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ABSTRACT

Qualitative studies can be approached through a method analogous to semiotic analysis. In order to avoid arbitrary assessments, news reportage should be subjected to an analysis that will reveal the various logical and technological, mythic and modal structures reflected in the message system. Humanistic inquiry can borrow from structural models appropriate to various disciplines, in interpreting how these structures and processes interrelate. As an example, the evening news is analyzed as a semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic phenomenon. The syntactic pattern and mythic and modal aspects evident in the television format are emphasized. (Author/AA)

THE EVENING NEWS: QUALITATIVE ASSESSMENT AND SYSTEMATIC ANALYSIS

by

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The most persistent challenge presented to "qualitative" scholarship is the accusation that it is unsystematic. No less a light than Claude Levi-Strauss has often observed that our study of culture and cultural phenomena is often the "pursuit of a lawless humanism." Codes of communication and expression must be analyzed in their proper contexts before we can evaluate them. If we have in the mass media, for example, the patrimony of social mythologies as well as technologies, then it becomes imperative to understand the logic of those structures before we can judge their humanistic significance and effect. If the scholar is responsible for judgment, then he is responsible for his method.

Qualitative studies need not be unsystematic. Humanistic aesthetic disciplines offer a wide range of possible points of departure. The evening news, for example, is a cluster of structures and processes: temporal, audial, and visual. Furthermore, it consists of a set of interrelationships between these structures and processes. To be more precise it is a "sign system" or semiotic. Thus, as a method of humanistic inquiry and qualitative analysis, semiotic analysis is one of the many appropriate heuristic tools available to the scholar and humanist.

In his classical definition of semiosis Charles Morris analyzed the "sign process" as a three-place relation, from which three kinds of two place relations emerge:

1) the relation between sign and interpreter (pragmatics)
2) the relation between sign and object denoted or "designation" (semantics)
3) the relation between sign and sign (syntactics)

In its precise and exhaustive application, semiotic analysis might prove too cumbersome and encyclopedic for qualitative purposes. But in an analogical form, it perhaps offers the most illuminating prism yet devised for media analysis

Thus in analyzing the cultural phenomenon known as the evening news we might distinguish three special aspects of the phenomenon:

semantic
syntactic
pragmatic

Remembering, of course, as Morris suggests in his definition, that the totality of the semiotic phenomenon is something more than its three branches taken together. The ultimate significance and effect of a news sequence will be more than a function of any arrangement or sequence of words and visual shots. Meaning is never located in the structural context of syntax, it resonates from the intersection of these various aspects of the sign--it is, indeed, a <u>systematic</u> event.

If humanistic analysis errs, it usually errs by reducing significance to the syntactic or semantic aspects of a particular phenomenon. If scientific analysis errs, it is usually by failing to interpret a plethora of pragmatic information (atomizing the phenomenon) or by equating significance with functionality.

And so, at the outset, let us assume that these three dimensions are integral, each shedding light on the other.

The scholar naturally seeks methods proper to each dimension of significance and very often these are readily available in some preexisting disciplinary context. For example, a semantic analysis of the evening news might test the verbal and visual contexts for evidence of typical semantic corruption, such as euphemism, rising levels of abstraction, stereotyped idioms, reductionism, osmotic transfer. It might examine the frequency of the passive voice or subjunctive in the words of the news subjects as well as the deliverers of the news. By comparative analyses of different news sources, one ought to be able to estimate the relative degree of semantic pollution.

Or, if one turns to the dimension of pragmatics, any number of behavioral and sociological factors might be applied to analyzing the sign-event that is the evening news. Morris had defined pragmatics as "that aspect of semiotic concerned with the origin, uses and effects of signs," and elsewhere, as dealing with "all the psychological, biological and sociological phenomena which occur in the functioning of signs." Here the motives of the messengers and the reactions of the receivers are equally important. By analogical extension, the entire spectrum of the technological-economic process behind the production of news becomes, perhaps, the most significant and determining interpreter of the sign-event.

When we turn to the <u>syntactic</u> aspect of the semiotic of the evening news, most humanists are on familiar ground. Here in the relationship of the parts to the whole, and part to part--in the form and format of the evening news--aesthetic theory, graphic analysis, and literary criticism have provided us with practiced heuristic tools. The humanist must go beyond content analysis, even beyond the synchronic organization of the form, to the diachronic resonance of this modern phenomenon of visually reported news. The humanist inevitably asks, what is there about the evening news that incrementally repeats traditional or mythic formulas? The answer to the question is crucial to understanding the <u>qualitative</u> texture and effect of such a sign-event.

As a case in point, let us examine the evening news as literature. There is much evidence to suggest that in the creation of any verbal or visual form, the human maker consciously or unconsciously draws upon a repertoire of dramatic and narrative forms in translating facts and events into meaningful patterns.

The whole history of narrative discourse in the Western world is a history of osmotic transfer between reportage and art. The English novel itself owes its existence to those spastic and often tasteless reports of executions and criminal confessions known as The Newgate Broadsides. In America in the nineteenth century it would have been difficult to distinguish between the language and subject matter of the dime novels or melodramas and

the newspaper reports of the Penny Press. Popular culture and the news media are perpetually incestuous, and a recognition of this fact sets these forms in perspective. More recently, with the new journalism and the "novel as history," writers have been more consciously explicit about this osmosis. Doctorow, the author of Ragtime has exploited the fusion and applied it reciprocally to the news media: "There's no more fiction or non-fiction now. There's only narrative. All the nonfiction means of communication employ narrative today. Television news is packaged using devices of drama and suspense and image. News magazines package facts as fiction in the sense of organizing and composing the material aesthetically."

This nexus led columnist Art Buchwald to ask in a recent column, "Who writes the news shows, who writes the crime dramas? Are they the same people?" In a way they are because the residue of a collective repertoire of popular forms is operative in any creative structuring of experience, and if one takes structural view of the evening news familiar patterns emerge: heroes, villains, conflict, pathos, sentiment, denouement.

The evening news is above all a narrative, and a typical program contains all the elements contained in the classical definition of narrative:

1. the framing of a tale
2. presence of a narrator whose character lends resonance to the style, quality of narrative
3. prose which has familiarity of conversation
4. ordinary characters--recognizable, in a context (often in Western narrative, with a decidedly individualistic emphasis)
5. precision in the rendering of details--verbal and graphic
6. plausibility in incidents

There are other aspects of the evening news format that give it a particular resemblance to fiction, both narrative and dramatic. Northrop Frye, the literary theoretician, has probed the deeper levels of meaning in literary form and his theory of modes offers an intriguing analogy with the format of the evening news. Frye first observes that, "In literary fictions the plot consists of somebody doing something. The somebody, is an individual, is the hero, and the something he does or fails to do is what he can do, or could have done, on the level of the postulates made about him by the author and the consequent expectations of the audience. Fictions, therefore, may be classified, not morally, but by the hero's power of action which may be greater than ours, less, or roughly the same."

Fiction, then is a kind of mirror in which we look for a recognized and familiar human figure, one like ourselves, or one that is superior or inferior to ourselves. Frye's categories are arranged in a descending order:

1. the demi-god: superior to men and to the natural environment (MYTHIC mode)
2. the romantic hero: superior to other men in degree and to natural forces (ROMANTIC mode)
3. the leader or great man: superior in degree or capacity to other men, but not to natural forces (HIGH MIMETIC mode)
4. common man: superior neither to other men, nor to natural forces, "one of us" (LOW MIMETIC mode)

5. inferior man: one who is inferior in power, intelligence, one who is in a state of degradation, bondage, absurdity (IRONIC or COMIC mode)

Frye notes that the history of Western narrative has moved more or less downward on this scale in terms of emphasis, whereas Oriental fiction has remained focused on mythic and romantic formulas. If Frye has constructed a kind of "phylogeny" of narrative discourse, then I would suggest that the "ontogeny" of the evening news format tends to recapitulate this "phylogeny." The news on any given network tends to move sequentially through four basic matrices of events, each of which generates a specific tone or style and each of which manipulates the formulas characteristic of Frye's modes. The evening news generally begins with cosmic, catastrophic events, then moves to (or begins with if there have been no apocalyptic events) news centering around world and national political leaders or celebrities, followed by "domestic" news about things affecting the common man more immediately, and usually ending with human interest anecdotes in a sentimental, comic, or ironic vein.

A characteristic program begins with a clip on an outbreak of violence in some troubled area--Northern Ireland perhaps--or with a report of a disaster--or perhaps with a new expose of CIA activities (it is interesting to note that since Watergate the CIA has moved upward on the agenda, it has acquired "cosmic" status as a sort of ubiquituous demonic force). Then the commentator introduces a series of politically-related clips, most of which are focuses on heads of state, secretaries of state, Congressional leaders or other nabobs. Celebrities--royalty, film stars, criminals--are often given a parallel place on the agenda. The third category of news is often issue-oriented: busing, taxes, gun legislation, strikes--all the things that affect the life of the common man more directly. Usually toward the end of the program some human interest material is introduced that provides a radical change in style and mode of communication. For example, on the evening of September 25 CBS ran three separate sequences on the respective progress in the cases of Patty Hearst, Lynn Fromme and Sara Jean Moore. The affinity of these three with California perhaps inspired CBS to run a Charles Kuralt "road romance" on California as the anchor piece in the program. The juxtaposition of the early Franciscan mission and Serra's "broken dream" with the modern San Francisco and Sacramento, while romantic and sentimental in tone, had the effect of overwhelming ironic counterpoint--suggesting as it did a subtle collusion with affluence and lawlessness. Or in another example, on the NBC evening news for January 6, 1976, the anchor piece was a comic-ironic admission that the network has spent a good deal of money to develop a new "original" logo, only to discover that it is a near duplicate of an existing symbol used by a Public Broadcasting Network in Nebraska. (Nebraska, of course, had developed the original logo at minimal cost.) In another program, ABC News for October 21 began with clips on the death of Franco and Kissinger's meeting with Mao in China, and ended with a humorous segment on dog psychiatrists. Whether it is ironic, sentimental, comic or banal, the anchor sequence of most evening news programs tends to be the counterpoint of the apocalyptic tones of the earliest segments on the agenda. Occasionally the networks depart from this modal sequence, but is the exception rather than the rule.

The narrators themselves give the news a distinctive coloration and tone:

the detached, "low key" style of John Chancellor, the authoritative, stage-managerial style of a Walter Cronkite, or the more intimate conversational style of a Harry Reasoner. These intermediaries add another layer to the texture of narrative that makes up this daily ritual.

Thus the modal variations in an average news program seem to mimic the cyclical pattern of myth itself. As Frye says, "Romance, tragedy, irony and comedy are all episodes in a total quest-myth." The news format tends to superimpose the contexts and characters of these traditional mythic modes onto the people, places and events of the contemporary world. We begin to see Nixon as pharmakos (scapegoat and scoundrel), Kissinger as alazon (self-inflated figure), assorted journalists and bureaucrats as eiron figures (those who wear the white hats) and Ted Kennedy as the prince-in-exile.

The evening news is much more than a mirror of reality, it is a myth-maker. And the best guide to what is really happening on televised news is probably to be found in books like Frye's, or in Aristotle's Poetics and Ethics--least of all, in the T.V. Guide.