american TELEVISION genres

Stuart M. Kaminsky
with Jeffrey H. Mahan

1985
Nelson-Hall nh Chicago

—7—

A Structural Analysis of the Police Story

by Dennis Giles

Art may imitate life but does not reproduce it. A story is always more organized than life; it presents a heightened reality. According to Alfred Hitchcock, a satisfying story is a "slice of cake" rather than a slice of life. No fiction script can stand up to the test of plausibility or credibility. Popular television genres, like popular films and novels, rarely detail the "average everydayness" of experience, to use a phrase from the German philosopher Martin Heidegger, but instead the experience that matters—events that change the direction of human life. "What is drama, after all," Hitchcock said repeatedly, "but life with the dull bits cut out."

The Study of Narrative Structure

Aristotle defines plot as "simply this, the combination of the incidents, or things done in the story." But events do not follow one another in random succession in the narrative chain. They are organized according to a certain logic—not the logic of "real life," but storytelling logic.

The study of narrative structure tries to describe those rules of combination which organize events into a coherent story. This approach considers plot as a passage—not only a journey from place to place, but a passage between states of mind, states of being. It treats the story as a movement from an original imbalance (of justice, for ex-

ample) to the resolution of that imbalance which provides the sense of a satisfactory ending. If a fiction is both a model of reality and a remodeling of previous fiction within the same genre, the student of narrative constructs a model of the story itself—a model of the model—to discover the laws which move the story from its opening promise of an event that matters through the crisis which fulfills the promise. In other words, the narrative analyst studies the story as a structure in process of transformation. Yet the analysis of the actions and events which form a plot is often so abstract that it bears little relation to the actual experience of watching and hearing—understanding and feeling—a story.

Television and Folk Art

In his pioneering study of 100 Russian *marchen* (fairy tales), *The Morphology of the Folktale,* Vladimir Propp was able to transform each plot into a sequence of algebraic notations: *F* (the hero gains use of a magical agent), *H* (combat with the villain), *Pr* (the hero is pursued), *Ex* (the false hero is exposed), *U* (the villain is punished), etc. Propp discovered thirty-one "functions," or acts, possible in any one story, some of which could be omitted, repeated, or rearranged to generate new tales. Each actual folktale is understood as a variation upon a single model. Propp was interested in a particular instance of storytelling only for what it told him about the narrative rules of the whole genre of folktales. Because genre analysis necessarily generalizes, individual differences between stories are often lost in the attempt to discern a common pattern of events. The analyst sees the forest clearly but neglects the concrete presence of the trees.

Despite its abstractions, the *Morphology* has heavily influenced the study of classical "heroic" texts and popular narratives. Propp's discovery that the typical plot is *curative,* that it enacts the hero's attempt to remedy a fundamental deficiency or "lack" in his or her world, is a particularly useful way of thinking about the police story. While the heroes and villains of folktales move in an idealized space, cut off from the world, the police genre attempts to root its fiction in the mean streets of everyday life. Yet, despite its emphasis upon realism, the police story replays the central acts of the folktale. Both are clearly action genres, emphasizing chases, combats, and the play of weapons. Both the traditional folktale and the police story begin their plots with the violation of law and/or the hero's transgression of a prohibition.

In each genre, the audience is expected to admire and identify with a protagonist who displays special powers and abilities, and yet is simultaneously an everyman.

Although television programs are highly calculated commercial products, they share many of the characteristics of anonymous "folk art." In both television and the folktale, the creativity or inventiveness that is the mark of value in the fine arts is subordinated to the replay of conventions. Of course, to some extent, all artistic expression restates a previous communication and plays variations on an earlier text. No art work can possibly "make sense" to an audience unless it is based upon certain conventions shared by both the artist and the culture. Yet, in most forms of artistic communication, the requirement to speak in the inherited, conventional language is always in tension with the producer's desire to invent a new form of expression. An episode of "Police Story" and the Greek tragedy are each the product of a compromise between convention and invention.

Whether an artistic production is classified as popular or "fine" art depends, to a large extent, upon its degree of fidelity to a previous model. The artist who stresses creation over repetition gains cultural prestige at the same time that the audience is limited to an educated elite. But, like the artist of the medieval and classical ages, the producer of television dramas gains a large audience by playing variations on a repertory of well-known conventions. The pleasure of genre productions comes both from our recognition of familiar territory and our trust that the rules of the game are flexible enough to admit new forms of play.

Television is conservative in its storytelling, spinning off new series from proven successes, updating traditional plots that preexist the medium by centuries. But TV genres are rarely brittle structures shattered by the pressure of new material, new styles of expression. Viable genres like the police story function as open, dynamic systems, always in process of renewal, while yet remaining themselves. The authoritarian, fiercely middle-class Ironside yields to the scruffy proletarian figure of Baretta as the genre begins to tolerate—even champion—deviant life-styles. The stern, no-nonsense face of Jack Webb as Joe Friday ("Just the facts, ma'am") is replaced by the seductive, let's-fool-around grin of Erik Estrada on "Chips" as strictly defined case assignments yield to the free-wheeling patrols of the motorcycle cop. While the private lives of the cops in "Dragnet" and "The F.B.I." are

clearly distinct from their professional functions, "Police Story," "Cagney and Lacy," and "Hill Street Blues" cops bring their jobs home, as the walls between public and private worlds become increasingly porous.

Characteristics of the Police-Story Plot

The police story is a plot of restoration. The world is thrown into a state of imbalance by criminal action. While patrolling his beat, the cop discovers the violation of law or is dispatched from the station to the scene of the crime. (Propp's functions *A*, *B*, *C*, ↑: the villain causes a lack, the lack is "made known," the hero begins counter-action or is dispatched to the scene, the hero departs on his journey.) After various preliminary combats (Propp's "test scenes") and the interrogation of witnesses, suspects, informers (the characters Propp describes as "helpers"), the criminal is met and vanquished in the field of battle, though the hero is often wounded in the process (functions *H,J,I,K:* combat with the villain, the hero "branded" in the fight, the villain defeated, the lack is "liquidated"). The plot has come full circle—the reign of justice has been restored. The cop returns home to the station or the familiar grounds of his beat, where he is rewarded—if only by a pat on the back—for a job well done (functions ↓, *Q,W:* the hero returns, is recognized, and "ascends the throne").

The policeman combines the roles of the *seeking* hero and the *victim* hero. As an investigator, he is involved in a search for knowledge or an object of value; e.g., a kidnap victim. Yet, he is also the victim of assaults on his person. The policeman seeks retribution, attempting to pay back the criminal in his own violent coin. The plot structure detailed above is played as a specifically *police* story by utilizing the plot devices of a *crime*, an *investigation*, *preliminary combats*, and a single, *final combat*.

The Crime

The criminal attacks a private citizen, a policeman, or both. When the cop is dispatched to a crime in progress, the criminal redirects his attack from the original victim to the representative of the law. As a result, the cop becomes a second victim, so that the gravity of the original crime is doubled. This direct attack on the law sharpens the conflict, transforming a story of routine, impersonal justice into a drama of private (yet legal) revenge. In theory, the police function is

simply surveillance, pursuit, and capture; punishment is left to the courts and the prisons. However, the police genre often assumes that the courts pervert the story of justice by refusing really to punish the criminal. As a cop bitterly complains in an episode of "Police Story": "That's what gets me. You catch him in the act and he's out in twenty-four hours. Out until the trial. If there *is* a trial! And they buy themselves super lawyers. . . ."

In innumerable stories, the police are "forced" to usurp the function of judge and jury. The genre typically narrates an opposed and equal reply to criminal violence. Doubts as to whether the police should themselves punish the criminal or leave him to the mercy of the courts are effectively resolved when the criminal leaves the cop "no choice" but to shoot back in self-defense. As an experienced policeman explains to his chief in "Police Story," "You know and I know that the only way to stop these people is to put them down." Punishment is more clearly possible than rehabilitation and a rookie cop is likely to be told, "If you have some kind of desire to save souls, get yourself transferred to juvenile."

In some forms of the genre ("Baretta"), the cop consciously considers himself to be the victim's personal delegate in a quest for revenge rather than the cool enforcer of an essentially impersonal law; because the individual victim is neither licensed nor qualified to avenge the injury, the policeman performs a public act of retribution. In other stories, the original victim rapidly disappears from a field of combat dominated entirely by the police and the criminal teams. In such cases, the cop does not represent the citizens so much as the interests of his own professional organization. Rather than impartially applying society's law, he seeks vengeance for the death of a brother officer or seeks a reply to assaults on the prestige of the special family he represents.

The Investigation and Preliminary Combats (Tests)

In the police story, these two action sequences are often intertwined. They both complicate the plot and build the sense of frustration to be released in the terminal catharsis of the gunfight. The hero advances toward his goal; but, at the same time, his action is blocked by the storyteller. The plot rarely progresses in a straight line but circles backward at the very moment when the solution seems clearly in view. In the first major sequence of the "Police Story" episode just cited, a

carefully laid ambush by "special unit" forces is ruined by a rookie's mistake, allowing a vicious character named Slowboy to take a woman hostage during a holdup attempt. Although Slowboy surrenders when the senior cop threatens to shoot through his human shield, the criminal is later freed on bail. In the remainder of the plot, the unit prepares an elaborate trap by which they can finally "waste" Slowboy, thus correcting the error of the legal system, while the rookie learns to master the mysteries of "special tactics." The introductory confrontation has proven to be only a test combat in which we learn the nature of the antagonist and discover precisely what abilities the hero must possess in order to qualify properly for the heroic role.

The decision to emphasize test combats or an investigative journey depends primarily on whether the identity of the criminal is known to police. Whereas "Dragnet" and "Ironside" episodes often detailed the step-by-step solution of a mystery, by the 1970s the mainstream of the genre had become the story of pursuit (particularly in Quinn Martin's "The F.B.I.," 1965-74). The popular *undercover* variation of the *pursuit story* reverses the classic situation of the public cop versus an unknown antagonist. The undercover cop ("Police Woman") is the deceiver—the charming trickster—operating secretly in the heart of the criminal world. The problem is no longer one of recognizing the criminal, but of preventing one's own recognition until the moment of truth—the scene of open combat. Yet, in both the classic and undercover variations of the genre, the spectator fully shares the cop's knowledge (or lack of it); we may be partners in deception *with* the cop, but we are never deceived by him.

In the process of investigation, the protagonist further proves his heroic qualifications by demonstrating courage, persistence, "street smarts" (intuition)—all those qualities that separate him from "the others." (Simply dominating the TV image is not sufficient to qualify a man for heroism: his image must be *filled in* with individual and generic traits; i.e., he must be stamped with character.) Whether the police story stresses investigation or combat, it usually combines the two activities in a single narrative. Whatever the mix, the investigative journey per se is studded with scenes of *interrogation*. These can be understood as displacements (and restatements) of the physical tests that dominate the pursuit variation of the genre.

Interrogation is a verbal form of combat that directly prepares the final resolution. In order to force valuable information from a reluctant

suspect or "snitch," the police threaten, promise, and cajole. The interrogation is a version of the scene in so many myths where the journeying hero is blocked by a creature from another world who challenges him to a contest. This often fabulous creature offers crucial advice, a magical weapon, or a password only if the hero can successfully answer a riddle, strike an appropriate bargain, win a wrestling match, etc. Such characters, called *helpers* by Propp, are neither clearly on the side of the hero nor allies of the villainous forces; like "Rooster," the flamboyant black pimp/informer in "Baretta," they appear as independent operators trying to maintain relations with both worlds.

Both Oedipus's Sphinx and the policeman's snitch are devious by nature. Their answers must be carefully interpreted as ambiguous signs that point toward truth; the informer/oracle rarely tells (or knows) the *full* truth. The cop depends upon this network of pseudo-information because he can only *visit* the criminal underworld, never fully *live* in it. (Even as an undercover agent in the criminal homeland, the policeman is only a tourist.) The care and feeding of snitches, squealers, and other contacts is an ubiquitous subplot of the police genre.

The Final Combat (Test)

Fear is a dominant emotion of melodrama. In the police story, the moment of greatest fear (thus the greatest sense of drama) occurs in those crucial seconds in which the warrior is cut off from his brothers, facing his murderous antagonist one on one. Previous scenes of camaraderie, horseplay with fellow officers, and the exchange of confidences between partners in the squad car all serve to heighten, by contrast, the fear of being alone. The cop is an organization man by training and habit, emotionally dependent on the communication from other policemen and the dispatcher at "home base." The coded squawk of the radio accompanies him everywhere, assuring him that the rest of the team is "in touch." Normally, the cop rests secure in the knowledge that the call "officer needs assistance" will, within minutes, bring a swarm of guns and uniforms to the point of crisis. But in those few terrible minutes, the cop must live or die as an individual, shut off from the support of his comrades-in-arms. The scene of sudden and perilous isolation is stressed in the police story, not only because it contrasts so dramatically with the "brotherhood" that defines the cop's normal experience, but because at this moment, the genre speaks in a much older tradition of storytelling. From the wars of the Old Testament

or the *Iliad* to the aerial dogfight films like *Hell's Angels* and *Star Wars*, the final test that makes or breaks a warrior-hero is the challenge of single combat. Joseph Wambaugh's titles *The New Centurions* and "The Blue Knight" (a made-for-TV movie and a TV series) explicitly recognize that a tradition even more ancient than feudal sagas of valor still informs the combat genres as a whole, and the police story in particular. Although the policeman acts as a member of a team through most of the plot, there is no point in qualifying and individualizing this hero unless he moves into the arena of death *on his own*. According to the tradition, at the critical moment of his story, the blue knight must fight alone, or the story is simply not worth telling.

Chips: The Pure Pursuit

The "Red Rider" episode (1980) of "Chips" begins with a pretitle sequence in which a masked bandit rides his motorcycle on the sidewalk of the prestigious Rodeo Drive shopping area in Beverly Hills, smashes a jewelry store window, snatches an expensive necklace in front of astonished onlookers, and then guns his cycle to make a fast escape. Motorcycle cop Ponch pursues, but the thief's cycle is far more powerful. Ponch crashes his cycle, having failed the first test combat.

The title sequence alternates wide shots of the two heroes with close detail shots of guns, badges, motorcycle wheels, and an extreme close-up of a booted foot. All shots are taken from a moving camera as the motorcycle cops speed together down a four-lane highway, informing the viewer that this will be a *mobile* story.

The next two sequences repeat and vary the original action in order to demonstrate a fundamental deficiency: the heroes do not possess the right tools to bring the criminal to justice. While Ponch recovers from his wounds in a hospital bed, his partner John twice pursues the criminal only to be frustrated by the limits of his own motorcycle. The two cops briefly investigate by reminiscing about a previous episode in the series in which they encountered a similar "supercycle." They conclude that the criminal is probably "The Fabulous Phantom"—star of a motorcycle thrills show—because only this old antagonist could possibly possess the equipment and skill to escape three desperate pursuits by professionals. Verbal contests with The Phantom at the site of the thrill show fail to gain information or victory. The Phantom denies guilt; the police hunch is not yet evidence.

Late in the third sequence, curative action begins. In order to put

the law on equal terms with the criminal, John demands and receives the police supercycle. Now that the imbalance of power has been remedied, the plot will be won or lost by skill alone. Mounted on his fabulous machine, John outperforms his opponent in the final pursuit. When the mask is stripped from the criminal, we discover that he is not The Phantom but a jealous assistant on the support team of the thrills show. Consumed with envy, the Red Rider wished to prove "in real life" that he could equal The Phantom's exploits on the track.

In this youth-oriented variation of the pursuit subgenre, the police are rarely forced to use their guns. The gun is replaced by the motorcycle as the means by which the criminal is captured. In fact, the cycle functions as a weapon, and the title sequence includes more close-ups of the cycle than of the gun. Both the capture and the crime are bloodless and relatively nonviolent. The victim is a jewelry store, not an individual; it sells luxuries to a social elite and can presumably afford the loss. The only injuries sustained by anyone are suffered during the pursuit: Ponch's accident is a result of his own actions, completely unintended by the criminal, while the major wound is to police pride. Both Ponch and John are shamed by the loss of the test combats; the supercycle is clearly the instrument by which the cops can resurrect their lost prestige. "Red Rider" is not so much a story of crime and justice as a contest of machines.

"Chips" can be seen as the police version of the so-called professional variation of the Western, in which the hero is no longer morally superior to his antagonist but is merely the representative of an opposing team. In this battle of speed, skill, and machinery, the police are the superior players; the moral struggle between good and evil has been transformed into a sports contest.

The Cop, the Organization

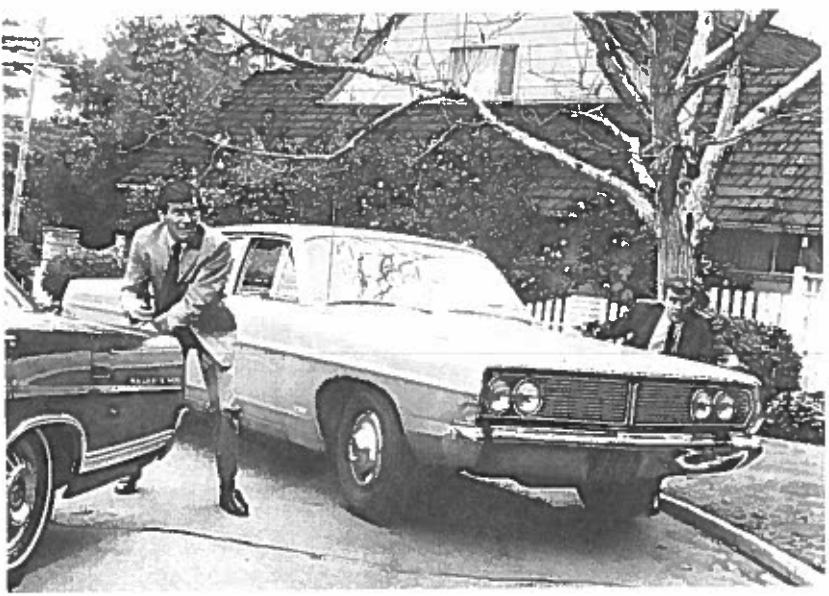
> But just as pure gold hath only a decorative purpose and for sterner uses must be alloyed with baser metals, so must the pure heart be made more sturdy by means of certain truths, which in themselves may be ignoble. To know evil sufficiently to fight against it, but not so well as to be infected by it, is the duty of the knight [Thomas Berger, *Arthur Rex: A Legendary Novel*].

While the police hero displays special powers and abilities which differentiate him from "civilians"—ordinary citizens—he is simulta-

Efrem Zimbalist, Jr., in "The F.B.I."

Raymond Burr in "Ironside."

Efrem Zimbalist, Jr., and William Reynolds in "The F.B.I."



neously an *Everyman*. In contrast to superhuman crime fighters like Superman, the Hulk, and the Bionic Woman, the policeman is not exceptional by nature. He displays no magical powers, no charms; there is nothing uncanny about him. To be sure, he is set apart by his knowledge of death, by his use of death-dealing weapons. But the policeman's death, when it comes, is a mean, brutal death; when a cop is gunned down, the police story prefers to communicate pain—sheer human suffering. It is neither the policeman's birth, his wealth, nor his breeding that establishes his difference from ordinary men, but his professional function, symbolized by the gun and the badge. Representing the threat of lethal force and the ability to use it, these are precisely the emblems emphasized in the title sequence ("Chips," "Ironside," "Police Story," "Police Woman"). The cop is not born with power but has learned how to exercise it. Apprenticeship stories—training the rookie—regularly parallel the primary story of investigation/pursuit. Ironside, in particular, plays the firm parent who guides and corrects his mixed brood of youthful cops.

Unlike the intellectually superior "whodunit" detectives (Ellery Queen, Quincy and Ironside in some episodes), high-living, wisecracking private eyes ("Vegas"), or the international sophisticates played by Robert Wagner ("Switch," "Hart to Hart"), the typical cop is an unpolished man of the streets, with proletarian tastes. The semiliterate speech of Baretta proves that he can provide justice *for* the people because he is himself *of* the people:

> We're all scared, kid. I'm scared every day of my life. Not because I'm a cop, but because I'm a person. I guess we're all left holdin' da bag in dis world, kid. Dat's what they call livin'. But it beats dyin'.

Police stories work from egalitarian assumptions: the law applies equally to everyone; nobody is permitted to be an "exception" outside the reach of police authority. Although Columbo operates on the fringe of the genre (he works essentially alone, assembling clues on the model of the classical English detective), Columbo's achievement is typical of the policeman's work, because it cuts a rich, powerful criminal "down to size," demonstrating that not even the social elite are insulated from justice. "Baretta," "The F.B.I.," and "Police Woman" often perform a kind of democratic leveling by penetrating the defenses of the Mafia Don—the modern equivalent of an absolute monarch—who

arrogantly believes himself to be invulnerable, above and beyond the law.

"The F.B.I." and "Police Story" represent the two extremes of the genre in their attitudes toward the police organization. In "The F.B.I.," the identity of the federal officer is entirely synonymous with his professional role. From the evidence of the series, this policeman has no private life; the organization makes the man. Strictly speaking, the federal cop is only an agent of the Bureau. As a limb of the body carries out instructions from the head, the field agent faithfully executes directives from Washington. Within this closed system, there is little free play for personal idiosyncrasies or private problems. Because the members of the organization are so disciplined, so firmly controlled, the very name *F.B.I.* pronounces the doom of the criminal. Like a force of destiny, like the impersonal Fate of Greek tragedy, the organization inexorably limits the freedom of criminal action until the trap is finally closed. "The F.B.I." represents the force of law raised to an infinite power, unrestricted by geographical boundaries or the flaws of personality. Within this context of organizational power, the series is hard-pressed to give Inspector Erskine (Efrem Zimbalist, Jr.) opportunities to individuate himself—to qualify as the hero. Erskine's role is purely representative; he is the visible face of the organization.

Although the field agents, headed by Erskine, are ostensibly the heroes of the "F.B.I." series, the character who occupies the screen for most of the drama is the criminal, not the cop. In fact, "The F.B.I." is more an *outlaw* story than a *police* story; it concentrates on the pathetic attempt of a small-time hoodlum to escape the jaws of justice. The natural opponent of the federal police organization is the only other organization that can match its power—the shadowy supergovernment called "The Mob," "The Syndicate," "The Mafia." When a massively efficient organization moves against a lone individual, the contest is simply unfair. Such a story violates the tradition that protagonist and antagonist must display approximately equal strength in order that the spectator can live in suspense for the duration of the story, pretending that the issue is in doubt. Yet, the Syndicate can never be annihilated by the F.B.I., or the organization loses its principal enemy, thus its very reason for existence. For every mafioso who is jailed, another takes his place. The Mob is as permanent as the F.B.I., although its faces may change. The organization remains the prime antagonist.

Since the Syndicate bosses can be linked only indirectly with any specific crime, Inspector Erskine and company focus upon the weakest links of the criminal family. The F.B.I. typically pursues low-level employees who will "finger" their immediate superiors in return for reduced sentences. Although the primary conflict is between two professional organizations, the "F.B.I." drama is triangulated (and personalized) by emphasizing the story of a criminal victim caught between the two centers of power. In other words, the strategy of "The F.B.I." is to divide the criminal role into two sets of characters, displacing the viewer's attention from the well-insulated, impersonal Syndicate to a relatively vulnerable, thus sympathetic, individual.

In "The Quarry" episode of "The F.B.I.," Michael Riley, a "runner for the Cosa Nostra," draws attention to himself by violently evading a federal roadblock. Fearful that he will inform on his bosses, the Mob arranges an assassination squad. From this point (the pretitle sequence) onward, the F.B.I. and the Cosa Nostra run a race respectively to save or to kill the unlucky fugitive, while the intended victim successfully evades both parties until the closing moments of the story. During the chase, Riley's trusting girlfriend is badly wounded by a Mafia bullet, while the pathos is further heightened by the victim's dream of a miraculous escape to "an island in Mexico" where the two lovers can live out their lives undisturbed by federal or mob law. The quarry is the classic man in the middle, pursued by both teams, desiring only to leave the game permanently. This outlaw is not a predator by nature or a professional criminal; he is the very antithesis of an organization man. As Riley's brother explains to Inspector Erskine, "He can't help you. He's a loner; thinks he doesn't need *anybody* else . . . except his girl."

The F.B.I. quarry is a variant of the romantic outlaw exemplified by (1) the rebels—Robin Hood, Zorro, Zapata, (2) the righteous bandits—Jesse James, Billy the Kid, (3) the victim-heroes of the *film noir,* and (4) the doomed lovers of the outlaw-couple genre (Bonnie and Clyde). These criminals have been placed on the wrong side of the law by a naive drive to find a private place in the sun; they are displaced persons, drifters, eternally homeless. Constitutionally unsuited for life in a "civilized" world of institutions, they are doomed to extinction by the organizations that enforce the law—mob law *or* federal law. According to the assumptions of "The F.B.I.," the desire to live one's own law is a universally seductive fantasy, but the life

of the loner is impossible/illegal. Like it or not, we must adapt ourselves to the law of the organization, or the organization will destroy us.

In contrast to "The F.B.I.," where no quarrels of policy or procedure are allowed to interrupt the efficient application of justice, the organization is itself the battleground in "Police Story" and the later "Hill Street Blues." Like the social melodrama exhaustively analyzed by John Cawelti in *Adventure, Mystery and Romance*, "Police Story" offers the "inside story" of a powerful institution, exposing sometimes "the dirt" but always the personal drama hidden behind the public image. The series fragments the organization into competing power centers in which Vice wars with Homicide for jurisdiction over the murder of a prostitute or pimp. The organization is no longer the monolithic power structure of the F.B.I., but an arena where individuals jockey for prestige and choice assignments, unable to separate their off-duty roles from their professional duties. The "Police Story" concept, pioneered by Joseph Wambaugh, is to mix public and private spheres of life in volatile combination. The *outside* story of investigation on the streets is often only a catalyst to the *inside* story of a primary change in a cop's relations with his fellow officers, his wife, or his conscience.

Violence

The suspense of fiction is based on the delay of actions which the viewer knows are essential to the genre. The viewer's sense of satisfaction is dependent on his or her knowledge of where this story is going. The viewer does not know (or want to know) exactly how the promised scene will be played out but expects a resolution that makes sense within the rules of the genre. The implicit contract in force between the viewer and the television program demands that the viewer will be mildly surprised within the conventions, that this story will both replay and vary previous stories within the same genre. The viewing contract assumes that this particular episode of "Baretta" will be simultaneously new and familiar, that it will renew the genre without violating the viewer's fundamental expectations.

Although the police story, like every genre, is founded on a complex system of promises, the promise of violence is central to its specific climate of expectation. The cop wears a gun. He carries a nightstick. He moves in an atmosphere of violence—threats of violence, violence

forecast and delivered. A fundamental definition of the policeman's role on television is his ability to respond to attacks on his person with an opposed and equal force. Violence is promised—connoted—by the very image of the cop. Yet, violence is "natural" to the genre, not only because the protagonist is an enforcer by profession, but also because his potentially lethal force is activated by the dramatic form in which he works. The cop may be a reluctant killer, essentially reactive in his violence; but his hand is forced by the requirements of melodrama.

In melodrama, as Robert Heilman writes, "one attacks or is attacked; it is always a kind of war." Melodramatic acts, by definition, are pushed to extremes. The conflict is unambiguous, simplified, purified, and typically drives breathlessly to a "just" ending. In tragedy, the protagonist can win while losing, or lose in the winning; but in the polarized world of melodrama, one plays to win everything—or loses one's life in the attempt. Melodrama is a zero-sum game that can only result in defeat or victory. If the police story is the drama of public justice (compared to the private justice of revenge dramas), its plot cannot end with the compromise in which right plea-bargains with wrong. Melodramatic action, once begun, must be pressed to clear-cut conclusions, decisively ended once and for all. Evil will be punished in *this* world, not the hereafter. And there is no ending more uncompromising than the death of one's antagonist. In the police story, justice is indefinitely suspended, the decisive combat postponed, until that final, cathartic scene in which the hero's previous inability to "speak" the definitive reply to the criminal violence is suddenly cured. All barriers that prevented the cop from closing with his antagonist are now cleared away; the plot can now be cleansed of pollution. Desire is, at last, transformed into deed. In this moment of purifying violence, all the frustrations of the hero's plot are focused into a gun barrel, all the delays of justice exploded by a single righteous bullet into the body of the criminal.

One of the satisfactions of fictional experience is the sense of an ending. *Stories* can provide us with the clean conclusions so often denied in the untidy plots of our lives. As Kaminsky argued in *American Film Genres*, in times of cultural instability audiences may prefer the awful clarity of violent resolution in fiction to negotiated, compromised endings that bring peace without victory. Citizens who perceive ubiquitous disrespect for the law, who fear for their property,

their lives, and the morals of their children may more easily identify with the cop who is both the potential victim of criminal violence and the embattled defender of bourgeois morality. The feeling that one is essentially impotent, unable to control the direction of society or improve one's position within that society, may promote an appetite for melodrama. In the melodramatic universe, one can at least come to grips with the antagonist, confront the enemy face to face. Those who fear that the Vietnam experience, the hostage crisis in Iran, the situations in Lebanon and Nicaragua, and other blows to U.S. prestige have signaled national impotence may yearn for the violent moment of truth as an end to the agony of hesitation, indecision. Through an act of violence or the vicarious experience of such an act, a person can become fully committed in body and soul. In violence, *idea is action*. The split between mind and body is suddenly healed. When violence unifies a man (or a society) in a hot rush of single-minded purpose, the emotion one feels is pure, unmixed with doubt. Anthropologists and sports commentators agree that spectacles of ritualized violence (football, boxing, the bullfight, ritual sacrifice) can unite a community of partisan witnesses, can forge the sense of common identity so often lacking in a society composed of individual, frustrated destinies.

Those who wish to purge violence from media fiction should first consider why spectators want to witness violent action and why, if given the choice, they prefer a melodramatic universe to a tragic one. Rather than blindly fearing violence in television, we should understand it as a condensation and displacement of both public and private experience, as both a relief from the irresolution of the live world and a purification of its chaos.

The police story drives inexorably toward a shoot-out on the streets precisely because physical violence resolves conflicts with a clarity that an exchange of words could never achieve. It is said that people "resort" to violence when communication fails, implying that violence is a negation of language. But, as Fiske and Hartley write in *Reading Television*, "violence is only, after all, the continuation of *language by other means*." Violence is still a form of communication. It may be convulsive communication, rooted in the irrational; but human reality is as much emotional as conceptual. In many moments of our lives, we feel words to be inadequate vehicles for the speech of emotions.

Violence does not merely translate, but *transforms* the word into material language. Violence quite literally (physically) *informs* people of one's point of view, if only through the deformation of the antagonist's face. Whether expressed by a fist, a bullet, or a nuclear missile, such drastic forms of information/deformation can resolve conflicts and order the social universe, sometimes more decisively than the speaker intended. "No conflict, no drama," said George Bernard Shaw. Violence is essential to the police story (and to most televised drama) precisely because it condenses abstract conflicts and makes them visible. Fiske and Hartley claim that television violence usually:

> enacts social, rather than personal relations; it takes place between personalized moralities (good *v.* bad, efficient *v.* inefficient, culturally esteemed *v.* culturally deviant) rather than between individual people *per se*. There is perhaps no more economical and visually arresting way of enacting social conflicts which are in essence abstract and located in the mind than by means of an enacted slugging match. . . .

With many other communication theorists, Fiske and Hartley believe that viewing televised violence does not cause violent behavior in "real life" because viewers recognize that the "Police Story" shoot-out is a schematized fictional event, both framed off from reality and heavily conventionalized. They point out that the type of violence encountered on the screen is rarely faced by the individual viewer. "Real" violence normally occurs between two people who know each other well, such as husband and wife. But, with rare exceptions, violence on television comes from another—a stranger outside the bounds of family or friendship. Yet, it is exactly the spectacle of the violent stranger that leads some researchers to worry about the long-term effects of televised violence. Comparison of actual crime statistics with the number of violent crimes on television (in both news and fiction) shows that the world of television is far more violent than the reality most people live. But because television is *part* of the familiar lived world (*lebenswelt*) and because it is consciously or unconsciously regarded as a "witness" to the reality outside the home, viewers tend to see the world in terms of their television experience. Studies directed by George Gerbner indicate that "heavy" viewers of television overestimate their chances of being the victims of violent crimes. Although exposure to TV violence apparently does not cause or trigger violent behavior in

the more or less sane viewer, Gerbner suggests that one result of violent television is an increased *fear* among viewers—a heightened atmosphere of suspicion concerning strangers. Gerbner himself fears that the result of televised violence may be a public demand for an authoritarian "law and order" society, with consequent risks to individual liberties.