, the timing for individual films' releases may vary considerably, and much of this timing is open to negotiation among the major players, especially as release-window timing is rapidly evolving. For now, however, a film's release windows follow fairly standard stages (see Sidebar3.1).

### SIDEBAR 3.1 Theatrical Film Release Windows

1. Day-and-date theatrical and video-on-demand window. Nonlinear VOD rental access to a theatrical film is sometimes made available on the same day as its theatrical release.

2. Standard VOD and DVD/Blu-ray window. Nonlinear VOD rentals and sales of video downloads (on iTunes, Amazon, etc.) and optical media (DVDs and Blu-ray discs) offer exclusive access to films during this window.
3. Nonlinear, subscription VOD services and linear “premium” cable channels window. Subscription VOD (a.k.a. SVOD) providers allow subscribers to watch titles in their library on-demand (e.g., Netflix, Hulu, and Amazon Prime). Premium TV channels are those for which cable/satellite-TV customers pay extra (prominently, HBO and Showtime). The length of this window depends largely on licensing deals the providers strike with the producers.
4. Ad-supported, nonlinear VOD window. Providers such as Hulu offer free or low-cost on-demand access to films. Licensing deals determine the length of this window.
5. Linear, over-the-air, network television (ABC, CBS, NBC, et al.) and “basic,” nonpremium cable networks (e.g., TNT, USA, TBS, etc.) window. Licensing deals determine the length of this window.
6. Television syndication window.

(This outline is largely based on a 2015 article in *Indie Wire*.)<sup>1</sup>

The most recent addition to the release-window mix are the various VOD services—from cable/satellite companies’ on-demand offerings to Netflix’s online streaming and the like. Just where VOD fits into the release schedule is currently a point of much contention. Initially, it came after DVD releases, but more and more services are now releasing movies simultaneously on VOD and DVD/BD.

The main point here is that theatrical films continue to play a major role in what we view on our televisions—whether it’s a linear-TV network programming a movie into a specific time slot or we viewers popping a BD into a player connected to our home-theater system. The notion of ancillary markets is changing, however, and has been strongly affected by the consolidation of media outlets. Nowadays, a corporation like Viacom might own both a home-video distributor (e.g., Paramount) and a television network (e.g., Comedy Central). Media outlets have vested interests in *all* of these markets, unlike the early days of television broadcasting when film studios and television networks were competing for our leisure time. Today, media corporations are only “competing” within themselves. The staggered release schedule of a theatrical film remains important in order to build marketing buzz, but it’s likely to change radically as on-demand services become more dominant.

Although VCR/DVD/BD/VOD technologies, shifting ancillary markets, and corporate consolidation have radically changed the way we view/consume movies on television and virtually eliminated programs such as *Saturday Night at the Movies*, we still spend much of our television-viewing time watching films originally shown in theaters. 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 or in a movie of the week.

## The Classical Paradigm

The theatrical cinema was not always a powerful narrative machine. Around the turn of the nineteenth 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 *The 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 storytelling 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**. Classical narrative structure is the concern of the present chapter. Classical visual and sound style are discussed in Part II.

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 *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2015), not to mention its sequel, *Fifty Shades Darker* (2017). 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, television commercials, and quirky premium cable channel programs such as *Girls* (2012-17).

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 and because it exemplifies classical principles so clearly.<sup>2</sup> Its exemplary status was recognized by the Library of Congress when it added the film to the National Film Registry in 1999.<sup>3</sup> Also, you may wish to study the film's narrative structure by examining its screenplay, which is available online (see [tvcrit.com/find/raidersscript](http://tvcrit.com/find/raidersscript)).<sup>4</sup>

### Single Protagonist

The protagonist is the central character in a film, book, TV program, or other fictional mode. The story revolves around them. 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. Serial dramas such as daytime soap operas and *Game of Thrones* (2011-) 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 classical films that 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 "ghostbusters" in the films of the same name (1984 and 2016), for example, work together to destroy the ghosts.

### *Exposition*

The exposition introduces the viewer to two components of the story:

1. the principal characters' personas, their "personalities";
2. 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* starts *in medias res*. The opening shot, beneath the credits, presents the hero as a mysterious silhouette (Figure 3.1; [tvcrit.com/find/raiders01](http://tvcrit.com/find/raiders01)). 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.

### *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



Figure 3.1 The opening shot of *Raiders of the Lost Ark* begins the film in the middle of the action.

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—his or her 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.

### Narrative Enigma

Early in any classical film a question is explicitly or implicitly asked. This question forms the central enigma of the classical story. In *Raiders* the question 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 3.2). Or, the antagonist may take the shape of the character's environment: for example, the Civil War in *Gone with the Wind*, North Atlantic icebergs in *Titanic* (1997), or the monsters on Skull Island in *Kong: Skull Island* (2017). 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 toward 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.

### 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 randomly or in arbitrary order in classical films. One event causes the next, which causes the next, which causes the next, and so on (Figure 3.3). *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 **syntagma**. The order in which the scenes or syntagms transpire is the film's **syntagmatic structure**.



Figure 3.2 *Raiders of the Lost Ark*: Belloq serves as the antagonist to Indy's protagonist.

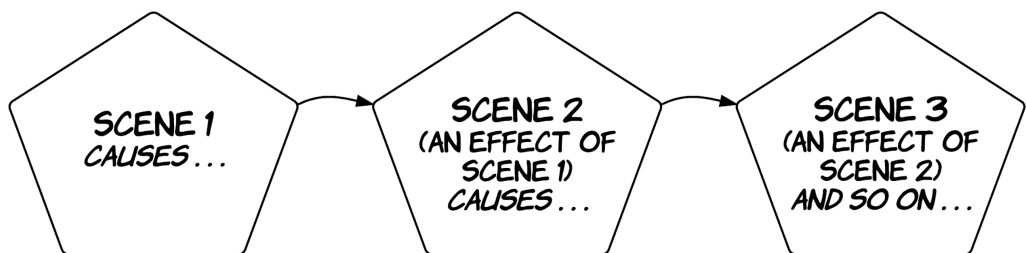


Figure 3.3 The cause-effect narrative chain.

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; and *Rope* (1948) and *Birdman* (2014) are presented as if they were one long, continuous shot. 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, **flashforwards**, to



rearrange a story's temporal structure. In classical film these departures from chronological order are clearly marked with visual 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 Christopher Nolan, the past is jumbled up with the present and the future in challenging and sometimes contradictory ways. Nolan's *Memento* (2000) even manages to tell its story in reverse, and his *Inception* (2010) takes us in and out of the past and dream time in ways that test viewer comprehension of the narrative.

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

### *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 long-standing competition (Figure 3.4; [tvccrit.com/find/raiders02](http://tvccrit.com/find/raiders02)).

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.

### *Resolution/Denouement*

Up to the point of the resolution, the enigmas have been consistently delayed and the narrative action has constantly 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 its narrative 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 3.5; [tvccrit.com/find/raiders03](http://tvccrit.com/find/raiders03)). 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 and the tension between protagonist and antagonist diminishes. And yet, there is some residual tension. Indy and Marion have been through a traumatic experience and are changed by it. Thus, if we diagram the rising and falling action of the classical film (as in Figure 3.6), we can visualize how a protagonist's motivation results in mounting conflict that only begins to decrease with a film's climax and resolution.<sup>5</sup>

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





Figure 3.4 The climax of *Raiders of the Lost Ark* brings the narrative conflict to a peak.



Figure 3.5 *Raiders of the Lost Ark*: Storing the Ark in a huge warehouse is part of the film's narrative closure.

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, and the indeterminate endings of the *Underworld* films (2003-16), are two examples among many. 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 movie theater to linear, broadcast television can have significant effects on theatrical film narrative—although many of these issues are not pertinent to premium cable

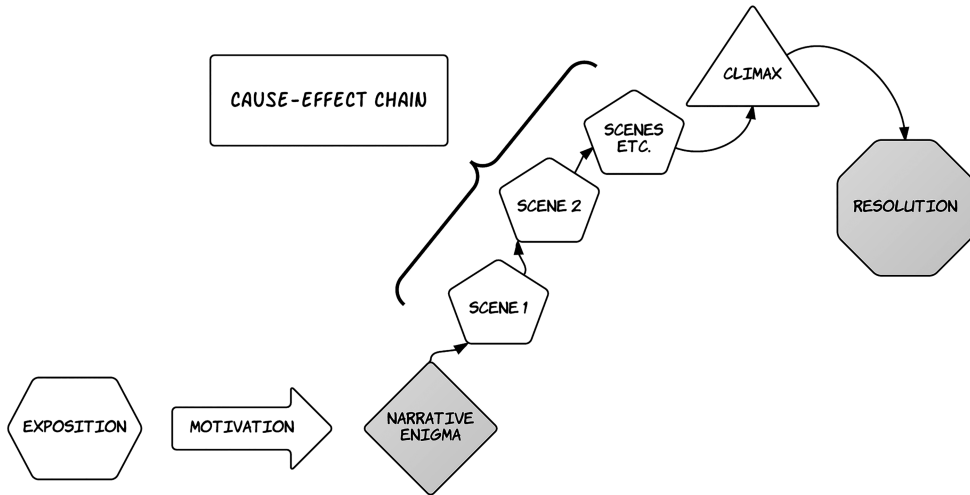


Figure 3.6 The rise and fall of the narrative action is highly conventionalized in classical film.

channels or streaming services. The most drastic of these effects is the shortening of a film to fit it into a commercial-based 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* (1953) 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.<sup>6</sup> It notes, for example, how *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991) lost 29 minutes when broadcast on the WB network. Obviously, cutting this much time from any film is going to affect severely 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.

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 laws for motion pictures. Images, language, and even entire scenes that television networks deem unfit for family viewing will be cut. *Slap Shot* (1977), *Raging Bull* (1980), and the originally X-rated *Midnight Cowboy* (1969) have all been ravaged when broadcast on commercial television.<sup>7</sup> 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 linear, 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 in Chapter 6; 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 several years ago they started presenting commercials before films begin. Even though the commercials do not interrupt the movies themselves, but they can still be

an annoying intrusion into one's movie-going experience—especially considering the price of admission to the theater.

The abbreviation and interruption of classical film narrative are not the only ways that film stories are modified on television. In 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.<sup>8</sup> 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. Narrative can be a fragile component of the movies and often is distorted beyond recognition in the transition from theater screen to television screen.

## 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), superheroes (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. 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, during the 2016-17 broadcast season the most popular series included a trilogy of "Chicago" shows—that is, *Chicago Fire* (2012-), *Chicago Med* (2015-), and *Chicago P.D.* (2014-)—as well as the long-running *NCIS: Los Angeles* (2009-). Crime and medical series such as these, which typically deal with one major incident in each episode and resolve that incident within the course of the hour, follow "series" narrative conventions. In contrast, other popular shows during this season carry story arcs across several episodes and thus they are more accurately labeled "serials"—including *Grey's Anatomy* (2005-), *Scandal* (2012-), and *Stranger Things* (2016-). 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 commercial interruption and of repetition, of a weekly appearance before the viewer, force the television series to rely on some distinctly different narrative strategies. These strategies were forged during the network era of broadcast television, but a surprising number of them persist in an era when it is often possible to binge-watch an entire season's worth of episodes in one sitting.

### *Multiple Protagonists*

Many series center on a single protagonist: Mary Richards (*The Mary Tyler Moore Show* [1970–77]) or Jessica Fletcher (*Murder, She Wrote* [1984–96]), 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 (Sharon Gless) and Mary Beth Lacey (Tyne Daly) hold equal narrative importance as the title characters on *Cagney and Lacey* (1982–88), as do the central characters on *The Big Bang Theory* (2007–) and *Friends*. The main function of these multiple protagonists is to permit a variety of plots within the same environment. One week *Friends* is concerned with Phoebe (Lisa Kudrow) giving birth to triplets (October 8, 1998). The next week Joey (Matt LeBlanc) appears on a PBS telethon, disappointed that he isn't hosting it; Ross decides to move to London to marry Emily (Helen Baxendale); and Phoebe's triplets are nearly forgotten. Narrative emphasis shifts from one episode to the next, but the core characters remain the same.

### *Exposition*

The constancy of the series' central figures means that each episode needs only a brief exposition. Most of the characters and their space are known to the viewer from previous episodes, and often they are re-established in the program's theme song: for example, "Come and listen to my story about a man called Jed, a poor mountaineer, barely kept his family fed . . ." (*The Beverly Hillbillies* [1962–71]). Only the particulars of the current episode's characters and any new locations must be established. We rely upon the consistency of characters and space; it is part of what makes the show comfortable to watch. We know that every day in syndication the characters of *Friends* will congregate at the Central Perk coffee house and that Andy Taylor (Andy Griffith) and Barney Fife (Don Notts) will preside over their jail (*The Andy Griffith Show* [1960–68]). Only new characters and new locations need be established in the exposition. Obviously, this is quite different from a one-time presentation such as a theatrical film, which must acquaint the viewer with an unknown cast of characters and an unfamiliar setting. And it also explains why TV **pilots** are often heavily loaded with exposition, which becomes unnecessary over the course of a series' run.

Series characters have a personal history of which we are usually conscious and to which references are occasionally made. On most series programs, however, these personal histories are rather vague and ill defined. The past is a murky region in series television. The present tense of a specific episode is usually all that matters. In the 1986–87 season of *Miami Vice*,

detective Larry Zito (John Diehl) is murdered—a narrative event important enough to warrant a two-episode story. Subsequent episodes of the program, however, seldom mention Zito. That segment of the program's past virtually ceases to exist, except in reruns. Thus, series characters do have an established past, and their characters do not need re-establishing each week; but they often misplace this past and, in any event, it is usually not necessary for our enjoyment of a specific episode for us to know the details of the characters' pasts.

If we examine a specific episode of *Friends*, we can see how series narrative is structured and how it is being blended with the serial structure discussed in detail below. In "The One With Chandler's Work Laugh" (January 21, 1999), the exposition begins before the credits. In a short scene, Rachel (Jennifer Aniston) pumps Joey for more information about Monica (Courteney Cox) and Chandler (Matthew Perry) getting together (Figure 3.7; [tvcrit.com/find/friends01](http://tvcrit.com/find/friends01)). As she quizzes him, the viewer is provided with background information, and one story arc for this episode is established. After the general program credits end, and while the credits for this specific episode are superimposed over the image, two more story arcs are begun: Ross announces that an ex-wife of his is getting married and expresses his frustration at being alone, and Monica and Chandler attend an office party at which he kowtows to his boss and is heard doing his fake "work laugh" (Figure 3.8; [tvcrit.com/find/friends02](http://tvcrit.com/find/friends02)).

Monica and Chandler's and Ross's stories are rooted in the past and depend upon viewer knowledge of previous episodes. Consequently, they qualify as serial-style storylines (see below). But the storyline based on Chandler's work behavior, from which the episode takes its title, has only vague connections to *Friends'* narrative history. For the longest time, the series didn't even show Chandler at work, so his behavior there has not been very important to the program. In this episode, however, it becomes a point of contention between him and Monica, with her criticizing the "work Chandler" as a "suck-up." Thus, the office-party scene serves as exposition for the storyline of Chandler's work behavior, which is woven into the storyline of Chandler and Monica's romance.

### *Motivation*

The constancy of a series' characters and setting establishes a narrative equilibrium. A state of balance or rest exists at the beginning of each episode. However, if this balance were to



Figure 3.7 In the exposition of a *Friends* episode, Rachel asks Joey for key narrative information, which he cannot provide.



Figure 3.8 More *Friends* exposition: A secondary storyline develops between Monica and Chandler.

continue, there would be no story. Something needs to disturb the balance to set the story in motion, to catalyze it.

The most common narrative catalyst, as in the classical cinema, is the lack or desire of the protagonist. Since the series incorporates multiple protagonists, this permits it to shift the narrative-catalyst function from one character to another. The desire of one protagonist may dominate one week; the desire of another may arise in the next episode. In "Chandler's Work Laugh," several characters have desires which motivate the narrative: Will Rachel discover Monica and Chandler's secret romance, and will that affect their friendship? Will Monica continue to love Chandler despite his "suck-up" demeanor around his boss? Will Ross find true romance? Each lack (of the truth, of commitment in a relationship, of romance) raises the question of whether the protagonist's desire will be satisfied. In short, each raises a narrative enigma.

### *Narrative Problematic*

Questions such as the above underpin the narrative of a series and capture our attention (if they are successful). But, of course, as in all narrative forms these enigmas must not be immediately resolved. There must be a counterforce that prevents their instantaneous resolution, or there would be no story to tell. In the *Friends* example, there are several counterforces. Monica functions as the antagonist for Rachel's desire for the truth—lying to her and concealing the relationship. Chandler's boss and his behavior around the boss are counterforces to Monica's commitment to him. And Janice (Maggie Wheeler)—an ill-suited date for Ross—delays his attainment of love. As with the classical film, the counterforce need not be a single individual. It may also be the protagonist's environment or an internal, psychological element within the protagonist. The main point is that protagonists' acquisition of their goals must be postponed, deferred, so that the narrative may develop further complications.

Thus, the narrative focus shifts from one week to the next, but it is important to recognize that these individual desires and enigmas exist within a larger **narrative problematic**. Because fundamentally the series is a repeatable form, there must be some narrative kernel that recurs every week. In effect, the program must ask the same question again and again to maintain consistency and viewer interest. Of course, we wouldn't watch exactly the same material each week (although the number of times we view a particular episode in syndication or streaming on Netflix contradicts this), so there must be some variation within that consistency. But, still, every series must have some recurring problematic, some dilemma with which it deals in every episode.

For *Friends* the ongoing dilemma revolves around issues confronting friends in their twenties—just out of college, but not yet fully settled into a career. We might think of that dilemma as, Will the friends' camaraderie be disrupted? That is, Will the friends stop being friends? Related questions include: Will Chandler/Joey/Monica/Phoebe/Ross/Rachel find romance? Will Chandler/Joey/Monica/Phoebe/Ross/Rachel find fulfilling work? Almost every week the program tests the bond among these six friends. To take another example—this time from a police drama—the problematic of *Miami Vice* is, Will Crockett and/or Tubbs surrender to the temptations they are immersed in and become villains? Individual episodes counterpose various antagonists against Crockett and Tubbs, but overriding these specific concerns is the more general issue of their moral character.

Each episode, drawing on the multiplicity of protagonists in series TV, poses a slightly different narrative enigma. As John Ellis has noted, "The basic problematic of the series, with all its conflicts, is itself a stable state."<sup>9</sup> Specific enigmas come and go—briefly igniting the viewer's



interest—but the fundamental problematic remains firm, sustaining the viewer's ongoing attachment to the program. The particulars of Ross and Janice's situation and Chandler's work laugh are the embodiment of the program's underlying problematic on January 21, 1999. In the following week's episode, these particulars disappear, but the program's problematic returns. In sum, most series have a single, stable narrative problematic, which is embodied in numerous different narrative enigmas on a week-to-week basis.

### *Cause-Effect Chain*

As in the classical film, events do not happen randomly in series television. One scene leads into the next, and the next, and the next. A cause-effect chain is erected scene by scene. However, in broadcast television this chain must be broken at least once during a half-hour program and at least three times during an hour-long program for the insertion of commercials. The TV chain is not continuous as it is in the cinema or on streaming services.

The series deals with this discontinuity by segmenting the narrative. That is, the story is broken into segments that fit between the commercial breaks. These between-commercial segments, often called **acts**, consist of one or more scenes that hold together as strongly as classical scenes do. They end with their own small climax, which leads into the commercial break. The function of this pre-commercial climax is not to resolve narrative dilemmas but instead to heighten them, to raise our interest in the narrative as we flow into the commercials. New, minor enigmas may even be posed just before the segment ends.

In "Chandler's Work Laugh," for example, Ross is despondent about his failed marriage to Emily. As act one ends, Monica, Joey, Rachel, and Phoebe quiz him about being out all night. He is evading their questions when Janice enters the room—revealing that Ross was with her. As the segment fades to black with a shot of an embarrassed Ross (Figure 3.9; [tvcrit.com/find/friends03](http://tvcrit.com/find/friends03)), the viewer is left with an enigma: Were Ross and Janice romantically involved the night before? Following the commercials, this question is answered in the very first scene (yes, they were) and the narrative chain resumes (Figure 3.10, the first shot after the break).

In sum, the segmentation of the series narrative interrupts the rising curve of increasingly intensified action that we see in classical cinema and replaces it with portions of narrative equipped with their own miniature climax—in a sense, several upward curves linked together. In this way, television narrative more closely resembles the play, with its division into separate



Figure 3.9 *Friends*: Ross looks guilty during the instant before a commercial break...



Figure 3.10 ...and everyone stares at him during the instant right after it.



acts, or the mystery novel that ends each chapter on a note of suspense. The chain is slightly ruptured, but not sundered by the so-called commercial breaks.

### *Climax*

Series episodes do have a final climax, where the action finally peaks and asks for some form of resolution. In the final scene of "Chandler's Work Laugh," Ross's whining annoys Janice and she breaks off their relationship. However, series programs' climaxes are undercut by one main factor: the repeatability of the program, its need to return the following week with the same problematic. The conflict reaches its peak, but there is no final resolution.

### *Resolution/Denouement*

Series episodes can have no final resolution, no narrative closure, because to do so would mean the end of the series itself. If there were no more threats to the friends' camaraderie, if they were all happily coupled up and satisfied with their jobs, or if the moral character of Crockett and Tubbs were permanently assured, there would be no more conflict upon which to base *Friends'* and *Miami Vice's* narratives. Consequently, the ending of each episode must leave us in doubt as to the ultimate resolution of the series' overarching conflict. There must be a sense of narrative openness, a limited aperture. In "Chandler's Work Laugh," we learn that Ross and Janice's relationship is over, but we don't know about Ross's future romances or the possibility of Janice reappearing on the show. The small question: "Will Ross find romance with Janice?" is answered. Larger questions such as "Will Ross ever find romance?" or "Will romance and marriage take him away from his friends?" are not fully resolved. The last shot of the episode shows Janice teasing Joey, the one male "friend" with whom she has not slept, that he might be next (Figure 3.11, final shot before the end credits; [tvcrit.com/find/friends04](http://tvcrit.com/find/friends04)). And so future complications are already being seeded.



Figure 3.11 *Friends*: The final shot before the end credits opens the possibility of a union between Joey and Janice.

On rare occasions, television series will conclude the program's run by providing true narrative closure. *M\*A\*S\*H* ended the fictional doctors' and nurses' conflict with the Korean War by presenting a two-and-a-half-hour episode (February 28, 1983) of the war's end. With no more war to play antagonist to the medical protagonists, the narrative motor of the program ran out of fuel. Its repeatable problematic had finally been resolved—after 11 years and hundreds of episodes. Most series, however, do not close in this fashion. One moment they are part of the weekly schedule and the next they are gone. Their abrupt departure sustains their narrative aperture, which is helpful if they are sold into stripped syndication, where their problematic is re-presented daily. When *Friends* concluded its ten-year run with a two-part finale—titled, significantly, “The Last One” (May 6, 2004)—it parceled out some closure by resolving long-running storylines such as Ross and Rachel's on-again-off-again romance, but it still left some storylines unresolved. Notably, Joey's future was left open so that he might move to Los Angeles, where the character's “life” could continue to be chronicled in a new sitcom the following season (Joey [2004-06]).

Thus, if we return to our diagram of classical-film narrative and modify it to visualize the narrative structure of a 30-minute, commercial-supported sitcom, we must recognize the increased complexity of the rise and fall of its narrative action and the changes necessitated by its repeatable format (Figure 3.12). Further, this diagram has been simplified—leaving out common sitcom elements such as the cold open and the tag just before the end credits. And, naturally, hour-long series have more than two acts and just a single commercial break. However, the basic principles of commercial-supported narrative structure are represented in Figure 3.12.

## The Television Serial

The serial is another form of storytelling that successfully made the transition from radio to television. Even before radio made use of the serial, there were examples of it in literature and the cinema. Nineteenth-century novels, such as those by Charles Dickens, were often originally published chapter by chapter in magazines. Silent movie serials such as the hugely popular *Fantômas* (1913) in France and *The Perils of Pauline* (1914) in the U.S. entertained audiences during radio's infancy. Neither of these forms, however, would reach an audience as enormous as the TV serial's.

## Narrative Structure

Unlike the *series*, the *serial* expects us to make specific and substantial narrative connections between one episode and the next. In the series, the link between each week's programs is rather vague. In the serial, the connection is fundamental to its narrative pleasures. The main difference between the series and the serial is the way that each handles the development of the narrative from episode to episode. In years past, the serial, in the form of the soap opera, dominated daytime television but had little impact upon prime-time schedules, with the significant exceptions of *Dallas* (1978-91) and *Dynasty* (1981-89). But the late 1990s and 2000s saw a surge in popularity of the prime-time serial that has continued to the present day. Critical favorite *Twin Peaks* (1990-91, resurrected in 2017) and ratings champion *ER* (1994-2009) led the way and have been followed by well-regarded, complex serials such as *The Sopranos* (1999-2007), *24* (2001-10, 2014), *The Wire* (2002-08), *Lost* (2004-10), *Grey's Anatomy*, and *Stranger Things*.

The television serial used to be the least respected narrative form. There was a creeping sexism in this attitude, for it assumed that soap opera and serial storytelling were something that only “housewives” could find interesting. The wealth of prime-time and streaming serials and the blurring of the distinction between serial and series have proven that the form may be

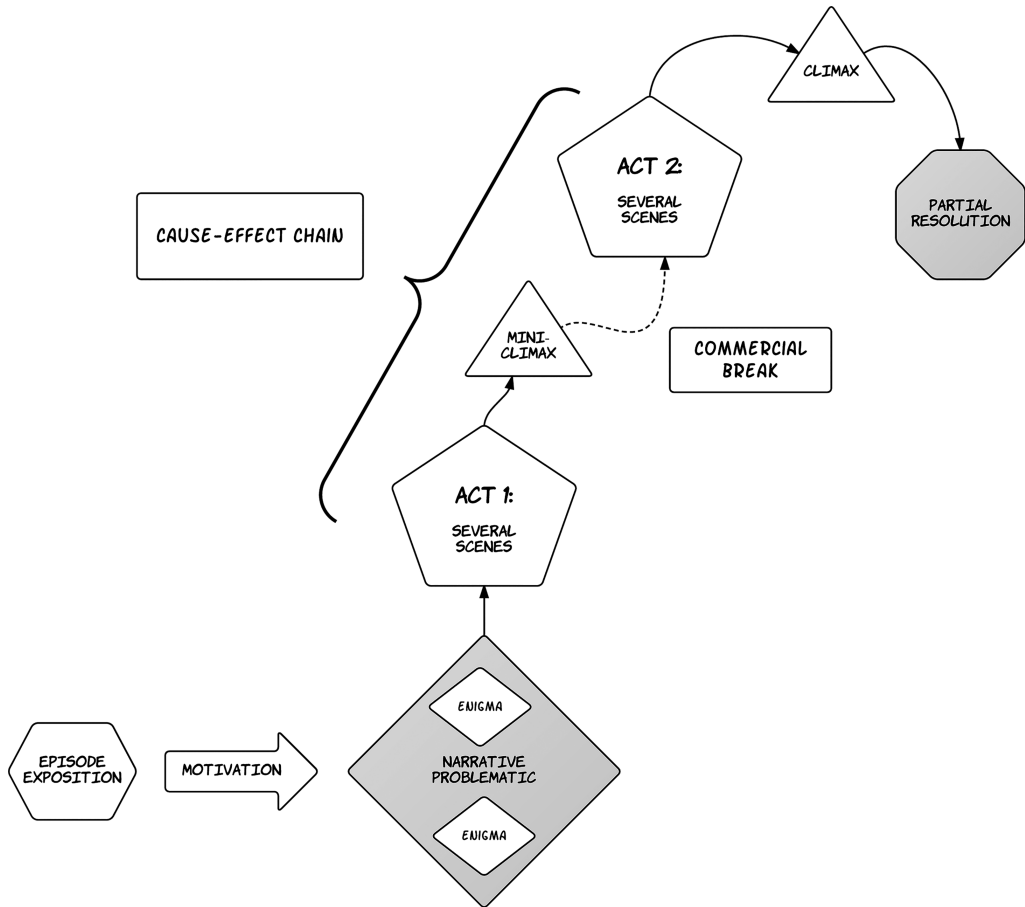


Figure 3.12 In the linear-TV series, narrative structure must accommodate commercial interruptions and allow for a repeatable narrative problematic.

used to create sophisticated and quirky television. Consequently, it is important to examine how it is that serials tell their stories. What is their narrative structure, and how does it differ from both the classical cinema and the television series? In the discussion that follows, we will focus on the daytime serial, the soap opera. Although it is a genre in decline, it still provides the best example for analysis because it remains the purest, most extreme form of serial television. Once narrative analysts come to understand the soap opera, they will be better able to dissect both daytime, prime-time, and streaming serials.

### Multiple Protagonists

In our discussion of series programs, we noted an increased tendency toward multiple protagonists. The serial—especially the daytime serial—uses an even larger number of protagonists, each of whom is equally important to the narrative structure. Hour-long soap operas typically have 15 to 20 central characters—many more than the classical film, and even more than multiple-protagonist series such as *Friends* (whose main characters number just six). Soap-opera casts are the largest of any program on television—including most prime-time serials. The plot recap for the December 6, 2005 episode of *All My Children* (1970–2011), as published

on its official website, indicates that no less than 16 central characters are involved in this one episode's events (see Sidebar 3.2).

The multiplicity of protagonists permits a variety of simultaneous storylines within the narrative world of a serial. And, more importantly, the high number of characters decreases the importance of any one character. Indeed, soap-opera characters lead a precarious existence. They come and go with a swiftness that is uncommon in other fictional forms. This is due partly to economics. Most soap-opera actors work under contracts that may be canceled every 13 weeks. If the producers feel that actors are not generating enough viewer interest, they may suddenly disappear, along with their characters (although characters are also frequently recast). However, economics is not the only reason for the large number of protagonists. Soap opera relies upon a multiplicity of characters to create a narrative web in which most characters are connected with one another.

### *Exposition*

As does *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, the television serial begins each episode *in medias res*. The story has already begun, the action joined in progress. On the episode of *All My Children* that aired December 6, 2005, the first scene is Del (Alec Musser) and Babe (Alexa Havins) discussing her child-custody fight with J.R. (Jacob Young), while he (J.R.) eavesdrops on the two of them. In fact, the very first shot is of the eavesdropper, before any other context is established (Figure 3.13; [tvcrit.com/find/amc01](http://tvcrit.com/find/amc01)). The two men are working together in a scheme to set her up. We, the viewers, are dropped into the middle of a complicated storyline that has been running for months. The scene serves as episode-specific exposition by establishing characters and a location that will recur through this particular episode. The original exposition of *All My Children* began over 40 years ago when it was first broadcast (January 5, 1970). The "lives" of its characters were initially constructed then, and the story continued until it ceased production in 2013. Other soap operas' original expositions also date from decades ago. Similarly, *Guiding Light* developed its story on radio and television for more than 70 years—making its radio debut on January 25, 1937, and concluding its television run on September 18, 2009. If these were classical films they would have lasted thousands of hours and their exposition would have occurred years ago!

#### **SIDEBAR 3.2**

Kendall suspects either Greenlee or Jonathan left her in the hammock but Ryan feels Zach could be responsible. Meanwhile, Julia and Aidan try to stop Zach's attack on Jonathan. Lily becomes very agitated to see Zach pummeling Jonathan. Zach apologizes to Lily. Jonathan doesn't tell Ryan about Zach's attack. Kendall admits to Ryan she doesn't feel as though she's ready to be a mother. Ryan tells Kendall he will support any decision she makes regarding the baby. Di succeeds in getting Greg to hire her as his new receptionist. Tad decides to trust Di and use her as a spy in Greg's office. Tad explains to Di that he found a file on the Martin family in Greg's closet. Tad is hit with a wave of emotion when Di covers herself with a blanket Dixie had made. Babe doesn't fall for JR's trap and cleverly turns the tables on him. Amanda tells Josh about her blackouts and fears what she might have done during them. Josh offers Amanda a job as his assistant at New Beginnings and deliberately gives her wrong information for a meeting she is to set up for Erica.<sup>10</sup>



Figure 3.13 The opening shot of an *All My Children* episode begins the program in the middle of the action; J.R. eavesdrops on two characters.

Few, if any, viewers could listen to and watch every single episode of long-running series such as *Guiding Light* and *All My Children*. Additionally, the programs are always adding new viewers. So how do serials cope with viewers who have missed episodes or are new to the program? The answer is that serials, particularly the long-running soap operas, contain a large quotient of redundant narrative information. Character A has coffee with character B and they discuss how C has fathered a child with D. This narrative fact is now established. But in a later scene (the next day, perhaps) we will see character B at the nurses' station discussing the situation with two more characters. The information is redundant to the regular viewer, but serves as exposition for the viewer who has missed the previous scene. A small example from the December 6th episode illustrates this. In the very last line of a scene between Ryan (Cameron Mathison) and the pregnant Kendall (Alicia Minshew), she challenges him, saying, "I might not even have this child." Her first line following the commercials is the redundant "I might terminate this pregnancy!" Through repetitions such as these the soap opera constantly re-establishes its characters and their situations.

Part of the redundant information that is regurgitated in the serial is the pasts of the characters. Serial characters carry a specific, significant past—much more so than do the series characters. In the series, the past is obscure and indefinite; but in the serial, characters constantly refer to it. Previous love affairs and marriages, murders and double-crossings, pregnancies and miscarriages, are layered on top of the current goings-on. For the regular viewer in particular this creates a remarkably dense, multilayered narrative. A casual remark between two characters can be loaded with repressed, unspoken associations. A kiss hello can signify years of ill will or unrequited lust. In the December 6th episode, Di (Kelli Giddish) becomes indignant about an injustice done to Tad (Michael E. Knight). He interrupts her and says, "In light of things that have happened between you and me, I would consider it a personal favor if you would try to stop acting like Dixie." No further explanation is offered as to what those "things" might be. The regular viewer, however, knows that Tad is referring to Di's attempt to pretend to be Dixie,

Tad's (seemingly) dead wife. So it is that a complex weave of character relationships exists from the very first second of a day's episode of a daytime serial and extends back into decades of complicated, previously told storylines.

This is not to say that new characters are never introduced on serials. Obviously, they must be, to keep the narrative fresh and interesting. These characters all undergo a conventional exposition, as does a character entering a classical film. However, daytime soap operas commonly abbreviate this exposition by providing familial associations for the new character. Often, the new character will be someone's never-before-seen cousin or uncle, or even sister or mother. The use of familial relations quickly incorporates new characters into the storylines associated with that family. This narrative tactic is illustrated by the character "bios" (biographies of the characters, written as if they were real people) on *All My Children's* official website. Each of the biographies begins with the character's complicated family connections. For example, the character of Di, who was introduced relatively recently, is situated thus:

Father:	Seabone Hunkle
Siblings:	Del Henry, Dixie Martin (half-sister; deceased), Will Cortlandt (half-brother; deceased), Melanie Cortlandt (half-sister; deceased)
Nephew:	J.R. Chandler
Brother-in-law:	David Rampal"

Her character is established as being similar to, or different from, the rest of the family's overall character—particularly Dixie's as she was pretending to be her.

### *Motivation*

Like the exposition, the original catalyst for long-running television serials took place years ago. In the episodes we watch day after day or week after week, the many protagonists' desires and lacks are mostly already established. Only the occasional new desire/lack is introduced to maintain the narrative diversity. In most daytime and many nighttime serials, these lacks/desires normally concentrate on heterosexual romance and familial relations (especially paternity). Over the past three decades, however, the serial has diversified, with *Dallas* leading the serial into themes of corporate greed, and *General Hospital* (1963–) introducing international intrigue and science fiction (the "ice princess") into the soap opera world. The 2000s has even seen political thrillers (24) and crime dramas (*The Wire*) rendered in serial form.

### *Narrative Enigma*

The serial is saturated with enigmas. It thrives on them. The multiplicity of protagonists ensures that several—up to a dozen or so—enigmas will be running on any one program at any one time. On December 6th, *All My Children's* enigmas include:

- Will Kendall have her baby?
- Will Ryan and Kendall get together since she is carrying his child?
- Is Jonathan still a psychotic killer or has he been cured?
- Will Babe get custody of her baby from J.R.?
- Will Krystal and Adam make their fake marriage a real one?
- Did Amanda attack Babe, pushing her down the stairs? And what evil is Janet, Amanda's mother, up to?

Unlike the classical film or the TV series episode with their one central enigma, the serial nurtures multiple enigmas. They are its foundation. The multiplicity of enigmas ensures that serials will never lose their narrative momentum. If one enigma is solved, many others still remain to slowly pull the story forward.

### *Cause-Effect Chain*

The narrative chain of daytime serial television is interrupted more frequently than that of series television. There are more commercial breaks per program minute in daytime soap operas than there are in nighttime series. (It is no coincidence that soap operas were the most consistently profitable programs on television until cheaply produced game shows and talk shows displaced them.) In an hour-long episode, approximately 20 minutes are taken up with commercials and other non-narrative material. Indeed, barely six minutes of story material elapse during the acts between commercial interruptions.<sup>12</sup>

Serials adapt to this constant interruption much the same way that series do. They segment the narrative. Each serial narrative segment ends with a small climax, which raises new enigmas rather than leading to resolutions. We enter, or “flow” into, a commercial break on the heels of a narrative question mark. Sometimes the break is preceded by a literal question, as in the December 6th episode when Ryan says to Kendall, “You are carrying my child. So, what the hell are we going to do about that?” The director, Angela Tessinari, ends the scene with a close-up of Kendall as this line is spoken (tight, scene-ending close-ups are a common convention of soap opera; Figure 3.14; [tvcrit.com/find/amc02](http://tvcrit.com/find/amc02)). Cut to commercial. After we return from the world of commerce, Kendall provides an evasive answer to that question. Her first line of dialogue is: “You forget, you and I are not the ‘we’ I was planning on with this baby. It was supposed to be me and Greenlee [her friend and stepsister]” (Figure 3.15). The program has teased us into waiting through five minutes of commercials by promising an answer to Ryan’s question. We don’t really get one, however, and the overarching enigma is sustained. As we have seen in all the narrative structures on television, they operate principally by delaying answers to enigmas.



Figure 3.14 *All My Children*: Kendall is framed in a tight close-up just before a commercial break. She has been asked what she will do about her controversial pregnancy...



Figure 3.15 ... and after the break she avoids providing a full answer.



*Climax*

Eventually, individual storylines do climax on serials. If they didn't, we would probably stop watching out of total frustration. So we do have fairytale weddings in which long-separated lovers are united and climactic gun battles in which evil characters are dispatched. But these climaxes never result in narrative resolution.

*(The Lack of) Resolution*

Almost by definition, serials cannot have total resolution. If they did, there would be no reason to tune in the next day. Climaxes don't generate resolutions. They just create new enigmas. In characteristic fashion, the December 6th *All My Children* episode is dealing with the repercussions of a resolved storyline. For months, the program focused on a mysterious series of murders. Then, the mystery was solved: it was Jonathan who killed three people, and what caused him to do so was a tumor pressing on his brain. Surgeons successfully removed the tumor—thereby both curing him and bringing the storyline to a conclusion. Or did they? Zach, the son of one of the murder victims, has turned to alcohol to ease the pain and he vows to kill Jonathan. Will he do so and/or will he get his life back in order? And is Jonathan truly cured, or is he just faking it? The attack on Kendall that begins the December 6th episode raises questions about Jonathan's rehabilitation. As is always the case in serials, the resolution of one storyline opens up new questions, new enigmas.

Even death is not a certainty—as was illustrated by Bobby Ewing's (Patrick Duffy) return to *Dallas* after “dying” in front of Pam's (Victoria Principal) eyes. (Apparently it was just a dream of Pam's—a dream that lasted an entire TV season!) And Jonathan (Jeff Branson), on *All My Children*, managed to return to the narrative after having been shot and having had a bomb he created explode, which caused a mining cave to collapse on top of him. Furthermore, many serial characters have returned from (presumed) death two and three times—as did James Stenbeck (Anthony Herrera) on *As the World Turns*. So even death is not a permanent resolution on the soap opera.

On the extremely rare occasions when a serial storyline does achieve relative narrative closure—say, a couple marries and leaves the program—it is still of little consequence to the enigma structure of the program because of the abundance of other enigmas. The sixth season of *ER* ends with major character Carol (Julianna Margulies) joining Doug (George Clooney) in Seattle—the conclusion of a very rocky relationship spanning several years. (Since both actors left the show, there would be no further developments in their relationship.) But *ER* hardly missed them and had no lack of ongoing enigmas in the following seasons. With numerous protagonists, someone is certain to be lacking or desiring someone or something at any point in time on television serials. The one imperative of the serial is that the story must continue.

In terms of individual episodes, the serial ends as it begins: in the middle of the action. The *All My Children* episode that begins *in medias res* in the child-custody storyline ends in the midst of the same storyline—with very little narrative development between start and finish. In the last shot of the day, Babe watches J.R. leave the boathouse, then grins at her success in turning the tables on him and Del. “Gotcha!” she says triumphantly to herself, concluding the day's episode (Figure 3.16; [tvccrit.com/find/amc03](http://tvccrit.com/find/amc03)). Her exclamation contains an implied tease: Will she trick J.R. and regain custody of their son? Tune in tomorrow to (perhaps) find out.

The narrative structure of a serial such as *All My Children* only partially maps onto the series-narrative diagram in Figure 3.12. A serial's beginning and ending are quite different from those of a series, and the cause-effect chain departs from the relatively simple progression of series such as *Friends*. Figure 3.17 accounts for the unique elements of the serial. As you examine the series



Figure 3.16 *All My Children*: The last shot of this episode provides no narrative resolution as Babe plots further schemes.

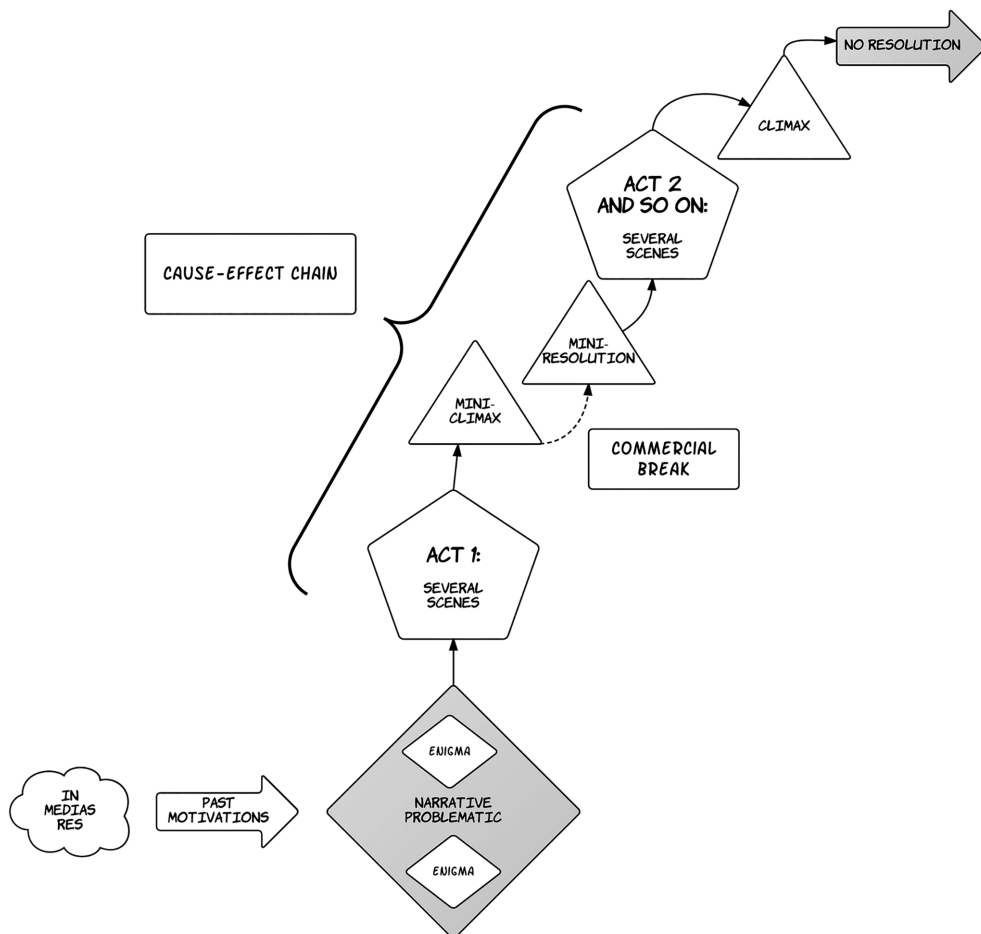


Figure 3.17 In the linear-TV serial, narrative structure is based on a continuing story with no foreseeable resolution and an exposition lost in the past.

and serial diagrams, look for the distinguishing features of the two television forms. And the next time you watch a serial, see if you can identify the components that are visualized in this diagram.

## Transmedia Storytelling and Binge-Watching

Before leaving our consideration of narrative we should discuss **transmedia storytelling** and **binge-watching**. Both have changed how viewers consume television stories, and both have the potential to enhance and disrupt the traditional TV experience.

All television programs have some sort of companion online presence—websites, Facebook fan pages, Twitter feeds, and so on. Many programs have taken to including additional information about their characters in short webisodes, blogs that are written from the characters' perspective, and other more creative features. NBC's *The Office* (2005–13), for example, expanded its narrative beyond what we saw weekly on TV. The program's paper company, Dunder Mifflin, had its own fake website at [dundermifflin.com](http://dundermifflin.com) (now taken down; see [tvcrit.com/find/dunder](http://tvcrit.com/find/dunder)) and several employees wrote blogs—including Ryan's (B. J. Novak) photo-blog titled *Thousand and One Words*.<sup>13</sup> Most significantly, in terms of *The Office*'s narrative, the program's online-only webisodes expanded and elaborated on the story presented on television. In one series of video segments, for example, Angela (Angela Kinsey) mentors Erin (Ellie Kemper) to become an accountant. By building a narrative world that existed both on television and online, the producers of *The Office* engaged in **transmedia storytelling**.

Transmedia storytelling in this example from *The Office* is a one-way street. Narrative elements from television travel to the Web and are elaborated upon there, but not the other way around. That is, *The Office* webisodes do not have an impact upon the television show's narrative; they function primarily as promotional material for the show. For example, the narrative action of the Angela-Erin webisode did not have any significant impact on Angela's or Erin's character on the television show. However, more significant experiments with transmedia storytelling have developed since the late 1990s. NBC augmented the later seasons of its police show, *Homicide: Life on the Street* (1993–99), with an online series titled *Homicide: Second Shift* (1997–99).<sup>14</sup> On television, *Life on the Street* showed one shift of homicide detectives while on NBC's website, *Second Shift* showed another. Mostly, the two shifts did not overlap, but, in an episode broadcast February 5, 1999 titled "Homicide.com," characters from the webisodes do appear and influence the narrative. However, NBC did not fully commit to transmedia storytelling. As the executive producer of the Web series, Thomas Hjelm, explains, "The [TV] episode on Friday is self-contained and makes sense by itself, but if you go online for the (continuing) *Second Shift* chapters, it just makes *more* sense."<sup>15</sup>

More fully developed transmedia worlds may be found in the realm of fantasy, science fiction, and animation. Henry Jenkins, one of the leading transmedia theorists, has chronicled how *The Matrix*'s (1999) narrative world has been constructed through theatrical movies, animated shorts, comics, video games, and various online materials.<sup>16</sup> And he contends that two of the most successful transmedia franchises are *Pokémon* (on American television 1998–) and *Yu-Gi-Oh!* (on American television 2001–06), which began as video games and have evolved across the media of television, theatrical film, and trading cards. Video games and trading cards that also involve game play introduce an intriguing, innovative aspect of transmedia storytelling: the ability of viewers to control the narrative themselves, to navigate through the narrative world along a path that they choose. This clearly has potential to disrupt the cause-effect chain upon which so much television narrative relies. The transmedia experience transforms the viewer into a "viewer/user/player" or VUP, as Stephen Dinehart has termed it.<sup>17</sup> In other words, the

transmedia viewer both consumes and produces story elements. Jenkins provides an example from *Lost* (2004-10) where viewers captured a frame of a map from one episode, posted it online, and then used the “collective intelligence” of online fans to construct theories about the Hanso Corporation and what was transpiring on the island.<sup>18</sup> Thus, fans become VUPs, helping to fabricate a narrative world instead of being led along a predetermined cause-effect pathway. Such narrative world building can now lead users into the real space outside their homes—as was illustrated by the release in 2016 of *Pokémon Go*. In this **augmented reality** (AR) game, Pokémon characters appear over the live video from a smartphone’s camera (Figure 3.18), allowing players to pursue them in the physical world. In true transmedia fashion, Pokémon narrative elements have transferred into users’ worlds and entice them to hunt game characters in real spaces, not entirely unlike Indiana Jones seeking the Ark of the Covenant. When *Pokémon Go*



Figure 3.18 In the augmented reality game, *Pokémon Go*, game characters appear over real-life settings.

players search for Pokémon in the wild, they are authoring their own narratives, becoming part of a story's development that they themselves determine.

In our example from *The Office*, we see the most common transmedia use related to television narrative: the further elaboration of characters and their stories. This could put an end to narrative closure because it means that there is always the potential for the story to be continued—whether from official online episodes or fan-generated fiction. The serial television form was built on a similar lack of closure, and one could see how soap operas and other serials could benefit from never-ending transmedia storytelling. The series form, however, relies on narrative pleasure derived from repeatable narrative closure—the resolving of narrative lines week after week. Continuing these lines past their on-television closure could cause ruptures in the texts and generate displeasure and uneasiness. However, a transmedia franchise might also “steal” the core narrative problematic of a television series and shift it to other media or an augmented reality. For example, the forensic crime-fighting problematic of *CSI* has already been adapted for graphic novels.

The *CSI* graphic novel, along with the examples above from *The Matrix*, *Pokémon*, *Pokémon Go*, and *Yu-Gi-Oh!*, illustrate one seemingly undeniable fact of transmedia storytelling: the viewer/user/player has many entry points into a transmedia franchise's narrative world. These entry points may be television programs, but they could just as easily be video games, theatrical films, a blog, or even trading cards. Thus, we can no longer presume that television's stories *originate on television*. As Jenkins notes, “Any given product is a point of entry into the franchise as a whole. Reading across the media sustains a depth of experience that motivates more consumption.”<sup>19</sup> Conceivably, narrative exposition could be encountered in another medium before the viewer watches the first episode of a TV program—as was the case of *Pokémon* fans who played the game before seeing the TV show. This could change how episodes or entire programs initiate their narratives, but few attempts have yet aggressively tested this potential.<sup>20</sup> The impact that transmedia storytelling will have on conventional television narrative is still being sorted out. It certainly has the capacity to change every aspect of narrative structure: its expository beginning, cause-effect middle, and semi-closed end. Will this result in the death of television and a revolutionary new transmedia form? It is still too soon to tell.

Just as transmedia storytelling provides viewers with new power over the ways they construct a TV narrative, so does binge-watching a TV program alter the broadcast-era experience of consuming narrative in weekly or daily installments. Binge-watching was a relatively limited phenomenon during the DVD era, when enthusiastic fans of a show might purchase a DVD set of an older program's entire season and blast through the episodes in short order. However, binge-watching gained new cultural currency in the 2010s when streaming VOD portals began releasing entire, season-long runs of original episodes all at once. Netflix has been a leader in this regard and has dropped entire seasons of original programming such as *House of Cards* (2013–) and *Orange Is the New Black* (2013–) to great fanfare. In fact, it is estimated that when *House of Cards'* second season came out on a Friday in 2014, hundreds of thousands of Netflix subscribers watched its nearly 11 hours of narrative over that weekend.<sup>21</sup> “Binge-watching” officially entered the Zeitgeist in 2013 when the Oxford Dictionaries declared it one of the runners-up to “Word of the Year” (the winner was “selfie”).

To date, original programming on Netflix, Amazon Video, Hulu, and so on, has stuck with the episodic structure of broadcast-era television—that is, narratives built in 30- or 60-minute installments. Moreover, 30-minute comedies have mostly maintained the structure of the series

as we discuss above—complete with a repeatable narrative problematic. And 60-minute dramatic serials have deviated very little from the open-ended structure we saw in the broadcast-era soap opera. However, the ability to watch two or three or more episodes in quick succession has the potential to change series/serial television's narrative formats. Episodes are becoming more and more like chapters in a novel, with viewers able to immediately turn a virtual page and move on to the next chapter. It's too soon to tell how television's "binge-ability," as it were, is going to affect narrative structure. Will it lead to more and more complex storytelling over longer forms? Or will it just mean that viewers will consume insubstantial stories much more quickly and distractedly—greedily gorging themselves on the plenitude of television in the twenty-first century?

## Summary

Narrative forms must share linear-television time with all sorts of other material: news, commercials, game shows, public service announcements, sports, and so on. And yet, stories are what principally draw us to television. Theatrical films, series programs, and serial programs lure us with the promise of entertaining stories. These television narratives share certain characteristics. They all present protagonists—established by an exposition—in a chain of events motivated by desire. There are always antagonists—individuals, environments, or internal—that prevent the attainment of that desire. The chain in each narrative mode is comprised of actions connected to one another by narrative enigmas that pull the story toward a climax. All of these aspects are necessary for conventional storytelling, though their order and emphasis may differ from mode to mode.

However, important distinctions separate the narrative modes. Series and serials rely upon a viewer foreknowledge of characters that is not possible in individual theatrical films. The series and the serial adapt themselves to television's constant interruptions through narrative segmentation, to which theatrical films are not accustomed. Each mode handles enigmas and resolutions somewhat differently—depending upon whether the mode must be continued the next week/day or not. On one end of the spectrum is the classical film, with its firm narrative closure; on the other is the serial drama, with its never-fully closing narrative aperture.

We should resist the impulse to use the classical film as our yardstick to measure these individual narrative modes. Instead, we should understand them on their own terms as television narratives. Every narrative form on linear TV must somehow conform to television's flow, interruption, and segmentation. The daytime serial—with its extreme segmentation, multiple protagonists, multiple enigmas, and lack of full resolution—owes the least to the classical film and is perhaps the most televisual of the narrative modes. The theatrical film is, obviously, the least suited and consequently suffers the most. The series has its own way of accommodating the medium. And still, all are television stories.

The future of television narrative will probably involve some permutation of transmedia storytelling, where viewers encounter narrative worlds on many different narrative platforms through a variety of entry points. Exactly what format this storytelling will take is still a matter of contention, but it is likely that today's VOD, streamed, and binged-watched media will necessitate some new narrative approaches.

## Notes

- 1 Melanie D. Miller, "Attention, Filmmakers: Here's Everything You Need to Know About Release Windows," *Indie Wire*, January 14, 2015, [tvcrit.com/find/windows](http://tvcrit.com/find/windows), accessed February 28, 2017.



- 2 Until 2015, it was one of the top 20 box office leaders of all time, but was bumped to number 21 that year by *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*. *Gone With the Wind* (1939) has been number one for over 70 years. Source: "Domestic Grosses: Adjusted for Ticket Price Inflation," *Box Office Mojo*, February 23, 2017, [tvccrit.com/find/boxoffice](http://tvccrit.com/find/boxoffice).
- 3 Each year, 25 films deemed "culturally, historically or aesthetically significant" are added to the National Film Registry, which works to preserve them. "Film Registry," Library of Congress, February 23, 2017, [tvccrit.com/find/nfr](http://tvccrit.com/find/nfr).
- 4 Lawrence Kasden, "Raiders of the Lost Ark," August 13, 2010, [tvccrit.com/find/raidersscript](http://tvccrit.com/find/raidersscript).
- 5 Nineteenth-century German playwright Gustav Freytag was among the first to diagram dramatic structure. His "pyramid" inspired this diagram. Gustav Freytag, *Freytag's Technique of the Drama: An Exposition of Dramatic Composition and Art*, translated and edited by Elias J. MacEwan (Chicago: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1894). Available online at [tvccrit.com/find/freytag](http://tvccrit.com/find/freytag).
- 6 "Film Victim of the Month," *Artists Rights Foundation*, January 1999, November 6, 2000, [www.artistsrights.org](http://www.artistsrights.org). The Artists Rights Foundation has been subsumed under the Film Foundation and its website has changed to [www.film-foundation.org](http://www.film-foundation.org).
- 7 *Midnight Cowboy* is so butchered when it is shown on television that Leonard Maltin advises, "[P]lease don't watch it on commercial TV: the most lenient prints run 104m. [out of an original running time of 113 minutes] and are ludicrously dubbed to remove foul language." *TV Movies and Video Guide* (New York: Signet, 1990), 719.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 1081-2.
- 9 John Ellis, *Visible Fictions: Cinema: Television: Video* (Boston: Routledge, 1992), 156.
- 10 "Recaps: 12/6/05," *All My Children*, December 7, 2005, [tvccrit.com/find/amcrecap](http://tvccrit.com/find/amcrecap).
- 11 "Character Bios," *ABC*, December 7, 2005, [tvccrit.com/find/amcbios](http://tvccrit.com/find/amcbios).
- 12 For more specifics regarding soap-opera timing, see Jeremy G. Butler, *Television Style* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 48-53.
- 13 Ryan Novak, "Thousand and One Words," [tvccrit.com/find/novak](http://tvccrit.com/find/novak), originally accessed August 17, 2010.
- 14 See "Multidirectional Digital Flow and 'Second Shift' Programming," in John Thornton Caldwell, *Production Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 279-82.
- 15 Josh Wolk, "Homicide Welcomes Its Website Cast to the Show—a First Step in NBC's Plans to Nab TV Defectors," *Entertainment Weekly*, February 5, 1999, [tvccrit.com/find/homicideweb](http://tvccrit.com/find/homicideweb).
- 16 Henry Jenkins, "Searching for the Origami Unicorn: *The Matrix* and Transmedia Storytelling," in *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 93-130.
- 17 Stephen Dinehardt, [stephendinehart.com](http://stephendinehart.com), August 16, 2010.
- 18 The concept of "collective intelligence" comes from Pierre Lévy. Henry Jenkins, "Transmedia Storytelling 101," *Confessions of an Aca-Fan*, March 22, 2007, [tvccrit.com/find/transmedia](http://tvccrit.com/find/transmedia), accessed February 23, 2017.
- 19 Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 96.
- 20 Experimental endeavors such as the University of Southern California's Labyrinth Project have explored transmedia's potential to a greater degree than the broadcast networks. For more information, see [tvccrit.com/find/labyrinth](http://tvccrit.com/find/labyrinth).
- 21 Alexis Kleinman, "An Insane Number of Americans Binge-Watched 'House Of Cards,'" *The Huffington Post*, February 21, 2014, [tvccrit.com/find/binge](http://tvccrit.com/find/binge), accessed March 16, 2017.

## Further Readings

The most cogent overview of television narrative, especially as it compares with the narrative of other related media, is John Ellis, *Visible Fictions: Cinema: Television: Video* (Boston: Routledge, 1992), although his references are becoming dated. A more current perspective on the complexities of television narrative in today's on-demand, transmedia world of storytelling is offered by Jason Mittell, *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), which has an online version that includes video examples (see [tvccrit.com/find/complextv](http://tvccrit.com/find/complextv)). One anthology that assesses the broad-ranging transmedia world of *Star Wars* is Sean Guynes and Dan Hassler-Forest, eds., *Star Wars and the History of Transmedia Storytelling* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017). Readers interested in constructing their own transmedia storytelling could consult Andrea Phillips, *A Creator's Guide*



to *Transmedia Storytelling: How to Captivate and Engage Audiences Across Multiple Platforms* (New York: McGraw-Hill Education, 2012); or Carolyn Handler Miller, *Digital Storytelling: A Creator's Guide to Interactive Entertainment*, 3rd ed. (Burlington, MA: Focal Press, 2014).

An overview of TV narrative theory is provided by Sarah Kosloff's chapter, "Narrative Theory and Television," in *Channels of Discourse, Reassembled*, Robert C. Allen, ed. (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1992). Kosloff includes an annotated bibliography of narrative theory of literature, film, and television. Nick Lacey, *Narrative and Genre: Key Concepts in Media Studies* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000) covers general principles of genre and then applies them to both television and film. Genre studies often focus on narrative—as can be seen in two TV-genre overviews: Jason Mittell, *Genre and Television: From Cop Shows to Cartoons in American Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2004); and Glen Creeber, ed., *The Television Genre Book* (London: British Film Institute, 2001). Using *Star Trek's* holodeck as a portent of the future, Janet H. Murray details the development of narrative in various formats of science fiction in *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997). Other discussions of specific television genres and formats include Robert C. Allen, *Speaking of Soap Operas* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1985); and Paul Attallah, "The Unworthy Discourse: Situation Comedy in Television," in *Interpreting Television: Current Research Perspectives*, Willard D. Rowland, Jr., and Bruce Watkins, eds. (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1984).

Analyses of the narrative structures of film and literature can often provide insights into those of television. David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson have written frequently on narrative systems in film. Their *Film Art: An Introduction*, 11th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2016) offers chapters that summarize their work elsewhere. Bordwell also maintains an informative blog that often analyzes narrative elements: [tvcrit.com/find/bordwell](http://tvcrit.com/find/bordwell). Thompson has addressed the specifics of television narrative in *Storytelling in Film and Television* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003). David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985) is a meticulous analysis of the evolution of classical film narrative form as a mode of production. Edward Brannigan, *Narrative Comprehension and Film* (London: Routledge, 1992) examines both narrative structure and our interpretation of it in film. Seymour Chatman's *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1978) provides a summary of narrative analysis in those two media.