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The Garden in the Machine:
The Rhetorical Limits and Possibilities
of Primetime Environmentalism
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of Primetime Environmentalism

by
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I feel very fortunate to have wound up in the Department of Radio-Television-Film at the University of Texas at Austin. I wanted to study the cultural power and joy of story and narrative in the widest and most inclusive sense possible. I found in the RTF department an environment which not only enabled me but expected me to do just that. I realize now more than ever that I worked with and learned from among the very best.

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The Garden in the Machine:
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of Primetime Environmentalism

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Environmentalism has emerged as one of the central scientific, social, political
and cultural concerns over the last twenty years of U.S. history. Perhaps not surprisingly,
American broadcast television has both reflected and shaped the topics of many
environmentalist concerns across a broad range of programming formats. This
dissertation is a critical examination of the particular ways in which the fictional series
of commercial primetime entertainment television -- from the half-hour comedy to the
hour-long melodrama -- have represented contemporary environmentalist discourse. The
dissertation employs the close textual reading practices of neo-formalist, genre and
aesthetic analysis in the context of a cultural studies approach. The sample of
primetime series programming on which the analysis focuses is taken from the 1990-
1991 broadcast television season.
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Environmentalism, Narrative and the Greening of Primetime

Introduction to Section I

Defending an environmentalist (Robert Foxworth), Rosie (Sharon Gless) sees legal system inadequacies.


Trial lawyer Rosie O’Neil walks slowly and thoughtfully before the jury, feeling her way into the final argument in defense of her client. Hers is a difficult argument, one she has been reluctant to make until this moment. She is defending a man who freely admits to the acts which have landed him in this courtroom: breaking into a toxic waste incineration plant and vandalizing it extensively. Her argument to the jury is that they should find him not guilty in spite of his actions. Indeed, she must explain that this environmentalist’s very actions in fact vindicate him.

This is her reasoning: Yes, her client has broken laws, laws designed to protect the property of the waste plant and its right to do business. But in this instance, these are laws which also protect and allow for a direct source of air pollution. By allowing this plant to do business, these are laws which simultaneously allow it to contaminate the area’s ground water. As such, they are outmoded, obsolete laws, superceded in effect by the greater laws and moral imperatives of the environment, of some larger force called Nature. It is to that set of laws that Rosie turns in defense of her client, and to which the jury must turn in finding him innocent. His actions are protected if not in fact endorsed by this second set of laws.

We follow Rosie through a series of standard courtroom shots as she makes this argument -- long shots of Rosie taken from behind and over the shoulders of the jury are...
intercut with close-ups of Rosie, and with reaction shots of the jury, or of the judge, or of Rosie's client. Then, as she builds to her conclusion, Rosie quite abruptly and unexpectedly begins to address not only the jury, but the camera itself. In so doing, she breaks the fictional frame and finishes her plea directly to the viewers of the fictional world from which she speaks. With that move, and in that moment, we viewers become the jury. We are the ones who must decide whether or not to include this newly articulated set of laws in our courtroom, which in that instant becomes our living room, our community, our society. The shot freezes on Rosie's final words, leaving her to stare at us intently. What will our verdict be? The question simply floats before us, as does the image of Rosie/Gless looking directly at us. The image then fades to black, and the episode comes to an end.

The newspaper's description of this episode of *The Trials of Rosie O'Neil* (CBS, 1990-1991) surely misstates the potential power of its storyline. As a divorced, middle-aged lawyer who has left a big-time, big-money practice uptown to be a downtown public defender, "legal system inadequacies" are a fact of life, something that Rosie and her co-workers deal with at every turn and in virtually every episode. At best, the description applies to the overall series itself. No, what Rosie "sees" in this particular episode, in fact, is the bankruptcy of the legal system as it stands in relation to the imperatives of environmentalism. What she finds herself defending is the sort of action against corporate and state property that activist environmental groups such as Earth First! have proposed and carried out for years. And so what the episode offers its viewers is a storyline deeply informed by and, through the narrative strategies inherent to series television, sympathetic to an apparently pro-environmentalist and anti-industrialist perspective.
By the formal standards of network storytelling, this is a significant moment of television. Its direct, even blunt, violation of the classical narrational techniques normally adhered to in episodic drama -- Rosie/Gless turns and addresses her final words directly to the camera/audience -- represents the sort of narrational self-reflexivity that has come to signify "quality television" for many viewers (Feuer 1984, Williams 1994). And its seeming endorsement of what some might label a radical political stance could further a discussion of the increased inclusion of controversial topics in commercial television, particularly in primetime entertainment television (Montgomery 1989). But in terms of the present study, the significance of this episode of The Trials of Rosie O’Neil does not lay solely in its proving to be a unique moment of televisual narrative, but also in its being yet another instance of the messages and themes of environmentalism having worked their way into the massive narrational landscape of commercial television of the early 1990's.

Indeed, after finding examples of environmental messages embedded in everything from half-hour sitcoms and hour-long dramas to movies-of-the-week, one observer claimed that it had "become almost impossible to avoid these messages" in primetime television (Brownstein 1991: 85). "Have you noticed?" writes another. "Many of your favorite television characters have suddenly become devout defenders and protectors of planet Earth."

On ABC's thirtysomething, for example, Hope (Mel Harris) organizes opposition to the building of an incinerator. On NBC's My Two Dads, Joey (Greg Evigan) goes to jail for dumping oil in the toilets of a fuel company that caused an oil spill. CBS's Murphy Brown (Candice Bergen) separates her garbage, and the fold on NBC's Cheers set aside bottles and cans for recycling. Cops and lawyers are seen drinking their coffee out of glass mugs, not styrofoam cups. Various TV moms debate the relative merits of washable diapers versus disposable, non-biodegradable ones. . . . And that's only a tiny part of what's in store. (Hickey 1990: 20-21)
This writer was right; there was much more in store. Since 1990, televi
dramas as varied as the manly action-adventures of MacGyver, the stylish noir-
detective show Shannon's Deal, the late Michael Landon's fantasy vehicle Highway to
Heaven, or the tenacious ensemble law show L.A. Law have featured prominent
environmental themes, characters and plot lines. Illegally dumped toxic waste proves to
be the unknown “murderer” in an episode of Murder, She Wrote. A corrupt politician is
blackmailed by a devious developer with his eyes on legally protected wetlands in
Midnight Caller. Likewise, episodic comedies such as Dinosaurs, Harry and the
Hendersons, and The Simpsons have designed entire episodes around overtly
environmentalist angles such as ozone depletion, deforestation and the dangers of
nuclear waste. And the most overtly-rendered instance of primetime series-based
environmentalism to date was the action-adventure vehicle F.A.R.T.H. Force. F.A.R.T.H.
Force featured what was dubbed a “heroic ecological A-Team” that was assigned
weekly missions to seek out and put to a stop to environmental destruction. While
ultimately short-lived (only the two-hour pilot and three additional hour-long episodes
aired before cancellation), this series remains commercial television’s only attempt to
devote a fictional series entirely to the topic of environmentalism.

But what kind of environmentalism is this primetime televised
environmentalism? Or, for that matter, what kind of television is this primetime
environmentalism? These most general of questions initiated the following study of the
overt inclusion of the discourse of environmentalism into the primetime series of
commercial television. What I explore in this study are the limits and possibilities of the
television series, with its unique formal features of repetition, familiarity, expectation
and variation, as a narrative context for the mass-mediated expression of environmentalist rhetoric.

Of course, commercial television's treatment of environmentalist concerns has not been limited to primetime fictional series. Movies-of-the-week, for instance, have turned a number of environmental issues into tales of environmental conflict. This is particularly true of TBS's television movies, such as Chernobyl: The Final Warning, The Last Elephant and Incident at Dark River. Environmental concerns have been woven into the storylines of daytime serials as well over the past couple of years. This is most particularly true of Days of Our Lives (NBC), but also includes The Bold and the Beautiful as well as Young and the Restless (CBS). Animated eco-heroes not unlike the live-action, primetime E.A.R.T.H. Force gang have found their way into Saturday morning children's animated programming through Captain Planet and the Planeteers (TBS). Outside of the superhero genre, Widget, Tiny Toon Adventures and Tale Spin are among the first-run syndication children's programs which have featured environmental issues in their animated tales.

In addition, non-fictional segments concerned in one way or another with the environment and environmental issues have been appearing on the television landscape with increasing regularity. Children's programming has included such non-fictional work as 50 Simple Things Kids Can Do to Save the Earth (CBS), The Day the Earth Threw Up (Nickelodeon/PBS), Earth to Kids: A Guide to Products for a Healthy Planet (HBO) or the ABC Afterschool Special entitled "A Town's Revenge." Recent music videos have incorporated overt environmentalist themes as well, from artists as varied as The Grateful Dead ("We Can Run"), Raffi ("Evergreen, Everblue"), Little Richard ("Yakety Yak, Take It Back"), Julian Lennon ("Saltwater") and Van Halen ("Right Now").
Non-fictional environmentalist programming aimed at adult audiences includes evening "specials" such as ABC's *A User's Guide to Planet Earth: The American Environment Test*, VH-1's *Ground Zero*, or Turner Broadcasting's *Danger at the Beach, Audobon: Battle for the Great Plains* and *One Child, One Voice*. And there are frequent features and regular spots on the daily/nightly news, daytime talk shows featuring victims of pollution-related illnesses, public service announcements promoting environmental or ecological awareness, commercial products advertised for their "eco-friendly" features, or weekly news and feature series devoted entirely to the issues of environmentalism, such as TBS's *Planet Earth*.

It is true that this is only a partial inventory. And it is also true that even a complete list of this type of environmental programming, fictional or otherwise, would then represent but a fraction of the overall programming flow of what is now for a most viewers a 30-, 40- or 50-channel, 24 hour-a-day medium. But the examples cited here still serve to indicate the extent of U.S. commercial television's appropriation of environmentalist themes, tales and images into its overall rhetoric of telling and selling in the early 1990s. Indeed, environmentalist rhetoric and imagery has so thoroughly permeated the commercial television landscape that a complete listing of its "occurances" is a virtual impossibility in any case. Still, it is this "greening" of commercial television, particularly as it is evidenced by the inclusion of environmentalist rhetoric in primetime comedies and dramatic series, that forms the central concern of this study.

The following chapters explore commercial television's creation of an everyday, popular, normalized environmentalist rhetoric through its primetime, series-based fictions. In so doing, they echo Leo Marx's earlier 1964 study of the gradual
"appearances" of images of technology and rhetorics of an encroaching capitalist industrialism on the pastoral landscape of the literature and the "public mind" of 19th-century America. That work examined the discursive relationship of what Marx called "the machine in the garden." This dissertation proposes to turn the mirror, and to study the increasingly persistent "appearances" of images of ecology and the rhetorics of an encroaching and often anti-industrialist environmentalism on the narrational landscape of late-capitalist America's principal medium: television. It is a study, in that sense, of the discursive relationship of "the garden in the machine."

A driving assumption behind this study is that televisual fictions such as these create distinctive types of environmentalism, because of their overall narrational structure and style as series-based entertainment programming. They differ in significant ways from non-fictional, informational television programming, or from fictional but non-series-based television programming such as movies-of-the-week and mini-series, or from the many other communicative arenas outside of television through which contemporary environmentalist discourse travels. Among the primary purposes of this dissertation, then, is to make these differences apparent and explore the ways in which these differences determine the rhetorical shape of a particular episode's environmentalism. The dissertation adopts an ecologically informed culturalist approach to understanding the environmental messages and entertainments of popular mainstream television. In so doing, it points to and fills an important gap in the ongoing discussions around the place and function of television and the mass media in the social, cultural and legislative politics of contemporary environmentalism.

In this, the first of four sections, the driving questions and assumptions behind this study of primetime environmentalism are established in Chapter One. The terms
and methods of analysis are then layed out and contextualized in Chapters Two and Three.
Chapter One
The Limits and Possibilities of Primetime Environmentalism

Commercial television's willing embrace of environmentalism stems in part from the cultural currency of environmentalism itself. Environmentalism has emerged in the past twenty-five years as a central political, scientific, social, and cultural concern certainly of the industrial and post-industrial nations, but also of the world. It has become a significant movement with a history of social actions and political responses. It has sought and affected change.

In the process, environmentalist discourse has inevitably worked its way through virtually every communication form, and into virtually every cultural formation and social situation, to emerge as one of the central public topics of our day. Feature films, video documentaries, newspapers, magazines, comic books, newsletters, town meetings, schools, churches, barber shops, beauty parlors, and coffee shops all "speak" of environmentalist issues with increased regularity. Acid rain, toxic waste, contaminated groundwater, rainforest destruction, the greenhouse effect, oil spills, holes in atmospheric layers of ozone, the protection of the spotted owl, the anti-growth stance of environmentalists or the heroic actions of Greenpeace activists are among the familiar images and shared tales of an increasingly popular environmentalist discourse.

These tales are often deeply embedded and implicated in other ongoing and conflicted topics of public discussion, such as growth and sustainability, industrialism and post-industrialist economics, and the powerful mythologies of progress, individuality, and freedom. Some environmentalist discourses and narratives point out just how culturally-constructed our understanding of "nature" is, and implicate many of
those constructions as enablers of the destruction of the natural world. In the process, they serve to challenge the Judeo-Christian underpinnings of Western civilization itself.

Of course, it is important to stress that environmentalism is not a single, simple idea, not a unified set of tales. As will be detailed more carefully below, there is not an environmentalist discourse, but rather a number of discourses which, once articulated to varying ideological, political and philosophical positions, circulate, compete and contradict one another from beneath the banner of "environmentalism." Indeed, how else could we account for the poll which suggested that approximately 75% of the U.S. population are willing to claim that banner as theirs (Wald 1990)? But for the moment, the generalizations indicate the extent to which environmentalism is a topic of widespread public concern and discussion, as well as its potential as a catalyst for changes in lifestyle, industrial practices, public health and community issues.

This study of primetime environmentalism stems from a larger interest in understanding the manner in which such a discussion is conducted. The critical study of environmentalism is increasingly coming to include the study of a set of discourse systems "operating through multiple voices across the social scale," in search of meaning itself, and in search of the material and historical grounding necessary to function as social forces, or as agents of change (Condit 1990: 3). As the focus of this study suggests, commercial television's role in the creation and articulation of contemporary environmentalism is of particular significance. For even in the wake of its continuing decentralization and diversification in the post-network era, and in its integration into the promises of an information "superhighway," television remains our "most widely accessed cultural medium," central to the "ways in which public . . . discourse [makes] the crucial transition into the cultural vocabularies of everyday life"
A survey suggests that some 75% of all Americans get the majority of their environmental information from television (Hickey 1990). So it is important to investigate television not as just another outlet, not as just another cultural “voice” among the many in a mass-mediated culture, but rather as a primary conveyor of contemporary environmentalism. No full understanding of contemporary environmentalism can be achieved, that is, without considering the place and function of environmentalist rhetoric on commercial television.

The Perfect Fit?

If television merely reflected its culture -- if it were simply a delivery system that conveyed information from sender to receiver -- then discerning and accounting for its role in the public discussion of environmental issues would be fairly straightforward. We would be free to assume that television's appropriation of environmentalist rhetoric amounts to an extension of a widely shared social concern with the topic of environmentalism, as if this were the medium's hardwired and predictable cultural task. We could assume, that is, that it was somehow inevitable that our culture's central information and storytelling machine would "go green."

This is an assumption that some have made in considering the relationship of television and environmentalism. Longtime television producer Norman Lear, for instance, has suggested that television is the ideal means for communicating the intentions of environmentalism. The "best way" to get audience members to change their lifestyle, Lear suggests, "is to let them see television families conducting themselves in an ecologically sound way. Family behavior on television is going to have a profound effect on how the American public helps solve these crises" (Hickey 1990: [pageref]).
And conversely, environmentalism is cited by some as being an ideal topic for television. Michael Eisner, chairman of Disney, sees environmentalism as "the kind of broad-based topic that television is especially well-equipped to bring to the consciousness of the entire population . . . in all sorts of ways -- from comedy to drama and from news to children's programs" (22). Or Fran McConnell, executive vice president of comedy at Columbia Pictures, sees environmentalism as "one issue that everyone can get involved in. There's no downside to it" (23).

Setting aside for the moment their supporting assumptions concerning the role of television in social change, these comments seem to perceive nothing less than a perfect fit between television and environmentalism. But of course, a perfect fit almost always requires the careful shaping of parts. And representational fits such as those imagined by the likes of Michael Eisner or Fran McConnell are certainly no exception.

In fact it is just as easy to see television and environmentalism as anything but compatible. If we limit our definition of commercial television to that which "is generally created to attract large audiences and sell commercial products" (Brown & Singhal 1990: 268), for instance, then we can say that the television industry is deeply embedded in an economic and social system which depends on continued if not increased patterns of industrial production and consumption. It is obviously in the television industry's best interest, that is, to promote and help to maintain an active, healthy, consumption-based economy which continues to value television as a primary advertising outlet (Ewen 1938, Moyers 1989).

To say that commercial television is implicated in an industrial system based on a continual cycle of production, purchase, use, disposal and replacement is not in and of itself a critical judgment against television. On one level, this statement simply
describes television’s function and its means of existence in a capitalist, commercially supported broadcasting context. And yet the statement does become a critical judgment when put into the context of a certain strain of environmentalist critique that insists on the fundamental need for the world's "developed" industrial and post-industrial economies to significantly alter a great many of these very consumption-heavy patterns. It argues, that is, for a change in the very system on which the industry of television depends not to change.

Again, there are wide differences among environmentalists, particularly on exactly this question of industrial and economic systems needing to change in the interest of ecological balance and recovery. And we should recognize that the interdependent logics of consumer capitalism and commercial television are always based on the ideologies of change, growth, development and progress, and offered up through the continual creation of “the new”: new cars, funnier sitcoms, improved detergents, better news (Kellner 1990, Bennett 1988). But the point remains that in “green television” of the sort that concerns us here, we stand to find a critical discourse of socio-industrial change that has found an apparently happy home in a medium whose interests are ultimately best served, albeit through the illusory and ultimately changeless ideology of change, by questioned but ultimately unchallenged patterns of economic growth, social structures, and a culturally expressed status quo.

Thus there is nothing inevitable or inherently perfect about this fit between environmentalism and the stories of commercial television. There is always more going on in the creation and circulation of televisual tales, or in the circulation of virtually any popular cultural form, for that matter, than the simple reflection of historical moments or the transparent transmission of popular discourses. The communication process,
James Carey (1989) reminds us, must also be understood and analyzed as a ritualized transformation of culture. It is a constant process of negotiation and renegotiation carried on from within specific systems of conventionalized representation. And television is a uniquely determinant socio-cultural force in this process. It is not merely a conveyor but a major player in the "social construction and negotiation of reality [and] the creation of . . . 'public thought'" (Newcomb & Hirsch 47). Therefore green television should be recognized and analyzed as in fact reworking, renegotiating, representing the public discussions of contemporary environmentalism in ways particular to television's demands both as a communications industry and as a signifying system.

We must consider closely the very conventions or rules of this system of representation -- specifically the narrational conventions and strategies through which televigual content takes its expressive form -- if we are to move beyond essentially reflectionist assumptions in recognizing the significance of this greening of primetime. We must look into the particulars and specifics, in other words, of this supposedly "perfect fit." What are the limits of this fit? What environmental issues don't fit so nicely? What are the textual possibilities of these perfect fits? We can begin to get at such questions by simply taking note of which environmentalist "stories" are included in the manifest content of television, and which are not. But beyond this inventory taking, we must consider more closely the narrational contexts and strategies of popular primetime that shape an environmentalism that some see as having "no downside." We therefore ask how exactly it is that green television is representing, renegotiating, re-telling environmentalist discourse. By asking what kind of television "green television" is, we begin to discuss what kind of environmentalism it is as well.
Thus an interest in the limits and possibilities of primetime environmentalism signals a need to attend to questions of both aesthetics and ideology. That this is an ideological process is perhaps the only place in this discussion that we can assert inevitability. For some critics, this process is more usefully understood and described as a hegemonic one in which mainstream television's extensive appropriation of environmentalist discourse is exactly that: a process of ideological appropriation through which the political potential of environmentalist rhetoric is ultimately diverted and contained by late capitalism's favorite means for maintaining a mass-mediated status quo (White 1987). Gitlin (1987) was among the first to point out some of the ways in which this process of diversion and containment is primarily a textual one, borne by the formal and generic elements of televisual storytelling.

But the task of close textual analysis, Thorburn (1987) reminds us, is not "merely to deconstruct or expose the ideological assumptions embedded in television texts, but to explore the range of freedoms permitted the text by the cultural roles and ideological pressures that ultimately, but not in every dimension, confine it" (165; italics his). If our critical interests presume to understand “the way such texts were conceived and experienced by those who created them and by the audiences who consumed them,” we should in fact privilege the aesthetic dimensions of televisual tales in our criticism.

Lacking a systematic history of television programming, much less a body of analysis attempting even the most elementary aesthetic discriminations (as between, say, Gilligan's Island and M*A*S*H; or between The Mod Squad and Police Story or that fine series' culminating refinement, Hill Street Blues), we are unlikely to be instructed by accounts of television purporting to lay bare its ideological substructures, its hidden assumptions about sexual or familial or racial conflict. (163)
Centered around close textual and aesthetic analysis of a representative sample of primetime environmentalism, this study explores the ways in which environmentalist images, issues and ideas are textually entertained, negotiated and offered up by televisual fictions. It considers what the context of series narrative, with its unique features of repetition, familiarity, expectation and variation, "allows" or "disallows" the environmentalist topics or concerns that it includes. Of principal concern, then, are questions of formula, genre, story format and such franchise elements as characterization, plot structure and production style. These primary aesthetic elements of televisual fiction will be further explored and explained in the following chapter.

Most critical studies of the relationship of environmentalism and television (Hornig 1990, Ryan 1991, Dennis 1991, Richard 1993), or of mass media and social movements more generally (Gitlin 1980), have tended to concentrate primarily on news and non-fictional narrative contexts. They have focused, that is, on special events, one-time occurrences, and other non-series television programs. Delli Carpini & Williams (1994) explain this relative lack of critical interest in entertainment or fictional television programming as the result of a fundamental misunderstanding among social scientists, journalists and even the television industry itself as to "what constitutes politically relevant television" (75). The distinction between 'non-fiction' and 'fiction', for instance, "is especially misleading when applied to television. Its unexamined maintenance leads to some fundamental misconceptions about the nature of the medium and its political significance" (76).

But as one environmental essayist recently realized, "You could argue that the Brady Bunch . . . is the really important show to understand -- simply by dint of repetition and familiarity it has won its way into the culture" (McKibben 1992: 15).
Television, that is, need not be remarkable or unique to warrant critical attention. It is, in fact, television's everydayness, its seemingly "natural" relationship with the public spaces it both inhabits and continually represents, that signals what is perhaps most important to know about it as a medium of mass communication.

This suggests the key reason to concentrate the energies of this dissertation on examples of environmentalist discourse that have found their way into the series-based fictions of entertainment television. By looking into the process of single environmental messages or issues being dropped into the established, ongoing narrative universes of serial or episodic primetime programming, we find an environmentalism rhetorically predisposed to "winning its way into culture" in ways specific to the strategies of televisual narrative: through characterization, plot construction, generic tradition, production style, and so forth. It is the task of this dissertation to delineate these strategies as they are deployed in environmental fictions, and to highlight some of the ways in which they "speak" environmentally and work to shape mainstream environmentalist rhetoric and action.

Theoretical Contexts

The questions driving this project merge the critical interests of environmental studies with those of television studies. Very little scholarly work has been done on this relationship to date. As was suggested above, to investigate the rhetorical limits and possibilities of primetime environmentalist programming is to investigate the aesthetic devices and strategies of primetime storytelling. As a way of continuing this "dialogue" between combined interests, and as a means of organizing a brief review of the literatures that contextualizes and supports them, I will first introduce and categorize the
critical positions taken toward television and televisual storytelling from within the literature of environmental studies. What assumptions and beliefs are held among environmentalist activists, philosophers and writers concerning the place of television in the environmentalist movement as an enabler or a retardant of the changes that movement intends? What is television's imagined place in an ecologically-recovered world?

As we will see, these approaches mirror and in some cases extend, a number of related critical positions taken from within television studies. These commonalities will serve to then tie this brief literature review of environmentalist studies to a review of pertinent television and cultural studies literature, with an emphasis placed on the formal and aesthetic features at work in primetime storytelling.

* * *

Like the environmental movement itself, environmentalist literature is hardly a unified collection of shared principles and politics. It embodies and represents instead a multiplicity of voices and a divergence of opinions. This is particularly apparent in the deep ambivalence held in much environmentalist writing toward the place of television, the mass media and technological culture in the processes and politics of ecological recovery. This ambivalence is informed by the degree to which post-industrial consumer society is taken to be "utterly unsustainable" and in need of reconstruction "according to an entirely different socioeconomic logic," or is taken instead to be deeply flawed, yet ultimately reformable from "within the framework of liberal democracy" (Lewis 1992: 2-3). Within this range, then, are two dominant critical
environmental approaches toward television, mass media and technological culture, one of which I will label the "inappropriate and unsustainable" approach, the other the "appropriate and sustainable" approach.

Inappropriate and Unsustainable Television. This first set of approaches is in many ways the most radical, in as much as it holds that virtually all modern forms of technology and mass media are entwined and implicated in the very industrial and economic systems that have brought us to the brink of ecological disaster. This view is based on the firm belief that by holding to our present economic and political systems, we are committing "ecocide," and that the culture as we currently know it and live in it is a "culture of extinction." And so it follows that the technologies which support this ecological suicide and enable this culture of extinction are wholly indefensible and unsustainable, and should be "unmade" (Manes 1990; see also Smith 1990, Glendinning 1990).

While each component of the contemporary mass communications network is implicated in the maintenance of an unsustainable status quo, and so is condemnable as such, television is often singled out as the whipping boy of choice. Consider, for instance, this set of claims made by environmentalist Brian Tokar, Vermont Green Party leader and author of The Green Alternative (1987).

The mass media and all of the cultural signals we internalize while growing up help to create feelings of distress and inadequacy. Television is clearly the source of many of these mass cultural manipulations. No matter what the specific content of television programming may be, protracted viewing breeds restlessness, impatience and a distorted time sense that creates a chronic sense of boredom. (94-95)
To the extent that these mass-mediated "feelings of distress and inadequacy" play into our alienating and destructive detachment from "the natural order," Tokar suggests, the "green alternative" is simply to get rid of those systems of communication altogether in favor of a more localized, orally-based, interpersonal and so more authentic communication experience.

As is often the case in these outright condemnations of television and televisual culture, Jerry Mander's book Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television (1977) is virtually the only source on the relationship of media, culture and society listed in Tokar's bibliography. Indeed, Four Arguments continues to circulate as a sort of "founding voice" for many environmentalists who find television to be a wholly unsustainable medium. Mander's continued currency seems to rest in part on his having spent fifteen years in the belly of the beast as a public relations and advertising executive. "During that time," he writes, "I learned that it is possible to speak through media directly into people's heads and then, like some otherworldly magician, leave images inside that can cause people to do what they might otherwise never have thought to do" (13). The book's overall argument is summarized as follows:

- At first I was amused by this power, then dazzled by it and fascinated with the minutiae of how it worked. Later, I tried to use mass media for what seemed worthwhile purposes, only to find it resistant and limited. I came to the conclusion that like other modern technologies which now surround our lives, advertising, television and most mass media predetermine their own ultimate use and effect. In the end, I became horrified by them, as I observed the aberrations which they inevitably create in the world. (13)

One of Mander's central claims is that television's hypnotic and autocratic power cannot in the end be used for "worthwhile purposes" (such as the dissemination of environmentalist rhetoric and information), because the medium itself, as Marshall
McLuhan would have it, is ultimately the message. And the message of television -- of any and all television, regardless of its content -- is to consume and conform. Of course, the extremity of his solutions, as suggested by the book's title, along with his tendency to depend upon what one critic describes as "anecdotal evidence as well as selected research studies (often unsubstantiated and taken out of context)" (Jensen 1990: 151), may well make Mander's arguments easy to dismiss for some. And yet the obvious influence of his claims and assumptions forces us to take them into account, particularly as we prepare to examine a body of programs that are at least to some degree intended to do exactly the sort of cultural and ideological work that Mander claims is impossible.

Of course, this inappropriate and unsustainable approach is not without its conflicts and contradictions. For instance, at a recent gathering of bioregionalists -- environmentalists who would restructure the state (and national) boundaries of the U.S. and North America into ecologically rather than politically determined and shaped "regions" -- an argument developed over the presence of a video camera at the gathering. Someone in attendance wanted to shoot a documentary of the event for distribution to the local PBS affiliate. Echoing Tokar and Mander, some argued that the making of this video impinged upon the more essential and "authentic" qualities of orality and interpersonal communication. "I would love to go to an event," one participant is quoted as saying, "that existed only in the minds and hearts of the people that were there and the people they talked to" (Media at Gatherings 1992: 3). Another participant remembered the words of a Chippewa environmentalist concerning the ways in which environmentalism is best represented and communicated:

"You have got to pass down to your neighbors and your children the story of this event. But don't write it down. Don't take pictures of it.

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Tell them about it. The story needs to be told person-to-person because that's the only way you know it won't be destroyed." (3)

On the other hand, some perceived the video camera's use as an integration of "high-technology with a new idea of the earth. . . . What we're really discussing here are the terms for that [integration]. What are the terms for integrating this high technology media world with a vision of re-inhabiting the earth?" (3). This question anticipates those more typically asked by the second group of environmentalists to be considered below, those who approach television as an appropriate and even sustainable communication system.

The same claims to authenticity in relation to particular channels or modes of communication -- oral, written, electronic -- were central to the first and founding "action" of the infamous direct action environmentalist group, Earth First! This action, which has come to be known as "the cracking of Glen Canyon Dam," took place in early 1981 during a demonstration of environmentalists who were calling for the dismantling of the 700-foot tall Glen Canyon Dam. A group of five, who included Dave Foreman, Mike Roselle and author Edward Abbey, unfurled a three hundred foot black polyethylene banner along the face of the dam, simulating a huge crack in the dam's superstructure. "It was a simple and graphic gesture," writes environmental historian Christopher Manes (1990), an act "of protest against the destruction of nature by the artifacts of industrial society: a symbolic 'cracking' of Glen Canyon Dam" (6).

This "simple and graphic gesture" was afforded its symbolic, signifying power not simply by the gesture itself, but by the presence of another "artifact of industrial society": the videocamera. "Fortuitously," writes Manes in a footnote to his description of the event, "the incident was videotaped by three students from the University of San
Francisco . . . who had come to interview Abbey" (249). Why was the presence of a video camera "fortuitous"? Because the event could not signify beyond itself without being plugged into a larger and mass-mediated system of signification. The written words and photographs in the newspapers the next day, the images on the broadcast news the next day, all allowed the event "speak" beyond the local historical moment.

Thus for radical environmentalist groups such as Earth First!, for whom the tactics of ecotage seem the best response to the belief "that our culture is lethal to the ecology it depends on" (22), this stance carries with it an in-built contradiction that echoes that of embedding anti-industrialist messages in the pro-industrialist medium of commercial television. Their actions depend more often than not on being filtered through and represented by the very networks of mass communication that those same actions are intended in part to condemn, if that condemnation is to be effectively disseminated and considered by the culture at large as a public issue. The video camera, along with pencils, paper, microphones, tapes recorders and 35mm still film cameras, are necessary evils if local actions are to to be "thought of" or made discursively available on a global scale.

This same clash of theory and practice is echoed in a recent review of Jerry Mander's most recent booklength work entitled In the Absence of the Sacred: The Failure of Technology and the Survival of the Indian Nations (1991). In the Absence of the Sacred ups the ante a bit on Mander's earlier work, Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television, by providing what the book's dust jacket sums up as "a skewering critique of modern technology, in which cars, telephones, computers, banks, biogenetics and television . . . all are shown to be part of a made 'megatechnology' that is destroying the world's resources and robotizing its peoples." The book review I refer
to appears in the "The Way of the Mountain Annual Newsletter," which is written by
one of the foremost proponents of Deep Ecology, Dolores LaChappelle. Appearing in a
section of the newsletter entitled Deep Ecology and Real Communication, and beneath
the boxed, banner-like declaration "The first line of defense is to KNOW THAT THE
ENEMY -- both for us and for the natural world around us -- is Television," the review
encapsulates Mander's basic argument in Absence by suggesting that the effects of our
post-industrial "pursuit of this terrible technocratic dream," a dream being shaped
primarily by a computers and television, are now upon us. "The signs of failure are
already vivid and rampant in the environment, within our social systems, and in our
desperate international behavior" (8). The review ends in this way:

You can easily see why the regular media has been so down on Mander
this past year, calling him all sorts of names. But do remember that he
has spent ten years doing the necessary research and also that through
his work as the director of the Berkeley ecological think tank, the
Elmwood Institute, he has access to information just by picking up the
phone that most of us would need months to track down. You can trust
his facts. (8)

These computer-based telecommunication channels, which "make it possible to
instantaneously move staggering amounts of capital, information and equipment
throughout the world, giving unprecedented power to the largest institutions on earth,"
are apparently the same channels which allow Mander to create and support his
arguments against the same system. By using the information available to him through
the very machine that supports the collective technocratic dream/nightmare, in other
words, Mander is able to "get the facts" which somehow, and for some reason, "we" can
trust.

Of course, the point here is not to condemn the beliefs or actions of radical
environmentalism simply because they contain contradictory impulses (see Lewis 1992

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for that sort of condemnation). But what these examples point to are fundamental questions concerning the relationship of any culture to its system(s) of communication. How does a small-scale, biocentrically defined and located community communicate itself to itself? How are its ideologies and mythologies of cohesion, of truth and power, to exist and to circulate? In what ways will these communities communicate to other communities? What exactly is being foreseen here?

The critiques in this category tend to be generalized at best, and rarely evidence much empirical investigation of what they condemn. One important exception is Bill McKibben's recent work The Age of Missing Information (1992). The Age of Missing Information is a comparison of the experience of watching everything available to him through his 93 station cable television system over a given 24-hour period (with the help of lots of friends and VCRs) to that of spending 24 hours alone in the Adirondack mountains, hiking, swimming, sitting, listening, watching. Unlike Mander, whose technological determinism and reductive McLuhanism keeps him from thinking that content matters much at all, McKibben's interests lay very much in "what is on" television, in what information is imparted in a given moment, hour, day. He spent "many months of 40-hour weeks" viewing all of it. His concerns going into the exercise were with the idea that "an awful lot of people have come to see this 'information ecology' (of the television) as a sort of substitute for the other, older, natural ecology (of the Adirondacks)" (22). These concerns are confirmed.

TV, and the culture it anchors, masks and drowns out the subtle and vital information contact with the real world once provided. There are lessons -- small lessons, enormous lessons, lessons that may be crucial to the planet's persistance as a green and diverse place and also to the happiness of its inhabitants -- that nature teaches and TV can't. Subversive ideas about how much you need, or what comfort is, or beauty, or time, that you can learn from the one great logoless channel and not the hundred noisy ones or even the pay-per-view. (23)
While McKibben, a self-described “TV baby” himself, does not join Mander in arguing for television’s elimination, his vision of our continued co-existence with television is in many ways no less bleak. In television watching, he argues in a more recent article, we are offered “the virtues of premasticated living,” and are taken further into “the age of living vicariously” (McKibben 1994: 55).

This substitution of secondhand experience for actual living may at first seem to be without environmental consequence -- or even, in the calculations of the overly practical, beneficial, since it takes less energy to run a picture tube [showing the comedy Cheers] than it would to get you to a bar. At second look, however, I think that the replacement of your own reality with someone else’s mass-produced version is at the very heart of our Western environmental cataclysm, a cataclysm driven most of all by our endless materialism. We need greater resource efficiency, we need population to be brought under control, but in the West the demon we must exorcise is the one that says: “Hey, I would like the Thighmaster-Buick-4000-square-foot-house-master-of-the-pan-pipes-Bigfoot-pizza.” (55)

McKibben’s argument relies very much on an understanding of television content as information. Indeed, the operative conceit of Age of Missing Information is to approach both his television and his camping spot in the Adirondack mountains as sources of observed information. This equation allows McKibben to avoid some of the essentialist naturalization of orality and “nature” that marks some of the other examples we have considered. When he suggests that the information he has gathered from his day on the lake is fundamental, primary, even “real,” and so privileges it over that available to him through television, he does so from a critical position that still recognizes that such information is enculturated and largely contingent.

This tendency among environmentalists and many social and media critics alike to hold to what Jensen (1990) describes as a media-as-information metaphor might account for the almost exclusive emphasis on news, documentary and non-fictional
programming in the majority of studies done to date on the relationship of mass media and environmentalism. The use of this media metaphor carries with it a particular way of seeing the communicative process. It leads McKibben to pay little attention to what the aesthetic elements of a given program might have been, to what the differences and formal distinctions exist within the seemingly endless flow of television information, and what structuring roles these distinctions may play in the interpretive processes of watching or attending to television. What matters instead is the manifest content, the information, the message that is being passed along, transmitted, or as Carey (1989) might phrase it, transported from sender to receiver, from television to viewer.

The “unsustainable approach” to television and environmentalism is rooted in a number of the same assumptions that drove and supported “the mass culture debate” of the 1950s and 1960s. This debate, Jensen (1984) reminds us,

was conducted by a diverse assortment of intellectuals, brought together by a common subject, but bringing with them divergent political and aesthetic concerns. Their discussion, in retrospect, can be seen as having a dual focus -- the categorization and description of levels of cultural material, and consideration of the effects of commercial on authentic expression and experience (99).

While many of the terms and conclusions of the mass culture debate are inadequate for post-structuralist or other contemporary critical discussions, it would be a mistake to assume that the debate’s originating concerns have been left behind in the process. As Iain Chambers (1990) puts it while considering the place of Herbert Marcuse’s One-Dimensional Man in this debate, “[t]he idea of reality being flattened out and reduced to a single dimension by consumerism, monopoly corporations, and the capitalist mode of production has, like many other radical ideas, today become part of an extensive consensus” (131). Jensen concurs: “The concern of that now dated debate was with the nature and worth of cultural material; its fervor was spent on

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content categorization, but its charges still animate popular debate on mass communication, and it remains crucial to inquiry into contemporary life” (98). I suggest that the contemporary discussion that is environmentalism, as evidenced by the examples used above, is in fact a primary cultural arena in which the issues of the mass culture debate continue to be negotiated and tested in contemporary terms and contexts.

It is the question of whether or not “authentic experience” remains available through the channels of mass mediation that we find asked most regularly in the environmentalist critiques of television, mass media and technologies cited above. These critiques, as we have seen, turn on the presumption of a lost or still unattained state of authentic or ecologically-balanced existence. Likewise, “a common thread among the writers [in the mass culture debate],” Jensen writes, “is a deep concern that something precious, human, vital has been or will be lost in the mass mediation of culture” (100). There was, or could yet be, a “better way” of communicating, whether that better way is to be found in notions of folk and high/elite cultures, or in visions of ecologically-balanced cultures. Both sets of constructs privilege a smaller-scaled, more immediate, more orally- and interpersonally-based, and so ultimately more sustainable system of communication.

Television is identified and critiqued as a primary agent of corruption, disruption or prevention, with its agency located either textually in its celebratory “messages” of consumption and industrialism (McKibben 1992), or technologically in its inherent support of those systems, no matter what their textual intentions may otherwise be (Mander 1974, Postman 1985). This critique is to a large degree predicated on a larger ambivalence toward or rejection of modernity itself, which is
taken to be "a transformation of the meanings by which men [sic] live, a revolution of the structures of consciousness," based on the industrial and post-industrial revolutions (Berger 1973: 2; qtd. in Jensen 1984: 115). "Use of the word authenticity," Chambers (1990) writes,

implies that there exists the possibility of a direct relationship between our actions and our ideas, that the former express something that is essentially immediate and natural. It is against this particular measure of the "truth" that modern culture is found to be wanting, to be fundamentally "false," and therefore "unnatural." Continually mediated by the mass media, commerce, and consumerism, modern culture represents the "inauthentic" world of an indirect and "falsified" existence. (313)

But however central such ideas continue to be in the "unsustainable approach" to television and environmentalism, they remain inherently limited and ultimately unrevealing by diverting attention from the limits and possibilities of the imagined "second world," as Chambers labels it, the world that, "for all its faults and contradictions, is ultimately the contemporary social one that we know. And, when all is said and done, it is in this second world, through and across its everyday textures, that we also come to experience and explain our circumstances" (313). It is a willingness to acknowledge and explore this "second world" that distinguishes the second critical environmental approach to which I now turn.

**Appropriate and Sustainable Television.** Whether by default from within the practices of direct action ecotage, or out of a more moderate approach to the role of television in the sort of change envisioned by environmentalists, the majority of environmentalist rhetoric tends toward a second approach in which a fundamental mistrust of technology is tempered to varying degrees with a support of certain "appropriate
technologies" deemed necessary to enable a change in industrial practices and an ecological recovery (Lewis 1992). Much of this more moderate position on environmentalism, sustainability and technology stems from the development and dissemination of The Whole Earth Review and Co-Evolution Quarterly, beginning the early 1970s. There, Stewart Brand and others were among the first to spot and explore emerging trends and ideas, such as Gregory Bateson’s theoretical explorations of cybernetics and community.

The approach of these and other "techno-environmentalists," as they are sometimes called, has less to do with the overthrow of industrial capitalism than with the gradual correction and reformation of its most environmentally damaging and errant ways. While most seem to agree that technologies are "appropriate" when they are "small of scale, lend themselves to decentralization, emit little pollution, and do not require extensive consumption of natural resources" (117), there remains a great deal of disagreement as to which technologies fit this definition (e.g. Commoner 1990, Rubin 1989, Porritt 1985, Berry 1990). This disagreement does not often extend to television, however, particularly commercial network television, which most find to be the very antipathy of a small-scale, decentralized technology.

When television is included, however, its perceived appropriateness is often a function of the pragmatism that drives the approaches of a good many of these techno-environmentalists, as is suggested here by Lester Brown of the Worldwatch Institute: "The communication industry is the only instrument that has the capacity to educate on the scale needed and in the time available" (Hertsgaard 1989: 47). The imperative of mass education in a limited timeframe would seem to outweigh what Brown may well agree with other environmentalists are the accompanying negatives of television.
Environmental activist and writer Duane Elgin (1989) goes a step further than resigned pragmatism to embrace certain qualities of "electronic communication" as in fact central to the cause of environmentalism, and the effectiveness of environmentalist rhetoric:

Electronic communication can introduce an idea to a hundred million or several billion minds simultaneously. Communication is not, therefore, "just another issue." It is the basis for understanding and responding to all issues. Our choice is simple -- communication or catastrophe. (26)

Here, contrary to the certitudes of Mander and McKibben, it is a matter of getting television to do for a sustainable culture what it seems to do so well for the unsustainable culture of consumption and waste. "The point is not to condemn television advertising and entertainment; rather, it is to acknowledge the need for balance and perspective in our diet of images and information so we can maintain a healthy approach to consumption" (26). The "diet" Elgin proposes includes equal parts of the following:

** "ecologically conscious advertising;"
** "ecologically sound lifestyles and role models" and a "balanced regard for the larger world situation" woven into entertainment programming;
** an expansion of "strong investigative reports and documentaries to awaken public understanding and concern of the challenges facing our planet;" and finally,
** "vigorous development of interactive television" (27).

Elgin's recipe, particularly its designs for entertainment programming, spells out the beliefs and the practices of a group of Hollywood lobbyists known as the Environmental Media Association (EMA). A 1990 press release explains the EMA's work:

EMA is a non-profit organization serving the entertainment community as a clearinghouse for environmental information and expertise. We work with writers, producers, directors and others to encourage the incorporation of environmental themes in television and film. EMA provides a wide range of services, including meetings for writers and
producers with environmental experts, script research and fact verification, access to our environmental resource library, environmental briefings with leading experts on specific issues and a newsletter of environmental information geared specifically to the creative community. (personal copy)

The driving idea behind the group's formation was, writes EMA President Andy Spahn (1990) in the first of his organizations bi-monthly newsletters, "simple but powerful. Through television, film and music, the entertainment industry can reach millions of people with both an important message of concern about our environment and examples of concrete action individuals can take to make a difference" (2).

Not more than a year after the EMA's appearance on the Hollywood scene, Spahn was singing of the group's success in enabling and supporting the entertainment industry's creation of messages of environmental concern. "The response from the entertainment industry has been tremendous. Already shows like thirtysomething, Murphy Brown, Alf, My Two Dads, Cheers, The Golden Girls, A Different World, Life Goes On -- to name just a few -- have raised environmental concerns, sometimes in the form of a few sentences of dialogue and sometimes with full episodes devoted to environmental issues" (2). The following year saw the EMA named recipient of the President's Environment and Conservation Challenge Awards, which are "designed to recognize outstanding individuals, organizations, or groups who have made a substantial contribution to environmental quality" (EMA Update: 2).

In the fall of 1991, the EMA initiated its annual Environmental Media Awards ceremony, which were created, in Spahn's words, "to honor television, film and music video entertainment productions that deal responsibly and effectively with environmental issues," as well as to "inspire members of the creative community to focus their talents on the protection of our environment" ( "Environmental Media..."
The star-studded affair included Robert Redford as keynote speaker and ABC’s Diane Sawyer as the master of ceremonies, and honored programs as varied as NBC’s Shannon’s Deal, Fox’s The Simpsons, and NBC’s long-running daytime drama, Days of Our Lives for their inclusion of environmentalist themes and content.

In the Environmental Media Association we find “true believers” in the power of television to disseminate environmental information through entertainment formats in a manner that will make a difference. The work of Hollywood writer and activist Norman Fleishman serves as further example of this faith in television. Of particular interest is Fleishman’s belief in the quite literal power of story, and the things that go on between the text and the “reader” during “the reading” of a story. "I was around the progressive movement as a child [in the 1950’s]," Fleishman says in an interview. "So I agreed with [Senator Joseph] McCarthy about one thing: that the storytellers were the most powerful people in the world. He went after the [Hollywood film] storytellers . . . because he felt their power" (Atkisson 1989: 22).

Fleishman’s explanation of the power these storytellers possess is based on an understanding of entertainment based on the Latin derivation of the word, “meaning ‘to hold in oneness, to grip in reciprocity.’ It comes from the same background as ‘whole’ and ‘heal,’ ‘a welding into oneness” (22). The power of this oneness exists primarily in the third of three Aristotelian elements of rhetoric that are traditionally associated with oral and interpersonal communication in the contexts of oral cultures.

The first is ‘pathos,’ the emotional appeal, and that doesn't work very well. The second is ‘logos’ -- the logic and facts -- and that doesn’t work well either. The third is all-powerful, and that's the ‘ethos’ -- the character of the speaker, the power of the self. The root of the word ‘ethic’ is the Greek word for character. Character is what is going to change this world, and that's really what's at the heart of entertainment (23).
Given this set of beliefs and aesthetic explanations, there is little surprise that Fleishman privileges the stories of character-based, primetime series-based television. His approach alerts us to the potential affective social power that resides within the structures of a storytelling system such as are found in popular television. It also moves us away from a primarily transmission view of communication, and the reliance on a media-as-information metaphor that informs the claims of those who hold to an unsustainable critical position. Instead, Fleishman suggests an explicit move to a *ritual* view of the communicative processes of mainstream television. The ritual view of communication, as James Carey (1989) defines it, is “not directed toward the extension of messages in space but the maintenance of society in time; not the act of imparting information but the representation of shared beliefs.” We find this view embedded in Fleishman’s distinct descriptions of the relationship “struck up” between reader and text in the process of “entertainment.”

Entertainment is the most powerful form of communication in the world. It throws your defenses to the wind, you’re captured, you’re part of it by definition. You go someplace else and come back, whereas if somebody’s lecturing or giving you facts in a documentary, your mind produces little responses. Somebody pushes, you push back. Entertainment isn’t pushing, it’s attracting -- it takes you inside a new world. (24)

The “space” being theorized by Fleishman -- the imaginative space created somewhere between the formal structures and textual intentions of a televisual fiction and the socio-cultural structures and interpretive moves of that fiction’s “reader” -- is of central importance to this study of environmentalism and fictional television, and to the critical project of television studies from which it stems. In a recent overview of “the field” of television studies, in fact, Newcomb (1994) claims that those questions which have focused specifically on both the ideological limits *and* the possibilities of this
textual and interpretive space have been particularly instrumental in developing a
critical understanding of television as something more than simply a monolithic
ideology machine, "churning out replications of the most oppressive and repressive
aspects of contemporary American society" (10). There has been an expansion, that is,
beyond the claims and ideas that spun out of the mass culture debate of the 1950s and
60s, ideas that we found lingering in the beliefs and assumptions of many
contemporary environmentalists and environmental theorists today. Instead, Newcomb
suggests, the key critical questions of television studies have
come to center on whether or not television [is] so unified in its form
and effects. One way to formulate the problem at this moment is to
grant that the medium (like all others) is varied and conflicted, but to
ask whether or not it is more "open" or "closed," more rigid or flexible
as a form of ideological expression. (10)

Of course, this "moment" in television studies is informed by, and is itself an
extension of, the larger project of cultural studies. Julie D'Acci (1994) extracts the
phrase "struggle over meanings" from the work of Stuart Hall (1982, 1985) and others
(Hall 1980, Fiske 1992) in an attempt to encapsulate the varied inquiries and
discussions that have increasingly fallen under the heading of cultural studies. Included
in this interest in the "struggle over meanings," D'Acci suggests, is "the assumption that
dominant and powerful groups try to 'naturalize' their own specific and vested
meanings into the general understandings of culture at large -- to make them seem like
obvious, agreed-upon 'common sense'" (211).

Here we recognize the question of ideological rigidity or flexibility through the
very influential ideas of Antonio Gramsci (1971), particularly that of cultural hegemony.
But our understanding of hegemony and of the cultural and communcative grounds on
which it is established and mediated has given way to post-structuralist and
postmodernist critical theory. Most deeply influential have been the concepts of power relations, social discourses and formations arising primarily from the work of Michel Foucault. In exploding the very ideal of an autonomous subject that can be ideologically "controlled," this theory has also exploded notions of predictably-located nodes of power and the fixity of meaning itself.

Feminist critic Annette Kuhn (1987), for instance, expresses the essence of this shift through the idea of what she calls "discursive authority."

Representations, contexts, audiences and spectators [may be] seen as a series of interconnected social discourses, certain discourses possessing greater constitutive authority at specific moments than others. Such models permits relative autonomy for the operations of texts, readings and contexts, and also allows for contradictions, oppositional readings and varying degrees of discursive authority" (347; quoted in D'Acci 1994: 212).

Thus critical analysis of the "struggle over meaning" that occurs in the process of meaning-making between text and reader has come to focus on the processes of "negotiation," a notion referring in D'Acci's terms "to the actual jockeyings among individuals and institutions to achieve authority, or at least some place for their own meanings, in a particular discursive field at a specific point in history and culture" (213). The work of critical and cultural studies emphasizes the location and comparative analysis of those multiple sites of negotiation found in institutional, textual and reception or interpretive contexts (Gledhill 1988). Janice Radway's (1984) booklength study of the phenomenon of romance novels, Reading the Romance, and Julie D'Acci's (1994) recent book Defining Women, a careful analysis of the television series Cagney & Lacey, are important examples of critical work which attempts to take all elements of all three sites of negotiation into comparative account.
Unlike Radway's or D'Acci's work, however, the present study explores its stated interest in the imaginative space created between text and reader by concentrating on a single site: the television text. That is, it is primarily an exploration of the aesthetics of primetime storytelling, if we understand the term "aesthetics" in its "descriptive, its cultural, or anthropological dimensions," as Thorburn (1987) does: "The term suggests not a valuing of aesthetic objects but a designation of their chief defining feature -- their membership in a class of cultural experiences understood to be fictional or imaginary, understood to occur in a symbolic, culturally agreed upon imaginative space" (162).

It is in Thorburn's work (1976, 1987), along with that of Newcomb (1976, 1983, 1987), that we find the initial and still pertinent inquiries into the aesthetics of television and the possibilities of meaning inherent in its formal or textual elements. These inquiries are based on analytical and critical approaches deeply informed by the New Critical tradition out of literary studies of close textual analysis, and by Caweltian studies of "the popular." Fiske & Hartley (1978), Gitlin (1987), Hall (1980) and Kellner (1987) are similarly interested in issues of textual form and meaning, and the possibilities therein, though they each operate more from within questions of ideology and hegemony than do either Newcomb or Thorburn. In the process, they manage to shake out some of the lingering monolithic assumptions of the mass culture debate, reposition the popular televisual text as a contradictory site of ideological struggle "worthy" of study, and so enliven the discussion begun by Newcomb and others with overt questions of culture and power.

Newcomb & Hirsch (1983) "respond" to what they take as a tendency in these ideologically based critics to see the television text as ultimately working "to mask or defuse those contradictions and conflicts" (Newcomb 1994: 500), by suggesting ways
in which the television text is, in the main, a relatively open signifying system or "cultural forum," and by proposing research possibilities to test such claims. "The central problem faced by this essay," reflects Newcomb (1994) ten years after its initial publication, "is how we should construct an analytical approach to the contradictions and variations within television" (500). Fiske (1986, 1987), along with Morley (1980), Radway (1984) and Jenkins (1988), have probably done the most to explore the possibilities of open textuality, and to shift the "power" of the imaginative and ideological "space" to the side of the reader. Condit (1989) counters these ideas with a study showing "the rhetorical limits," and so the interpretive limits imposed upon the reader by the text. More recently, Thorburn (1993) has bluntly argued, and Brundson (1990) has more tentatively suggested that there is an importance in evaluative critical work in the aesthetic criticism of television as well.

Of course, this "discussion" is complicated, wide and anything but two-sided. But the supposition held in common between the arguments sketched above and those to be made in this dissertation is that a close formal study of television texts ultimately allows informed judgments as to the possible roles such texts play in the representational politics of society, culture and media. Or, more to the topic at hand, textual analysis will provide carefully rendered, if ultimately speculative and subjectively interpreted, "maps" of the rhetorical possibilities and limits of primetime environmentalism, and the textual intentions which work to determine those limits and possibilities.

The purposes of laying out and exploring the text’s rhetorical intentions are to understand the mechanisms that make possible a oneness with an imaginative text, a characterized entertainment. It is to explore the imaginative, emotional and intellectual
possibilities from within the hegemonic structures of series television. It is to ask what else might be possible in the reader's act of willingly suspending her disbelief, and reading in relative accordance with the rhetorical parameters of the television text besides a presumed ideological alignment with and consequential endorsement of its hegemonic intentions? In the case of comedy, what is possible through laughter, satire and the deconstructive experience of humor? In the case of melodrama, what is possible through emotional and psychological alignment with the protagonist, through pain, suffering, action or joy? What happens to environmentalism when it is experienced not simply through, but from within these narrative environments?

Methods and Intentions

Methodologically, this study relies most heavily on the close formal and aesthetic analysis of a body of television texts. The tradition of close textual analysis is traceable in a general sense to the New Critical tradition of literary analysis, and to the neo-formalist traditions of Film and Television Studies. My understanding and application of these traditions are deeply informed by the scholarship of film and television historian Thomas Schatz (1981, 1987). This is particularly the case in Chapter Two, which incorporates, to a large extent, Schatz's approaches to the "narrative strategies" of television series, as well as in the analytical chapters of Sections II and III, where I apply those approaches to my sample of environmentalist fictions. The literature review has already betrayed the fact that my methods and approaches are also heavily influenced by what I still understand to be the ground breaking work of Horace Newcomb. This is perhaps most apparent in the analytical chapters of Section II and
Section III below, particularly to any reader familiar with Newcomb's first book *TV: The Most Popular Art*.

Two recent critical studies, one of the public rhetoric of abortion by Celeste Michelle Condit (1990), the other of the televised representations of AIDS in the 1980s by Rodney Buxton (1992), have offered important methodological and stylistic approaches to this study as well. In *Decoding Abortion Rhetoric*, Condit looks at various historical moments and cultural arenas during and through which abortion rhetoric was *made public*, and so made into a determining force in abortion politics. One of the arenas Condit considers is that of primetime television, in which she finds the incorporation of abortion rhetoric and issues into the stories of several series.

I am expanding on what she explores and discovers in that chapter by using a far more extensive critical model of the formal and narrational elements of series television. This model, which is outlined and explained more at length in Chapter Two, is based on that used by Rodney Buxton's (1992) in his as yet unpublished doctoral dissertation, *Broadcast Formats, Fictional Narratives and Controversy: Network Television's Depiction of AIDS, 1983-1991*. Buxton's study is an exhaustive investigation into precisely what the title promises. In Buxton's view, network television proved not only to be the first, but ultimately the most progressive of the popular media of the day to bring the topic of AIDS into the public arena. My study of network television's depiction of environmentalist issues owes a great deal to Buxton's study, particularly to its understanding of the narrative strategies of series television (indeed, it is not accident that Buxton also studied with Schatz). His is a model of analysis which breaks television narrative down into four primary areas: production techniques,
programming formats (comedy vs. melodrama), story formula/genre, and franchise elements (narrative formats, narrative agency, character type, and so forth).

These possibilities and limits -- both of the theoretically perceived and discussed juncture between text and interpretation, and of the critical approach of textual analysis itself -- will be explored through the close analysis of a body of programming from the 1990-91 network television season. This sample of series television includes nine episodes from the following hour-long dramatic series:

- Against the Law (FOX)
- 21 Jump Street (first-run syndication)
- MacGyver (ABC)
- Northern Exposure (CBS)
- thirtysomething (ABC)
- Shannon's Deal (NBC)
- Guns of Paradise (CBS)
- In the Heat of the Night (NBC)
- E.A.R.T.H. Force (CBS)

In addition to the dramatic series, the sample also includes episodes from seven half-hour comedy series:

- Major Dad (CBS)
- The Simpsons (FOX)
- Harry and the Hendersons (first-run syndication)
- Dream On (HBO)
- Murphy Brown (CBS)
- Night Court (NBC)
- A Different World (NBC)

This sample of primetime environmentalism was acquired through the Environmental Media Association, the group of environmentalist lobbyists discussed briefly above. Each of the episodes represented here was submitted by the series producers to the Environmental Media Association as part of that organization's Annual Environmental Media Awards ceremony. "The Environmental Media Awards," explains
one EMA press release, “were created to honor television, film and music video entertainment productions that deal responsibly and effectively with environmental issues.”

The nine dramas and seven comedies represented in this sample do not represent the total number of series submitted to the EMA for that year’s Environmental Media Awards. Nor do they represent the entire season’s fictional foray into environmental matters. Instead, they simply represent the number of programs that the kind people at the EMA were willing to lend out to a pesky academic. I therefore make no claims as to the statistical quality or generalizability of this sample of television. The sample's usefulness is found instead in both the range of environmentalist rhetoric and topics it includes as well as the range of generic, formulaic, format and franchise elements it offers up for analysis and discussion. Each episode offers a unique cross section of franchise and formula elements; indeed, while the “choices” were, in effect, made for me, I could not have asked for a better range of narrative type and style. My study must and will, therefore, concern itself more with possibility than with probability.

This study is divided into four sections. Section I, of which the present chapter is the first of three, introduces the driving questions, assumptions and methodological contexts of the overall study. Chapter Two explores in detail the formal elements and strategies of series-based televisual storytelling, and in so doing, lays out the terms of formal analysis that are applied in the analytical chapters of Sections II and III. Chapter Three briefly reviews the history of 20th-century U.S. environmentalism as a means of establishing the discursive nature of environmentalism as a conflicted and multi-layered set of ideas, arguments, laws, actions and philosophies.
In Section II, the study then turns to close analysis and discussion of the half-hour comedies included in the sample of primetime environmental programming. Chapter Four begins this section of the study by considering in a general sense the place of "serious" topics such as environmentalism in the narrative context of televisual comedies. The following two chapters then explore the specific examples of "comic environmentalism." Chapter Five focuses on the dominant comic form in the sample, and arguably in primetime television today, the ensemble workplace comedy. Chapter Six then details the place of environmentalist rhetoric in three more situation comedy formulas, magicoms, dramedies and anti-sitcoms, which will be introduced and described at the top of that chapter.

Following much the same pattern as Section II, Section III then shifts the focus of the study to the nine episodes of melodramatic series television included in the sample. Beyond an introduction which lays the initial groundwork by very briefly reviewing some of the storytelling possibilities inherent in the melodramatic form, Section III consists of four chapters, Chapters Seven through Ten. Each chapter explores specific examples of "embodied environmentalism" according to genre or storytype: Chapter Seven focuses on the action-adventure genre, Chapter Eight on the law-and-order structures of cop shows and westerns, Chapter Nine on lawyer shows, and finally Chapter Ten considers the place of environmentalism in serial-ensemble dramas.

Section IV consists of a single final chapter, Chapter Eleven, which concludes the study by reviewing the questions explored and the answers posed in the analytical chapters of Sections II and III. This final chapter considers what we might call the methodological limits of aesthetic criticism such as is done in this study, limits that are highlighted in many ways by the state of commercial televsual storytelling in a post-
network environment. As the industry shifts, in what ways has the signifying system known as television shifted, too? And how should these shifts determine the analytical approaches we bring to them?
As indicated in Chapter One, the methods and intentions of this study center on the close textual analysis of a body of primetime fictions that directly incorporate environmentalist issues and discourses into their pre-established and regulated narrative universes. Specifically the focus is on the imaginative space that is structured from within the narrative strategies and intentions of the televisual text, and made meaningful through the interpretive process of viewer engagement with that text. In short, we are investigating what is involved in the process of “buying into” the textual or formal “franchise” of a given series, and what is made ideologically possible or experientially available through that “purchase”?

This central question is clearly tied to David Thorburn’s (1987) arguments for the centrality of aesthetic approaches in the analysis of popular television, particularly its primetime series-based fictions.

Because television fiction is a body of drama or narrative that relies on conventions of characterization, plotting, and, especially, of genre and that employs strategies of editing and camera movement drawn from our culture’s 80-year saturation in forms of visual storytelling, a scholarship oblivious or insensitive to these aesthetic ground features of the medium will be radically enfeebled. (163)

Indeed, Thorburn suggests, aesthetic perspectives are “necessary for the basic work of historical and cultural interpretation” (163). There is more to be explored in relation to the larger discussion of television studies concerning the imaginative, cultural and political process of watching and interpreting televisual texts. Certainly “aesthetic
methods of interpretation -- an attentiveness to tone, to plot and character, to visual strategies" (165), or to such "literary" elements as nuance and variation, or thematic associations appended to particular actors, or formal excellence (163) have a real place in that discussion.

Were we analyzing the textual structures of music, we might find the equivalent claims and concerns in such aesthetic concepts as *inflection, articulation, beat, drive, texture or timbre*. Ethnomusicologist Charles Keil (1994), for instance, has theorized the imaginative space that is created between musical text and listener. One of Keil’s central concepts is what he calls music’s "participatory discrepancies," by which he means the ways in which a musical text might, through its highly structured syntax, "invite" the interpreter/listener to *participate in* its textual structures.

All humans were participants once upon a time, but I believe we still experience much music and perhaps some other portions of reality this way. . . . If you can participate once, in one song, dance, poem, rite, you can do it more times and in more ways until you are at “at one” with the entire universe, or some very large chunks of it. The social moments where I get these “oneness” and “urge-to-merge” feelings most forcefully are when I’m dancing at polka parties, or salsa parties, or swept up in a black church service, or when making music. Trying to conceptualize or explain these euphoric feelings of “polka happiness” or “blues mellowness,” a theory and rhetoric of participation helps keep the good feelings alive. Positivism and Marxism (with its language of negation, contradiction, alienation, commodification, reification, mediation, etc.) tend to reify our problems still further, as they name and describe them, whereas the language of participation offers hope. (97-98)

Essential to this “rhetoric of participation,” and so to the hope that presumably results from it, is the idea of discrepancy. “Discrepant is as good a term as I’ve been able to find,” writes Keil,

for the phenomena to make music a peculiarly powerful vehicle for participatory consciousness and action: ‘not consistent or matching; disagreeing . . . from Latin . . . discrepant: to sound different, vary; dis-apart plus crepare, to rattle, sound” (American Heritage Dictionary 1969). It is the little discrepancies within a jazz drummer’s beat,
between bass and drums, between rhythm section and soloists, that create "swing" and invite us to participate. (98)

I am interested in the same occurrences, the same potentials for participation, the same discrepancies that may well be available both from within and between the formulas and structures of primetime series narrative. Rock music plays from my stereo speakers in formulaic 4/4 time. My participation in that formula is invited from within the text by those four beats per measure, but realized and embodied through the discrepancies that exist, and that I "interpret" from between the beats: the pleasure of the groove. Situation comedies play from my television in formulaic half-hours, episodically-structured, serially-predictable. Is my participation in that formula likewise invited from within by these structural elements, but given embodied meaning through my attendance to and participation in the variance, the play on formula, the discrepancies of episode in relation to series, and so forth?

In Keil's ideas are reflected another claim of Thorburn's that I take to be mine as well: "[W]e must be able to read these texts in something of the way the audience experiences them" (165). Exactly how to do this remains, of course, a central epistemological question of contemporary cultural studies, particularly as it involves forming aesthetic judgments of popular cultural texts such as television through close, literary or formal analysis. Anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1984) puts its simply: "How is anthropological knowledge of the way natives think, feel, and perceive possible?" (123). Geertz explores the answer to this question in the interplay between two concepts: "experience-near" and "experience-distant."

An experience-near concept is, roughly, one which someone -- a patient, a subject, in our case an informant -- might himself naturally and effortlessly use to define what he or his fellows see, feel, think,
imagine, and so on, and which he would readily understand when similarly applied by others. An experience-distant concept is one which specialists of one sort or another -- an analyst, an experimenter, an ethnographer, even a priest or an ideologist -- employ to forward their scientific, philosophical, or practical aims. “Love” is an experience-near concept, “object cathexis” is an experience-distant one. “Social stratification,” or perhaps for most peoples in the world even “religion” (and certainly “religious system”), are experience-distant; “caste” or “nirvana” are experience-near, at least for Hindus and Buddhists. (124)

When we analyze and draw meaning from (which is to say assign critical meaning to) an aesthetic object such as a television series, there “exists a gap,” Thorburn (1987) suggests, “between our contemporary mediated experience of such texts and the actuality of their originating embodiments before audiences who regarded them as objects of use and leisure, no more valuable or artistic or historically instructive than the jokes or conversations and social encounters that comprised the ordinary blurred continuity of their daily lives” (161-62).

When closely reading an episode of Murphy Brown, for instance, I am attempting to construct an anthropological knowledge of sorts, a picture of the constructed relationship between viewer and text. That is, I am applying the experience-distant concepts of the critical analyst to read that episode’s textual structures closely, in order to construct and posit an interpretation like that experienced “naturally and effortlessly,” in experience-near terms by a “native” viewer. Except that I am my own “native” in this instance. I am dredging up from the “ordinary blurred continuity of my everyday life” my inside, first-person, phenomenological, cognitive, emic engagement with Murphy Brown, and trying to represent it from an outside, third-person, objectivist, behavioral, etic position or perspective (Geertz 124).

What I am able to say, and more importantly, what I presume to know or to have learned from this “autoethnography” (Fiske 1994), is evidenced in the chapters of
Sections II and III below. What remains to do in this chapter in the meantime is to lay out the formal structures -- the codes, conventions, story types, and franchise elements -- that give shape and intention to the texts included in my sample. Following Condit's (1989) cue, we recognize structural "limits to polysemy," identifiable, predictable, indeed, institutionally-required limits that we can (and should) assume are in place in any communicative moment, certainly when that moment is embedded within a popular mass communicative system such as that with which we are concerned here. "The audience's variability," she writes, "is a consequence of the fact that humans, in their inherent character as audiences, are inevitably situated in a communication system, of which they are a part, and hence have some influence within, but by which they are also influenced" (120). With this in mind, then, we explore with some claim to authority the range of rhetorical possibilities for environmentalist and anti-industrialist ideas to be "made present," in Condit's terms, on the landscape of popular television narrative (119).

*Playing the Tension, Finding the Balance*

Series television is a confluence of structures held in simultaneous relation through both tension and balance. Paraphrasing Michelle Hilmes (1990), for instance, Betsy Williams (1994) points to a constant tension in the very production of television programming, and in our critical understanding of that programming: should we see the weekly series being churned out as commodity production, or aesthetic or textual production? What are the implications of the question? (142). Kathryn Montgomery (1989) explores the balance that must be struck again and again between the television industry, audiences, special interest groups, advertisers and the FCC. It is a balance which, in her view, does a disservice to the concepts of public good and diversity in
programming, as it leaves no clearly discernable argument to be made in any program (219). This same set of balances and tensions, essential to the creation of commercial television, is seen by others to in fact both enable and insure its polysemous qualities as an aesthetic object, and thus its widespread popularity as a commodified product (Fiske 1986, D'Acci 1994).

The interplay of tension and balance is central to the interpretive moves of participation suggested by Keil as well. In televisual series narrative, this interplay of balance and tension is usefully located in the following four textual features: (a) the rhetorical functions of comic and dramatic programming formats; (b) the long- and short-term demands of narrative formats; (c) the variations possible both within narrative agency and character function; and finally, (d) the production processes and techniques used in the actual creation of the series itself.

Programming Formats. The analytical sections of this study that follow this one are organized according to commercial broadcast television's two most distinctive and proven fictional programming formats: half-hour comedy series on one hand, and hour-long melodramatic series on the other. As we will see, these very broad categories must be quickly subdivided if they are to remain useful. For instance, melodramatic series are usefully subdivided into those that are action-based -- externalized conflicts drive the narrative, which is resolved primarily through the action of the protagonist(s) -- and those that are more character-based -- internalized personal and interpersonal conflicts drive the narrative, which is resolved through the emotional or psychological "actions" of the protagonist(s).
But as with virtually all categorizations of this sort, the given qualities of each of these formats, and the distinctions between them, are naturalized and sustained through the unquestioned assumptions of industry, critics and audience alike. One such assumption holds that "serious" subject matter is best handled or contained by dramatic story structures, and that, conversely, comedic story structures are best designed for the entertainment of lighter, less politically or socially significant cultural concerns. The work of Alvey (1985), Magoc (1991), Newcomb & Hirsch (1983), Cripps (1985), Gitlin (1983, 1987), Kellner (1987) and many others suggests that there are many ways in which this has never been the case in actual practice, and that in fact comedic forms have done as much ideological work in "dealing" with "serious" socio-cultural issues as have dramatic forms. Of course, this is not to say that it has done so overtly; indeed, the point many of these critics make is that situation comedies, for instance, have done a particular type of ideological work in part because they are positioned and received as "merely" comedies, meant only for entertainment, and not for anything serious. Are we merely “having fun” with environmentalism when we laugh at the three-eyed mutated fish that Bart Simpson fishes out of the river downstream from the neighborhood nuclear plant? Or are there ways of laughing, types of laughter, forms of humor which work to determine the ideological nature of this environmentalist “joke”? The answer is yes to both questions. We are “just having fun,” but of a particular kind. Humor matters. But this puts us too soon into the concerns of Section II. The point here is simply to indicate that while they are the broadest of organizational categories to be used in this dissertation, the labels comedy and drama are nevertheless constructed and variable, and will be recognized and analyzed as such.
Narrative Franchises. Perhaps more important to the interpretive experience and textual intentions of primetime series narrative are the structuring elements of the "series franchise" -- most particularly the elements of genre, narrative format, narrative agency, character function and production techniques -- which "converge to give [individual television series] a unique inflection within the parameters of a programming format" (Buxton 1992: 30). These elements, along with a "hierarchy of identification" with the series characters, are the means by which "to navigate" content and viewpoints through television narrative (73). The active claim here is that both the narrative formats and the franchise elements shape the textuality and so work to determine (though never ultimately to insure) the viewer's interpretation or "reading" of topical "discussions" within television fictions. Buxton offers a useful example of this type of what we might call "textual predetermination:"

For example, a regular viewer of Roseanne, when watching the show on Tuesday evenings, expects to see a humorous examination of problems facing a working-class American family, usually through the perspective of wife and mother Roseanne Conner. In addition, a regular viewer can expect situations from previous episodes to reappear since the series has an ongoing memory of prior events. Because Roseanne is shot proscenium-style, it depends on interior sets depicting the Conner household, thus reinforcing the domestic themes of the series. Few viewers would expect an extended car chase in Roseanne because the franchise does not include the use of either action/adventure themes or location shooting. For series programming generally, the franchise forms the basis for viewer expectations about television programming. (76-77)

Beyond the facilitation of viewer expectations in relation to a given series, franchise elements "also have an impact on the range and direction of any discussion about topical material . . . that might be included" in the content of that same series (77). For instance, in considering the inclusion of the topic of AIDS in the half-hour
comedies *Designing Women* and *A Different World*, Buxton claims that each series evokes different discussions about AIDS given their franchise contexts. The former (*Designing Women*), which centers on white, middle-aged professional women, developed a narrative around a gay colleague in the interior design business. The latter series (*A Different World*), focusing on Black, college students, addressed the impact of HIV infection on the Black community and teenage sexuality. Given the different contexts, different kinds of issues concerning AIDS were addressed that coincided more efficiently with their narrative environments. (31)

The same claims might also be made of an hour-long action adventure series such as *MacGyver*, which unlike many other hour-long episodic dramas of the late-1980s, included very little discussion of AIDS.

Since the predominant construction of AIDS in American society has been that of a gay disease, any positive discussion of gay men challenges heterosexual male privilege that forms the foundation of a series such as *MacGyver*, a macho action/adventure series. To suggest that AIDS could be transmitted through the actions of the heterosexual hero would undermine the very ideals of sexual potency and conquest that a character such as MacGyver embodies. (77)

For many of the same reasons having to do with franchise and format, *MacGyver* has been recognized at the same time as being among the most “environmentally concerned” of primetime dramas in the early 1990s (EMA Update 1991). Of course, environmentalism and AIDS are themselves distinctly different social issues that emerge from and circulate through distinctly different discursive formations and social narratives. As such, they come discursively “marked” with unique “requirements” for inclusion in mainstream broadcast television of any sort.

We will think about the discursive nature of environmentalist discourse at more length in the following chapter. In this chapter, our focus remains more with the shape and intentions of the container. As Buxton has shown was the case with televisual
representations of AIDS, and as the present study will show in relation to representations of environmentalism, television's treatment of any topic is tied directly to the narrative franchise elements of its series. The same franchise elements of MacGyver that make AIDS a difficult topic to incorporate, that is, make environmentalism a preferred topic. It is therefore essential to delineate those elements held in common by all series television narrative, that we might then distinguish and discuss the differences.

Narrative Format: Plotlines, Closure and the Three-Act Structure. The antecedent cultural forms from which primetime television found much of its narrational voice and shape -- radio, theater and narrative cinema -- all share the dominant classical narrative form of Western storytelling (Barnouw 1982). Bordwell (1985), Bordwell and Thompson (1990), Schatz (1981) and others have carefully delineated this form in their studies of Hollywood cinema. Central to this classical narration is its three-act structure. "Dramatic composition," writes Linda Seger (1987), with a pragmatic ethnocentrism typical of scriptwriting consultants and instructors, "almost from the beginning of drama, has tended toward the three-act structure. Whether it's a Greek tragedy, a five-act Shakespearean play, a four-act dramatic series, or a seven-act movie-of-the-week, we still see the basic three-act structure: beginning, middle, and end -- or set-up, development, and resolution" (4). This dominant narrative paradigm is fundamentally structured and identified through its reliance on a logic of causality, which is realized through a cause-and-effect chain or structure of events. Schatz (1984) turns to the words of another screenwriter, Wells Root, to explore the ways in which this Aristotelian/Western paradigm is a character-driven construct.
In developing character and conflict the writer should take care to define not only the capacities and goals of the protagonist (and antagonist) but also should indicate what is at stake for the characters—that is, what they have to lose should the problem or crisis not be resolved satisfactorily. Act I, as Aristotle suggested, should present expository information that creates characters and a virtual world “according to the laws of probability and necessity.” The conflicts generated in Act I should intensify through Act II and reach a point of climactic confrontation in Act III. The climax and the accompanying “Unravelling or Denoument” completes the narrative providing a sense of closure for the story. (48)

But there is an essential distinction to be drawn and understood between classical narration as it is practiced by mainstream narrative cinema and the narrational strategies of primetime series on television: series rely on a series-based narrative system. Televisual primetime fictions such as those to be analyzed and discussed in Sections II and III below are created, produced, broadcast and received in a series of regular weekly intervals. Such fictions carry, therefore, a number of narrational requirements related to yet distinct from the narrational requirements of the discreet, self-contained storyforms of the classical narration of mainstream Hollywood cinema.

The formal nature of series-based narrative insists upon repetition and regularity, both of which are signaled in part by "regular" or recurring characters operating within a set of established rules and in the same or similar setting each installment or episode of the series. In this we see immediately that the classically-determined expositional requirements (Act I) of televisual series narrative, for instance, are altered according to the specifics of the medium. As we already know the "primary characters and their relationships to each other," and we are already familiar with "the setting," each episode of a given series need not spend the sort of time doing the establishing work that is required of discreet texts such as theatrically-released films, or television movies-of-the-week.

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We might say that there are always two expositional lines being either referenced or created within each instance or episode of series-based fiction. One expositional line, which we might say is operating on an *episodic level*, is introduced and developed at the start of the episode itself. What is this week's problem? Where is the problem occurring? What set of characters, be they recurring characters or characters new to the narrative world of this series, does this problem involve?

Some of this episodic expositional line will simply reintroduce or reference characters and contexts which are established and recognized regularly within the series of episodes. In this way, the expositional concerns of Act I are maintained and operate on what we might call the *series level*. Of course, this series level is "a place" that exists primarily within the memories of the regular viewers and the writers/creators, and only tangentially within the televisual texts themselves (through backstory, flashbacks, references and other such devices). The more familiar we are with the series -- the more episodes we watch and remember, that is -- then the more expositional factors we already know, and so bring with us to particular episodes. The narrative may, and typically does, then assume such knowledge on the part of the viewer and shape itself accordingly. One result of this is that the "intensification and complication of narrative conflicts" -- the requirements of Act II to throw up some barriers to the protagonist's goal-driven agenda as a means of creating conflict -- can be introduced more quickly and efficiently in series-based televisual narrative.

Of course, this is a very large generalization, one which is easily challenged or complicated by the specifics of a particular story type or genre of an individual television series. The generic logic and formal conventions of the action-adventure genre, for instance, tend to take the series hero or heroic team to different locales and
present them with different situations each episode. This is certainly the case with MacGyver and E.A.R.T.H. Force, the two action-adventures that are included in our sample, and to which we will turn in more detail in Chapter Seven. This generic convention demands renewed attention from both creator and viewer to certain expositional details specific to that episode, details having to do, for instance, with establishment of setting and the introduction of conflict. A cop show like In the Heat of the Night, on the other hand, which is regularly set in the station and in the homes of the regular ensemble of recurring characters, has a different set of expositional factors with which to concern itself from episode to episode. Likewise, the very essence of domesticated workplace comedies such as Murphy Brown, Cheers or Home Improvement depends absolutely on the episodic regularity of setting, the predictability of recurring character interrelations, and the quick introduction of "the basis for narrative conflicts" or the situations around which each episodic conflict and the resulting comedy will revolve.

It is around the requirements of a classically-rendered plotline's Act III, and the ways in which those requirements are met, challenged or altered by series-based narrative, that we begin to make distinctions that ultimately help to typify and distinguish among televisual narrative formats. A number of television storytypes -- perhaps the majority, in fact -- whether action-adventures, Westerns, domestic comedies, mysteries, dramedies or cop shows, honor the paradigmatic rules of Act III by setting up an inevitable climax, presenting the climax, and then resolving the problem, the situation, or the conflicts which originally disrupted the narrative world. That is, they bring the plotlines that have been introduced within an episode to an internal, logical point of closure. In so doing, they return the narrative -- the constellation of
characters and the rules and circumstances of their narrative universe -- back to the series-based stability or equilibrium with which they started the episode, and with which they will start the next week's episode, *ad infinitum*. It is this type of narrative line that we call episodic. The concerns of the week are dealt with that week.

But there are a number of series whose plotlines do not "obey" this classically-modeled rule of closure, but tend instead toward reconstitution of narrative conflict and the infinite expansion of potential plotlines. This type of narrative line we recognize as being serialized. While it, too, is a series-based narrative, its use of ongoing storylines -- storylines which seem to remain forever caught in their Second Act -- make it a serial narrative. Of course, this too varies with the demands and intentions of each series. The definitive serial narrative is that of the daytime melodrama, or soap opera, such as *The Guiding Light* or *The Young and the Restless*. The earliest precedent for this type of narrative format finding its way into primetime programming is the 1960's weekly melodrama *Peyton Place* (ABC, 1964-1969). But it was the hugely successful nighttime serial *Dallas* (CBS, 1978-1991) which carved a definitive place in primetime for this narrative format.

Episodic closure and serialized openendedness are two points of reference that the majority of television series work to exploit and find some balance between. There are relative advantages and disadvantages to each that are tied to both the industrial imperatives and the signifying practices of broadcast television. The continuum between episodic narrative lines and serial narrative lines might be signified in this way:

```
episodic                          serial
self-contained                    infinite narrative expansion
return to equilibrium             reconstituted conflicts
modified three-act structure     ongoing second act
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Using this continuum, we are able to quickly list the variations or balances that might be found along it. **Arcing plot lines**, for instance, are those plotlines which run through the course of several episodes before reaching narrative closure. The arcing plot line ignores, in a sense, the boundaries imposed upon it by the arbitrary half-hour or one-hour of time allotted within a single episode. What distinguishes arcing narrative lines from fully serialized narrative lines is the fact that they do eventually observe the classically-required rule of closure. The police drama *Wiseguy* (CBS, 1987-1990) is regularly cited as a show which used the arcing narrative in a careful and effective manner. The death of the regular ensemble series character Gary formed the center of what became a multiple-episode arcing narrative line for regular viewers of *thirtysomething* (ABC, 1987-1991). *Hill Street Blues* (NBC, 1981-1987) was noted in part for its inclusion of story lines which ran over the course of several episodes before being brought to closure, or simply left to dangle as ultimately uncloseable (i.e., unsolveable crimes) (Gitlin 1983).

With series such as *Hill Street Blues* and *thirtysomething*, we must expand the discussion to include the place and function of **multiple storylines** within a single episode of a given series, with each following or varying from the classically-defined three-act structure. This in turn gets us into complicated issues indeed, not simply in terms of story production and maintenance, but in terms of viewer engagement with the plotlines, with the story, with the text. These are complications which arise in part from attempting to write generally about what is perhaps best analyzed and understood by studying particular examples and specific cases, as we will do in the chapters to follow.
**Narrative Agency.** We know from those who have analyzed and described in detail the classical mode of narration that the narrative line itself, and its literal construction as a chain of cause-and-effect events, is a function of human agency and goal-oriented motivation, both of which are embedded in the personality traits and actions of characters. It is the character, that is, which drives the narrative. Or more precisely, it is through the establishment of a character's goals and the setting of agendas through which those goals might be achieved, that the causal chain of events finds structure and is enacted in the classical narrative. Thus, in determining the rhetorical strategy of a given narrative line, it is important to analyze the type of characters that are assigned particular topical duties, or that are embued with a particular ideological or motivation. There are three facets of character construction and behavior in series narratives that are important to identify and define: character development, character regularity and character constellation.

**Character development.** As is the case with virtually all of the separate narrational elements concerning us here, the idea of character development in series narrative is very much tied up in the same questions concerning narrative formats: to what degree does the series structure its plotlines on episodic grounds, and to what degree does it play into more of a serialized structure? As these questions suggest, character development ranges from a static, relatively two-dimensional, and essentially predictable character to an organic, more fully-realized and developing character. Or we might define this range as being between episodic characters on one hand, and serial characters on the other. Gitlin (1987) has explored some of the ways that the creation of stable, static, predictable characters is often a function of an economy of production adopted by those production companies.
who must produce some thirty episodes of a primetime television series each year. On the other hand, we find organic characters who continually change and develop in daytime melodramas, which are truly “cranked out” at the rate of some 250 episodes per year. So production economy is a relative indicator of such things in and of itself. But whether we recognize them as economically- or narratively-efficient characters, or both, static or episodic characters wind up functioning within their narrative universes as characters without memories of previous actions. The very idea of character development or growth is limited by the character's role to serve the immediate needs of this week's plot.

On the opposite side are serial/organic characters, who do indeed "have memories of their previous actions and know that these actions will have future consequences" (Buxton 1992: 98). Again, as static characters tend to be found more in episodic than in serial narrative lines, organic characters tend to inhabit serialized narrative universes (Dallas), or in cumulative formats (The MTM Show), where we do get the weekly sense of closure and resolution, while the organic character development "drives the overall cause-and-effect trajectory of the series" (100). The continuum between character types might be drawn in this manner:

```
static  <------------------------> organic
plot function                     growth
episodic                           serial
no memory                          remembers
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Character Frequency. Our relation to character, and so to the ideological and rhetorical concerns of the narrative universe in which they exist, is also determined by the frequency of their appearance, and the hierarchy of agency suggested by that frequency.

Regular characters: As the name suggests, regular characters appear in virtually every installment or episode of a given series. Indeed, the predictability and regularity of their appearance is central to our even identifying or recognizing a series as a series (Newcomb 1974, Gitlin 1987). Beyond their simple appearance on screen, regular characters carry with them "some aspect of the underlying conflicts that form the basis for the series" (Buxton 1992: 101). Within the category of regularly appearing characters, we can distinguish between central or primary characters and subsidiary or secondary characters. Again, these categories tend to correspond to the distinctions in narrative format.

Primary characters within episodic narratives serve an "axial," or narratively and technically central role, in as much as they tend to either initiate the narrative trajectory or promote the central conflict of the episode (Barker 1987). Lucille Ball in I Love Lucy, or Roseanne Arnold’s character in Roseanne, or Tim Allen’s in Home Improvement, or Andy Griffith’s character in Matlock, each function as primary axial characters in this manner. The essence of any series depends absolutely on the regularity of primary characters. Secondary characters within episodic narratives tend to get caught up in the trajectory initiated or propelled by the primary or axial character.

In serial narratives, which almost always have multiple storylines and a good number of characters, the distinction between primary and secondary characters is less easy to identify. As we see at work in such ensemble serial narratives as Northern Exposure, L.A. Law or Picket Fences, different characters are often privileged, which is to
say they are chosen or "brought out" from within the overall constellation of characters, to function as central, axial characters in particular episodes.

Recurring Characters: Recurring characters are those characters who make intermittent appearances over the course of a season. Such characters are imminently useful in bringing storylines into the narrative, to serve as occasional foils for regular characters, to in effect "audition" for regular character status (as happened with Fonzy in Happy Days, who began the series as a recurring character), or to dispose of when the narrative trajectory warrents.

Episodic characters: The third category having to do with character frequency contains those characters who appear only once in a single episode or installment of given series. Typically, their narrative power or function rests in their ability (achieved through their sudden appearance in an otherwise stable, predictable, intact narrative universe) to disrupt the continuity and stability of that world, and so provide the source for conflict, drama and/or comedy within a given episode. Their fate, after that disruption is recovered from and closure has befallen the narrative world, is disappearance. In this capacity, they are often labelled "disposable" characters.

The agency or power inherent in each of these types, Buxton reminds us, depends on the narrative format of each series.

Narrative format and narrative agency are closely related, yet distinct, elements that help to define a series franchise. Consequently, both play an important part in framing any [topical] discussion [such as environmentalism] . . . that might be included in a particular television program. (108)

Production Style. Finally, it is important to take into account the production style of each series. "Distinctive choices in camera work, recording medium, shooting style, and
editing style delimit a series franchise as much as narrative formats or regular

Television programming, as the point of convergence where stylistic
elements of radio broadcasting, movies and live theater meet, is the
product of mixed mediums. Within this amalgamation, the constraints
of production schedules, recording mediums, shooting styles, screen
size and reception context create their own distinctive demands on
fictional broadcast narratives. While these constraints leave their imprint
on the look and sound of every television program, they also shape the
narrative construction, and therefore the ideological construction, of the
content of the programming (109).

Buxton's claims echo those of David Barker (1985), who has shown quite convincingly
that "the communicative ability of any television narrative is, in large part, a function of
the production techniques utilized in its creation" (235). And indeed, there is a
deceptively simple set of choices to be made when determining the production process
of any given primetime series (including each of the series represented this study's
sample of programming): proscenium-style on one hand, film-style on the other.

Barker delineates the particular narrational qualities of each of these two
production styles by isolating and comparing sample episodes of two critically- and
commercially-successful 1970s situation comedies, All in the Family (AITF) and
M*A*S*H. To quickly explore each of these production styles, we will stick closely to
Barker's argument for the moment, and quote the article from which it comes at some
length. I have found no other explanation as efficiently and clearly drawn.

"The decision to examine these particular programs was based on two factors,"
Barker writes. The first factor had to do with both programs being "pivotal to their own
specific narrative traditions."

AITF represents the tradition of domestic situation comedies that
revolved around a single axial character -- in this case Archie Bunker.
Archie was axial inasmuch as plot lines were usually built directly upon
his character, and most other characters in the program were usually defined not so much by their own idiosyncrasies as by their relationship with him. [. . . ] M*A*S*H, on the other hand, was pivotal to the tradition of what might be termed ensemble comedies in which each character had a persona of his or her own, distinct from the rest of the ensemble. Yet the interplay and conflict among such characters worked to strengthen the personalities of all concerned, making the ensemble comedy very much more than the sum of its parts. (235)

The second factor for investigating these two series “was that both were also products of conscious decisions by their respective creators, Norman Lear [All in the Family] and Larry Gelbart [M*A*S*H], to utilize specific production techniques in specific ways.”

In Archie Bunker, Lear had an axial character whose persona was often patriarchal in the sense that he was myopic and tyrannical. . . . Much of AITF was intended to portray the patriarch as buffoon. Lear thus decided to shoot AITF in proscenium. (236)

“Shooting in proscenium” refers to a multiple-camera, live-on-tape set-up that captures the performances of the actors/characters not in single takes and single set-ups, as would a feature film crew, but in “real time” as a virtual stage play. Lighting, set and stage design and character blocking are all planned and executed with both a live studio audience and an “audience” of three or four cameras in mind. The live audience and cameras form a “fourth wall” towards which the actors/characters perform. This quite literally theatrical or performance-based production style creates a correspondingly theatrical narrative style that is evidenced in such textual elements as the timing and delivery of lines -- off of other actors in the scene, or off of the laughter from the studio audience -- or in the blocking and on-stage movements. Lear’s decision to shoot All in the Family in proscenium-style meant that the camera (and thus the viewing audience) would maintain a distinct distance; they would not be allowed to move into the set -- into Archie’s domain -- for reverse angles. [. . .] There were practical reasons for [choosing to shoot in the proscenium style], but there were equally important narrative reasons as well: shooting in proscenium helped maintain Archie not only as the axial character but as the buffoonish patriarch. By preventing the cameras from moving into the
set for reverse angles, viewers were allowed only to look at Archie, not with him. (236).

In other words, what was not being allowed the All in the Family viewer was the sort of psychological and sympathetic alignment with Archie that may have been created had Lear decided to shoot the situation comedy in film-style, as Gelbart did in the case of M*A*S*H.

When Gelbart first saw the movie version of M*A*S*H, he realized the intrinsic role director Robert Altman’s reflexive shooting style played in the film’s narrative. Altman was not dealing with the all-pervasive influence of a single axial character [as was Lear with Archie’s character], but with the nuances of an ensemble of characters, and the apparent aimlessness of his camera movements, the sheer “busyness” of his shots, actually helped define the characters and their relationships. Thus a shooting style similar to that employed by Altman would be important in maintaining the spirit of the ensemble: a single camera with multiple set-ups, unimpeded by spatial or psychological boundaries, able to capture visual patterns of great complexity. (236)

Film-style production is television’s variation on Hollywood feature film production, and on psychological or classical narration. Whether with an ensemble of characters or a single character, the fourth wall of the proscenium-style is “removed.” This makes room for shots and angles that represent not simply the actions or facial expressions of characters, but their point-of-view as well. We can, that is, penetrate not simply the physical space in a manner prohibited by a proscenium shoot, but the psychological “space” of the characters in a manner similarly prohibited by a proscenium shoot.

Neither is a better style than the other. What is important in all of this, and what Barker makes very clear, is that production style decisions are as much narrational or aesthetic decisions as they are economic decisions. As we will find by engaging in close analysis of our sample of programs, the large majority of half-hour situation comedies are shot in proscenium style. This should hardly be surprising, given both the nature
and intentions of comedy in general, and the tradition of televisual comedy in particular. One of our sample of half-hour comedies is shot film-style, however, and as we will see, this makes a significant difference in the “type” of comedy it can best sustain, and so the type of story it can best tell. All nine of the hour-long melodramatic series included in our sample are shot in film-style. This, too, is unsurprising, given the psychological and often action-based imperatives of much contemporary televisual drama. There are variations and stylistic differences within each series’ employment of this production style.

Programming formats, narrative formats, franchise elements, character type, narrative agency and production style are each informed and enabled by one another. A performative and stage-bound comic feel and style, a strong sense of episodic closure, a reliance on a regular, axial character and the choice of a proscenium-style of production are each factors (among many others) that coalesce into a narrative structure that is simultaneously identifiable as a standardized narrative vehicle called “a situation comedy” and a differentiated and unique television series called All in the Family, or Murphy Brown, or Roseanne, or The Cosby Show, and so on and so on. Viewer alignment with these narrative structures is based on the recognition of decades, perhaps centuries, of comic and melodramatic traditions, story formulas and character types, situations and outcomes, performance and production styles. It is against this base -- this deep structure of culturally-embedded and popularly-held elements of narrative and story -- that difference and variation are located, and that the experience of series narrative is constructed, its pleasures derived. The essence of popular art and narrative, that is, is the imaginative space created in reading “between the lines,” of
balancing the standardized, structural facts of similarity against the slightly discrepant appearances of difference.

To push the metaphor of musical structures with which we opened this chapter into the particular aesthetic realm of jazz and improvisation, each episode of series narrative might be understood as a slight variation or "riff" on a standardized set of chords, changes and rhythms. Each moment within an episode might likewise be thought of as a riff on some narrative strategy or franchise element that we have begun to delineate in this chapter. In the act of interpretation, that is, is a participation in the (re)creation of the feel, the swing or the "groove" of interpretive improvisation of this sort. "Groove" is the "recognition of style in motion;" style is empirically real, "but is also necessarily general, vague, and physical, feelingfully ingrained in affective time and space" (Feld 1994: 112). Within the ritual of engaging regularly in/with a series narrative is the (re)creation of an imaginative place we take to be greater than the sum of its narrational, mechanistic parts. It is the (re)creation of what Leonard Meyer might call "implicative relationships" or "felt probabilities" (qtd. in Feld 1994: 110) that exist somewhere between the regularity and variation, the standardization and differentiation, the regular beats and rhythmic discrepancies of primetime series narrative.

* * *

But beyond these personal pleasures of engagement with the form, variation and style of primetime narrative, what is made possible by such engagement? As we recall from Chapter One, it is this study's position that within popular series narrative is the stuff of public discussion and shared concern. Indeed, as Condit (1989) has
suggested, commercial televisual narrative is a primary means by which the very notion of “public,” and the shared stories and topical concerns that go to “make up” the “public sphere,” are constructed and circulated. In this brief into the aesthetics of series narrative, we have by necessity put aside the question with which we initiated this study: what happens (what is made possible) when the topic of environmentalism is dropped into this narrative system?

Earlier in the present chapter, we touched briefly on the idea that AIDS, which we take to be public topic of discussion arising in part from the physical facts of HIV, was discursively “unsuitable” for the narrative container we recognize as MacGyver. Environmentalism, on the other hand, a public topic of discussion arising in part from the physical facts of environmental degradation, did prove “suitable” for MacGyver. Indeed, it was in many ways “a perfect fit.” We need now to consider this more closely by considering in some detail some of ideas, actions and events that make up contemporary environmentalism.
Chapter Three

Environmentalism as Discourse System

Values, both those that we approve and those that we don't, have roots as deep as creosote rings, and live as long and grow as slowly. Every action is an idea before it is an action, and perhaps a feeling before it is an idea, and every idea rests upon other ideas that have preceded it in time. - Wallace Stegner (1990: 35)

We have depended to this point on such phrases as the environmental movement, the environmentalist perspective and the discourse of environmentalism to establish in necessarily introductory terms the interests and intentions of this study. But such phrases are, in their efficiency, misleading in as much as they suggest that there is a unified way of seeing or knowing as an environmentalist. This is no more the case with environmentalism than with any other broad-based, popular conjunction of beliefs and actions that comes to be seen and to function as a "social movement" (Wilson 1973, Ash 1972). Rather, there is a broad range of philosophical perspectives, ideological stands and political strategies from and through which to speak or to act in a manner that may be publically recognized as that of an environmentalist.

Environmentalism is usefully understood and analyzed as "a discourse system," or an "intersecting set of self-validating beliefs about what was, what now is, and what ought to be" (Jensen 1990: 13). Environmentalism derives its meaning, that is, "from its location and performance in the public realm of discourse" (Abu-Lughod 1990: 7). It is always emergent, never fixed, inseparable from its socio-political context. It cannot exist apart from itself, Foucault might say, in as much as it is a "practice" that "systematically forms" the very "objects of which its speaks" (7). A discursive intersection,
environmentalism functions essentially on a narrative level -- indeed, it functions as narrative -- and in the process, "mobilizes and reproduces assumptions about history, culture, society and technology." In this sense, we recognize environmentalism operating as a social narrative: in making sense of (and in) the social world, it engages and confirms "taken-for-granted assumptions about the world" (Jensen 1990: 13).

Indeed, we might think of any discursive system such as environmentalism as an ongoing process of definition and redefinition, claims and counter-claims, positions and counter-positions within the "communication polyglot we know as society" (Newcomb 1984: 39).

And so we come to understand the impulse behind using convenient phrases or shorthand definitions of environmentalism as mirroring the very process by which environmentalism is both created and invested with claims to authority, power or a "taken-for-granted" naturalness. As was suggested in the review of mass media-related environmentalist literature in Chapter One, for instance, many writers define environmentalism as an almost pre-linguistic, fundamental, hardwired human knowledge, which Euro-imperialism and the capitalist/socialist industrial order, riding on the narrational shoulders of the myths of progress and manifest destiny, has displaced and masked over. "The radical ideas that have been changing attitudes toward our Earth habitat," writes novelist Wallace Stegner (1990), "have been around forever" (39). Even those who recognize that all cultural belief systems are created and maintained by "the metaphorical nature of language and thought," as C. A. Bowers (1993) puts it, push a need "to rediscover ancient pathways that enabled human beings to live in ecological balance over a time frame that makes the classical tradition of
Greek philosophy . . . appear as a rather brief and ecologically disruptive cultural experiment that has almost played itself out" (103).

This "recovery of the ecological imperative," as Bowers phrases it, suggests one of the ways in which environmentalism is often positioned and received as "oppositional discourse" and understood as potentially "disruptive" to our "taken-for-granted assumptions about the [modern] world." Of course, approaching environmentalism as discourse begs the question of whether or not environmentalism is in some way a contemporary expression of a deeply held, universal human knowledge outside the reaches and interests of this study. But the ways in which environmentalism might be experienced and understood as such, on the other hand, particularly as that experience is or is not made possible through the sample narratives of television series, remains very much at the center of my critical concerns in this study.

Similarly, definitions of the contemporary environmentalist movement often construct it as a sort of inevitable response to the fallout in the natural world of the "brief and ecologically disruptive cultural experiment" known as Western civilization. Warwick Fox (1990) puts it simply: the "variety of popularly-held responses" to the staggering lists of environmental problems make up what is "collectively referred to as the environmental movement" (4). John Seed (1988) is another who sees environmentalist thought as deep and fundamental, but the contemporary movement as a collective response to recognition that "our planet is in danger."

We all know that on some level of our consciousness. The accelerating ecological crisis which threatens the survival of life on earth is evident now not only to professional biologists, botanists and environmental scientists, but to all of us. (5)
Likewise, Stegner, for whom the “environmental idea” has been around “forever,” can still determine “the modern environmental movement” as having been derived “pretty directly from 19th-century travelers, philosophers, artists, writers, diviners [and] natural historians” whose purpose was to declare “our dependence on the Earth and our responsibility to it” (35).

The tracing of ideas is a guessing game. We can’t tell who first had an idea; we can only tell who first had it influentially, who formulated it in a striking way and left it in some form, poem or equation or picture, that others could stumble upon with the shock of recognition. . . . Only if they begin to win substantial public approval and give visible effects do [ideas] achieve a plain and even predictable curve of development. (39)

So to “discuss environmentalism” is always to rework and reassert a set of public responses to or discursive formations around an idea, just as to trace the development of environmentalism is to delineate a series of historically-realized discursive formations around that same idea. In a very general sense, this is what Michelle Condit is up to in her 1990 study Decoding Abortion Rhetoric. In this work she tries to come to some understanding of the “meaning and practice of abortion” in the U.S. between the years 1960 and 1985 -- its “curve of development” -- by studying the public discourse that constituted the abortion controversy and debates.

The story told here is not a conventional history, for histories usually focus on the people and events that “cause” social change, relegating public discourse to a supporting role in the story. In contrast, this account focuses directly on the American argument about abortion, describing the vast flows of public discourse that spread across American to shift the meaning of abortion and of related terms, practices and laws. (1)

Condit locates her study in a number of different public arenas, including popular magazines, primetime television series, the proceedings of legal decisions, the proceedings of U.S. Congressional debates, and both print and electronic news
coverage. The present study is limited to one of these arenas, primetime television series, and to the expression or materialization of environmental ideas through the aesthetic or textual logic of series narrative and the formal specifics of each series' franchise as those specifics were outlined above in Chapter Two.

It is the purpose of this chapter to review in a brief and partial manner some of the ways in which environmentalist discourse has functioned historically as "an empirical entity operating through multiple voices across the social scale" (3). This review in effect lists what Foucault (1980) might call "the data" of environmental discourse and its articulations to "the mechanisms of power" as found in (a) a series of historically-located social, legislative and judicial responses to an increased awareness of environmental degradation, and (b) a continuum of ideologically-informed and supported philosophies and assumptions about the relative place of "man" in the "natural world."

A History of Environmentalism

In its current usage, the very term "environmentalism" is a relatively recent one which suggests a quite different set of meanings from those it suggested a generation or two ago. Joseph Petulla (1980), a historian of American environmentalism, writes that early in the 20th century, environmentalism referred primarily to a sociological school of thought in which geographic, climatic and even astrological conditions were "perceived as influencing or determining everything from the individual personality to the rise and fall of empires" (ix). P. A. Sorokin, a prominent pre-World War II American sociologist, describes this early environmentalism essentially as an exercise in geographical determinism:
There scarcely is any physical or psychical trait in man, any characteristic in the social organization of a group, any social process or historical event, which has not been accounted for through geographical factors by this or that partisan of this school. Distribution of the population on the surface of the earth, the density of population, racial differences, the character of economic, political, and social organization, the progress and decay of nations, the character of religious ideas and beliefs, the forms of the family and of marriage, health, fertility, intelligence, crimes, suicides, cultural achievements, the number of men of genius, the traits of literature, poetry, and civilization, the movement of economic and social life, in brief, almost all social phenomena have been attributed to geographic influences. (qtd. in Petulla 1980: ix)

By the time of the Second World War, however, this older and primarily academic understanding of environmentalism, which stressed the effects of the natural world on human society, began to give way to a much more popularly-based and applied sense of environmentalism, one which was concerned instead with the effects of human society on the natural world. This was the first of what historian Mark Dowie (1992) would have us recognize as three distinct stages of contemporary environmentalism. In the increasingly industrialized society and technological culture of post-war America, this "new" environmentalism began to signify "the ideas and activities of those concerned with the protection or proper use of the natural environment or natural resources" (Petulla 1980: x; italics mine). Developing conceptually in part out of the writings of Thoreau and George Perkins Marsh, and later of Aldo Leopold and John Muir, and politically in part out of the policies of the Theodore Roosevelt administration, this first stage was marked by the development of a tradition of land and wildlife conservation in the U.S. With the creation of a national parks service, and with the consequent setting aside of significant portions of undeveloped land, this "protection and proper use" conservationist philosophy was

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formally structured into American national policy and public consciousness by the 1950's.

Over the next decade or so, however, it became apparent to many that these acts of conservation alone were not adequate responses to the increasingly noticeable rate of environmental degradation. The idea of continued industrial expansion, supported by the very potent and largely unquestioned myth of Progress, was largely ignored by environmentalism that was centered around conservationist practices. The destruction of those lands and ecosystems not "set aside" was continuing apace, and the costs of unchecked industrial growth became only too apparent in the condensed symbology of dying Great Lakes and a burning Cayahoga River.

This set of factors gave rise to the second significant stage in the development of contemporary environmentalism, which Dowie suggests was initiated on Earth Day, April 27, 1970, and realized through the significant and landmark pollution control legislation of the decade that followed. Most accounts of that first Earth Day agree with Dowie, who describes it as "one of the most remarkable public events in American political history" (45).

Two hundred fifty thousand people gathered in Washington, D.C., to voice their support for decisive action on environmental protection. One hundred thousand New Yorkers walked down Fifth Avenue in an eerie, silent requiem to ecosystems despoiled by industrial pollution. At 1,500 campuses and 10,000 schools across the nation, students and teachers observed the occasion with teach-ins on environmental issues, putting knowledgeable speakers in such demand that in some cases they had to fly from state to state or even coast to coast to make their engagements. Both houses of Congress recessed to allow members to join their constituencies in observing the event. . . . Population biologist Paul Erlich, biologist Barry Commoner, biologist Rene Dubos, consumer advocate Ralph Nader, all gave major addresses to inform and exhort Americans in what amounted to the equivalent of a national town meeting on America's environmental future. (45-46)
The energy of the moment was realized by several important pieces of congressional legislation and many successful legal actions brought by environmental groups. The National Environmental Policy Act of 1969, signed by President Nixon on January 1, 1970, "was a blueprint for achieving goals on environmental quality and the text for a whole new vocabulary of federal land use requirements, such as the famous environmental impact statement" (47). That same year saw the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency. Species threatened with extinction were listed for the first time through the Endangered Species Conservation Act of 1969 and later through the stronger Endangered Species Act of 1973. Bills favoring business as usual for the timber industry were being questioned and defeated in the House, while at the same time environmentalists were realizing that "the federal courts were the real battleground for shaping environmental policy" (48).

As was perhaps inevitable in this second stage of contemporary environmentalism, a stage often referred to as "reform environmentalism," the large, national environmentalist organizations such as the Environmental Defense Fund, the National Wildlife Federation, the Audobon Society and Sierra Club became increasingly entrenched in the political power scene of Washington, D.C. By the mid- to late-1970s, Manes suggests, it was clear that "the environmental movement as a whole was very much a Republican, white, middle-class affair, having little spiritual affinity with the growing protest movements in the country" (50). During the comparatively anti-environmentalist years of Reagan-Bush, these organizations found themselves largely transformed into special interest groups, lobbyists "playing by the rules and the style of Washington D.C." (Dowie 1992: 107).
This had several important effects on the environmental movement overall, effects which spell out what Dowie marks as environmentalism's third and most recent stage. One effect came as a result of the growing split that existed between the Washington environmentalists and the rest of the country. Much of the drive and force of the movement began shifting to the grassroots level, as individuals and communities found themselves fighting water contamination, air and land degradation, encroaching toxic dumps, incinerators and so forth. From public hearings to elections to small demonstrations, the environmental issues on this level were local and immediate, far from the big-money players of Washington, D.C.

An equally important effect was to be found in the people working within the reform environmental movement in Washington who became increasingly disillusioned with "its idee fixe, credibility" (66). Dave Foreman, for instance, one of the founders of the radical and decidedly non-D.C.-based environmentalist group, Earth First!, had been a suit-wearing Washington moderate in the early 1970s. Foreman worked with the Wilderness Society, one of Washington's Big Ten national environmentalist organizations. When "disgust" ultimately replaced frustration during these days of reformist environmentalism, Foreman, along with an increasing number of people like him, turned instead to the tactics of civil disobedience, guerilla theater and ecotage, or the intentional destruction of the property and tools of industries perceived to be agents of environmental destruction.

By the end of the decade and into the 1980s, a shift began to occur among many of the major D.C.-based environmentalist organizations away from a belief in preventing pollution through the mechanism of governmental legislation, toward a belief in containing pollution through the mechanisms of the marketplace. This shift
clearly echoed the dominant ideologies of the Reagan-Bush governments by designing market-based initiatives with which to "induce industry to pollute less" (109). The development and increased employment of the idea of pollution credits as described by Dowie exemplifies this type of "third-wave environmentalism": "If a firm wishes to pollute in excess of tolerated allowances, it must purchase credits from another firm that does not need them. Pollution is thus made more costly, the argument goes, driving inefficient producers from the market" (109).

This third "wave" or stage of environmentalism has also seen the rise of an increasingly organized and vocal anti-environmentalism. Lewis (1992) quotes the content of a recent manifesto put out by the Center for the Defense of Free Enterprise, a "wise use" think tank, as including calls for "the opening of all national parks to mineral production, the logging of all old-growth forests, and the gutting of the endangered species act" (6). Mediated and popularized to a large extent by the staid and careful words of conservative newspaper columnists George Will and Alston Chase, and to an even larger extent by the amazingly popular radio and television rants of Rush Limbaugh, this anti-environmentalism has become a potent feature of popular mainstream discussions of environmentalism, industrialism and, as Limbaugh's bestselling book put it, the "way things ought to be." A common theme of this sort of "environmentalist-bashing," according to O'Keefe and Daley (1993), is that the Sierra Club, the Wilderness Society, Earth First!, Friends of the Earth and other groups care more about snail darters than they do people. This gross generalization of a broad and diverse movement is nonetheless tied to the key philosophical underpinnings of contemporary environmentalism, as we will see and discuss more at length below.
While the development of each of these various stages of the environmental movement is specific to its particular historical moment, the ideological notions behind each stage continue to circulate within the environmentalist discussion to this day. Belief in the protective approach of conservation, in the power of legislative and legal action, in the inherent wisdom of the free market, in the immediacy of local, grassroots action, in the defiant force of civil disobedience, in the confrontational tactics of ecotage, or in the reactionary actions of anti-environmentalism all reflect varying strategies of action and response within contemporary mainstream environmentalism.

The Philosophies of Environmentalism

Wisconsin Senator Gaylord Nelson, who is credited with developing the idea of Earth Day, delivered a speech in Denver on the first Earth Day in April 1970. Nelson's speech included this hopeful note, which Manes (1990) suggests signified the "ebullience" and confidence that many environmentalists were feeling at the time: "Earth Day may be a turning point in American history" (46). The validity of this claim remains open to debate. But more important than these words, perhaps, were those that followed: "It may be the birth of a new American ethic that rejects the frontier philosophy that the continent was put here for our plunder, and accepts the idea that even urbanized, affluent, mobile societies are interdependent with the fragile, life-sustaining systems of the air, the water, the land" (46-47).

The "new ecological ethic" expressed by Nelson points in essence to the central philosophical question underlying virtually every wave, stage or ideological variant of the movement of environmentalism. To what extent, that question goes, are the perceived environmental problems and catastrophes a result of our deeply embedded,
Western-based human-centeredness, or *anthropocentrism*? And to what extent can these catastrophes be lessened, averted and even recovered from by adopting a non-anthropocentric or more *ecocentric* worldview?

These questions, and the philosophical continuum established between the two *worldviews* they introduce, are foregrounded in Warwick Fox's (1990) retelling of the development of contemporary environmentalism. For Fox, the interests and intentions of the conservationist years, or the first forty years or so of Dowie's three-stage history sketched above, should be considered apart from the development of contemporary environmentalism. This is because the conservationist tradition was based primarily on much the same assumption as was the "frontier philosophy" that Nelson invokes: a human-centered or anthropocentric notion of the natural world as something "out there," separate from the human sphere and available to be "set aside" as much for our use as for its protection.

The very myths of progress and unlimited economic and industrial growth that ran so strong in postwar America turn on this idea of a separate and controlled natural world (see Nisbet 1980 for a history, albeit a celebratory one, of "the idea of Progress" in Western society). Indeed, Western civilization has from its inception defined itself in relation to some constructed idea of the natural world. "By dividing the world between cultivated lands and wilderness," writes Christopher Manes (1990), *civilized people became citizens* (the two words are cognate), with an allegiance to a politically ordered space distinct from the "disorder" of wild nature. The distinction between the natural and the cultural world enforced by civilization generated a number of concepts that have dominated human thought, with differing emphasis and varying forms, ever since" (40).
Conservationism held that as long as the natural world, or a significant chunk of it, in any case, could be "protected" or "used properly," then the new leaders of the Free World could, it seemed, have its cake of industrial growth and eat it too. As time went on, however, the physical degradation of the natural world was becoming impossible to ignore. In the face of the comparatively "simple" conceptual pleasures of "protecting" and "conserving" public lands, came a plethora of very real problems having to do with unchecked industrial growth and practices, the "fallout" of nuclear power and warfare, the increased use of chemical fertilizers and insecticides on farmlands, the increased use of biocides, and on and on. The contradictions inherent in the conservationist philosophy were becoming increasingly apparent, as were the interdependencies of the natural and social worlds. The myth of Progress was suddenly under serious scrutiny and doubt, and the conceptual relation between the human and non-human worlds on which the Western world's very definitions of civilization and society have always been founded was in trouble.

Thus the birth of the modern environmental movement "as a vigorous, temporally continuous, geographically widespread, and increasingly well-organized social and political phenomenon" (4) occurred not with the development of conservationist ideals and politics in the early- to mid-20th century, but rather with the popularization of the ideas of interconnectedness and interdependence that were echoed, for instance, in the words of Senator Nelson on Earth Day. The process of popularization was in fact initiated some years earlier, Fox argues, with the "virtual explosion of interest" that accompanied the 1962 publication of *Silent Spring*. Rachel Carson's studied indictment of the increased use of pesticides and synthetic chemicals to control insects on crops and farmlands (4).
Although *Silent Spring* was primarily concerned with the biological damage we were doing to the world and, particularly, to ourselves, it was clear that, at another level, Carson's book was also an indictment of our arrogant conception of our place in the larger scheme of things. For Carson, our ecological thoughtlessness was matched only by our lack of philosophical maturity. In the last paragraph of her book, Carson concluded that "the 'control of nature' is a phrase conceived in arrogance, born of the Neanderthal age of biology and philosophy, when it was supposed that nature exists for the convenience of man." The effect of Carson's critique was to suggest to many people that what was needed first and foremost in regard to ecological problems was not bigger and better technical solutions but rather a thorough rethinking of our most fundamental attitudes concerning our place in the larger scheme of things. (4-5)

While public outrage resulted in the legislative actions of the sort Dowie has traced as the second wave of environmentalism, what was proposed by Carson went beyond legal questions to a "thorough rethinking" of a fundamentally human-centered, or anthropocentric worldview on which the "protect and use wisely" approach of conservationism so completely relies.

As Fox's review of ecophilosophical literature makes clear, this fundamental philosophical shift has been considered by a number of writers, and placed within a variety of terminologies. In Leo Marx's words, for instance, the meanings environmentalism are located between a *conservationist viewpoint* ("nature is a world that exists apart from and for the benefit of mankind") and an *ecological perspective* ("man is wholly and ineluctably embedded in the tissue of natural processes"). "If this organic (or holistic) view of nature has not been popular," Marx writes, "it is partly because it calls into question many of the presuppositions of our culture" (qtd. in Fox 1990: 27). Historian Donald Worster suggests a distinction between what he calls an *imperial tradition* (urging "the employment of science to extend humanity's power over the nonhuman world as far as possible") and an *arcadian tradition* ("a simple rural life in close harmony with nature . . . coexistence rather than domination; humility rather than
self-assertion; man as part of, rather than superior to, nature*). Theodore Roszak recognizes a spiritual dimension inherent in the tension Worster identifies, by seeing actions as either expedient ("anthropocentric technique of more efficient manipulation, a matter of enlightened self-interest and expert, long-range resource budgeting") or sacramental ("embrace nature as if indeed it were a beloved person in whom, as in ourselves, something sacred dwells") (27).

But the typology that has come to be the most popularly held, even if the complicated and at times arcane philosophy behind it has not, is that of Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess, who has proposed a distinction between shallow and a deep ecology. Kirkpatrick Sale (1993) encapsulates the fundamental premises of deep ecology in this way:

Standing in contrast to what Naess termed the "shallow environmentalism" of most of the movement, deep ecology stressed such points as: ecological equality, the right of every species to existence and survival and with equal "intrinsic value" regardless of its importance for humans; the diversity and abundance of all life forms, which should not be reduced by humans except "to satisfy vital needs"; the sharp reduction of human population so that other species may not only survive but have sufficient habitat to thrive; the preservation of the wilderness as a pristine habitat valuable in its own right; and the self-realization of humans through lower levels of consumption and resource use. (63)

* * *

This chapter has provided a brief survey of environmentalism as a set of historically-located "moments" of discursive intersection that have emerged from such public sites of negotiation as courtroom decisions, congressional acts, political actions, marketplace exchanges, and community responses. In so doing, we have conceptualized environmentalism as a series of actions and events along a continuum:
Recalling a phrase of Jensen's (1990) with which we began this chapter, each of these moments might be seen as “mobilizing and reproducing assumptions about history, culture, society and technology.” Likewise, we have in this chapter quickly identified some of the key philosophical and ideological underpinnings that support and naturalize these environmentalist assumptions. These ecophilosophies might be visualized as operating along a continuum such as this:

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Anthropocentric</th>
<th>Ecocentric</th>
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<tr>
<td>(human-centered; shallow; market reform of socio-industrial complex)</td>
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<td>(system-centered; deep; total restructuring of socio-industrial complex)</td>
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Though useful as points of reference, the linear nature of these continua, and of the brief narrative they are intended to encapsulate, are potentially misleading. It is to be emphasized, that is, that grassroots activities and various legislative activities co-occurred with conservationist and direct action activities all along. Perhaps each should include two way arrows on either end as well, to suggest more of a circle than a linear progression.

Our driving interest in this study in any case is in how and what these “actions and events” come to mean when placed in various contexts of the character-driven, action-based narrative system of dramatic and comedic television series. What occurs, that is, in the re-contextualization of the social narratives of environmentalism into the representational realm or arena of broadcast series narrative? As we will see, the topical range of environmentalist topics and concerns that appeared on the landscape of 1990-91 primetime network television, though far from complete, was substantial. From a

85
dispute over whether to develop or put into public ownership and protection a piece of undeveloped Alaskan wilderness, to the use of chemical pesticides on corporate farms and the effects of those chemicals on the health of the field workers, to the failed efforts of a grassroots citizens group to stop the construction of a hazardous wastes incinerator, to the illegal dumping of hazardous wastes by law-breaking companies, to the near death of a night watchman of a logging company as result of a bomb placed by an ecoterrorist organization, to the recycling efforts of school children, we are quick to see in more specific terms just how green primetime television has become, and how varied the environmentalist threads of content and discourse are.
Section II
Lightening Up: Environmentalism and Televisual Comedy

Introduction to Section II

In the previous section's brief history of 20th-century U.S. environmentalism (Chapter Three), we reviewed some of the principal discursive threads through which various meanings of environmentalism, whether it be understood as a "social movement," "legislative action" or "consumer behavior," have been constructed. In this section, we consider more closely particular instances of this ongoing process of construction and negotiation by analyzing the manner in which a number of these threads of environmentalist discourse were given a public presence in the cultural arena of primetime commercial television. The focus of this analysis is on seven of the 1990-91 programming season's primetime comedy series:

- NBC's series A Different World, a Cosby Show spin-off (two separate episodes);
- first-run syndicated series Harry and the Hendersons (two directly tied episodes);
- CBS's military comedy Major Dad;
- NBC's courtroom comedy Night Court;
- CBS's Monday night staple Murphy Brown;
- FOX television's animated hit The Simpsons;
- and the only cable series to be considered in this study, HBO's Dream On.

In Section III, the same analytical approach will be applied to a set of episodes drawn from hour-long dramatic primetime series from the same season.

The threads of contemporary environmentalism that were incorporated into this sample of television comedy, whether primarily through alignment with dominant plotlines and central characters, or secondarily through more incidental plots lines and peripheral characters, are as follows:
** personal, familial and generational commitment to recycling of household waste products (Major Dad)
** the displacement and endangerment of wildlife as a result of deforestation and the practices of clear-cutting (Harry and the Hendersons)
** reproductive responsibility and population control (A Different World)
** the effects of non-biodegradable products such as styrofoam on the ecosystem (A Different World)
** the possible detrimental ecological effects of bioengineering (Night Court)
** grassroots organization against industrial polluters, with direct action or ecotage as a necessary component of such local environmentalism (Dream On)
** contamination of surface and ground water from improper handling and disposal of toxic/radioactive waste (The Simpsons)
** the use of kidnapping as an act of ecotage designed to direct media attention to the destruction of wetlands through unchecked industrial development (Murphy Brown)

Though drawn from an admittedly limited sample of programming, this selective list suggests a fairly broad range of significant environmental topics included in the overall primetime sitcom concerns of the 1990-91 commercial broadcast season. Each of these topical threads comes encrusted with potential meanings assigned to it through the many previous public discussions and historical formations of environmentalism from which it has emerged. For instance, several of the environmentalist threads listed above can be said to derive much of their meaning from what might be generically identified as a discourse of anti-industrialism. A narrative which includes in its storyline the industrial logging practice known as clear-cutting, for instance, brings with it a possible source for tension and dialogue with other discourses and social narratives circulating in the public sphere: the myth of progress, local economic needs in relation to the perceived global ecological effects, profit motives which lead the industry to prefer clear cutting over more selective, and so more costly, tree cutting, and so forth.
Again, these are only potential meanings and connections derived from previous representational or communicative instances of environmental "discussion." As such, the meaning of these "topics," these environmentalist "utterances" are never guaranteed. Meanings emerge, as was suggested in Chapter One, from the clashes and alliances formed among the signs, codes and strategies of discourses occurring in social practice, from within the communicative act. Discursive formations such as anti-industrialism remain, in linguistic anthropologist Joel Sherzer's words, an "elusive area" to locate and to predict, "an imprecise and constantly emerging and emergent interface between language and culture, created by actual instances of language in use" (quoted in Abu-Lughad & Lutz 1990: 8).

More particular to our objects of analysis, these textual instances of environmentalist topics are not merely packages of automatically pre-coded and pre-interpreted information, because primetime televisual texts of this sort are not merely containers or transmitters of cultural information. They are, as David Thorburn (1987) reminds us, aesthetic objects, "understood to be fictional or imaginary, understood to occur in a symbolic, culturally agreed upon imaginative space [in] any ritualized environment where 'real' experience is re-presented, re-created, symbolically displayed" (162). Simply noting that these important environmental topics were included in the manifest content of these programs, or tracing their discursive genealogy and identifying the various meanings that have emerged from the public construction to date, does not fully explain their function in this imaginative, ritualized space, does not completely show how they were included, encoded, represented, contextualized, "spoken" from within the formal constraints and aesthetic possibilities of the programs themselves. One cannot claim, that is, that a given program "represents," "tells," "argues,"
privileges," "holds to" or "seeks to persuade" us of one ideological position or set of meanings over another without first taking into account the formats, formulas, franchise, and specific episodc elements through which that program establishes its identity and tells its stories.

These are the elements of the basic narrative strategies that must be unraveled, deconstructed and explored as the structures and spaces into or against which we align ourselves in the processes of reading, interpreting, watching. These are the structures in which we as viewers, readers, interpreters, and so as critics, look both for consistencies and discrepancies, formulas and variation (Cawelti 1976, Keil 1994). To understand our participation in this process of recognition and interpretation, and the range of meanings, from dominant to resistant to oppositional, that we encounter and create along the way (Hall 1981), we must consider the inflections and intentions of the very idea of comedy itself. We must consider the similarities among and differences between comic story formulas, ranging in this sample from ensemble workplace comedies to fantasy comedies, dramedies and satirical anti-sitcoms. We must consider narrative formats, and the extent to which a story operates episodically with regularly-observed narrative closure, or in a more open-ended or serialized manner, with storylines that arc and accumulate well past a single story installment or episode. We must consider the extent of a given character’s narrative agency: is she static and predictable, week after week, episode after episode, or does she grow and change over the course of the series? Is he a central or essential character to the story, appearing week after week, or is he an occasional or even episodic character, appearing only in a single half-hour installment and disappearing from the narrative’s universe after that? Are they singular or axial characters, around whom the majority of the action and conflicts and comedy turn, or
are they members of a larger ensemble of characters, whose constellations and interrelations are at least as significant and engaging as the individual characters who constitute it?

But our purpose in this is “not merely to unravel the text,” Newcomb (1984) suggests. “Rather it is to recognize the essential dialogic nature of all forms of communication.”

The “languages” and “words” interact with one another to form a new totality. There the author may strive to establish a hegemony of intention, the ascendancy of one “word” over another, but that attempt will never be fully successful. In recognizing the blend, the thrust, at times the combat, of these combinations we come to a fuller understanding of the work in question. (39-40)

This leaves us on a critical terrain not of prediction, nor of proving hypotheses concerning the structuring power of hegemony in popular televisual texts, but of attempting “to recognize the essential dialogic nature” of our ritualized engagement with televisual comedy as means of understanding the ways in which this cultural form might contextualize, determine and enable popular environmentalist discussions, strategies and politics.
Chapter Four

Television Comedy and the Idea of the Serious

This chapter focuses on comedy, on the two broadest of formal and aesthetic categories by which primetime fictional programming is divided. Perhaps most commonly understood as a programming format for the television producer, and a rhetorical format for the television viewer, the half-hour comedy remains an essential point of reference on the spectrum of television’s primetime fictional approaches, particularly when considered in relation to the equally pervasive primetime story form, the melodrama. Investigative news magazines, reality programming, skit & variety shows, game shows, spots, zany home videos and blooper reels increasingly vie for position among the non-fictional slots of contrast and difference along this spectrum of programming. But fictional formats, and specifically comedies and melodramas, continue to dominate network primetime, and segmented fields of limits and expectations continue to define that fictive flow: programming formats are linked to time slots (comedies generally appear early in the evening, serious stories come a bit later), narrative formats are tied to programming formats (comedies usually are half-hour programs, drama an hour-long), and programming formats in turn seem to turn on rhetorical expectations (half-hour comedies promise laughter and lightness, hour-long dramas promise emotions, adventure and seriousness). On network television, primetime remains much as Newcomb (1974) described it twenty years ago: “If we desire gentle amusement, some good fun and warmth after dinner, we can view the situation-domestic comedy. But if we desire excitement and adventure, a somewhat harsher world, we can turn to the world of the Western or the mystery” (65).
Of course, any number of exceptions come to mind: comedies such as *Wonder Years* that employ melodramatic structures, ensemble dramas such as *L.A. Law* that include darkly comic tendencies. But even with these exceptions noted, there remains the presumption that calls them forth as exceptions, and that still leaves us to wonder how it is that "serious topics" such as environmentalism come to be embedded in comic programming in the first place? Deforestation? The destruction of wetlands? The degradation of ground and surface water from nuclear and toxic waste? How do these topics function as the stuff of popular televisual comedy? What is so warm, fun or gentle about environmentalism? And for that matter, what type of environmentalist rhetoric or discourse emerges from these half-hour comedies? Is a television comedy a suitable cultural form for the discussion of such matters?

This last question is a particularly pertinent one when considered in light of the recent emergence of a significant anti-environmentalist backlash in the U.S.. Given a loud populist voice by talk radio czar Rush Limbaugh, a more blue-blooded conservative voice by newspaper columnist George Will, a pseudo-scientific legitimacy in Alston Chase's (1986) or Martin Lewis's (1992) booklength refutations of fundamental environmentalist claims, and a claim to political activism by the "members" of the Wise Use Movement ("We're ready to put the environmental movement out of business.") (O'Keefe & Daly 1993), a common theme of these angry reactionaries is that environmentalists need at the very least to "lighten up." Indeed, not unlike being labeled "politically correct" in the 1990s, "lighten up" has become a buzz phrase of sorts with which to attempt to put any number of social critics and organizations in their discursive and political place (Berman 1992).
In an interesting parallel dialogue with this popular anti-environmentalist discourse, we find a similar concern reflected in the writings and discussions of environmentalists themselves that popular environmentalist discourse has tended to be too “blame-based,” too heavy and negative to function rhetorically as an effective agent of popular social and behavioral change (Piasecki 1992). Historian and environmentalist Theodore Roszack articulated this concern in a recent interview:

Sometime in the mid-eighties I began to realize I was burning out as a writer and speaker on environmental issues because so much of what I was presenting was relentlessly negative. . . . I also began to realize that it was more and more difficult to connect with the people I was addressing. They were going numb on me or turning hostile. I see this not just in my own experience but in a backlash to the environmental movement. . . . People were beginning to feel the movement’s philosophy was based on a sweeping vilification of American society and culture (Miller 1994: 6).

Significantly, one of the common themes in the comedies which concern us directly in this study -- one of the ways in which environmentalism is couched within these comic stories -- might well be described as that of being “lightening up.” And even in those episodes in which the theme of lightening up isn’t overtly embraced, these are each comic vehicles, with the formal intentions to “make light of,” or “to find the humor in” the issues which are situated into their narrative worlds and which confront the regular characters who inhabit and define that narrative world.

To the degree that primetime commercial broadcast television remains our “most widely accessed cultural medium,” as Condit (1990) describes it, and thus is central to “the ways in which public . . . discourse [makes] the crucial transition into the cultural vocabularies of everyday life,” what is there textually, formally, aesthetically about the half-hour television comedy that gives a particular spin to that “crucial transition” (123)? And what, might we speculate from there, are the possible results of
that spin on the quality of our “cultural vocabularies”? Are there ways that the formal features of television narrative might offer rhetorical avenues for the “lightening up” of environmentalist discourse? Might “sitcom environmentalism” be an antidote or response to this distinctly rhetorical problem?

*  *  *

One answer to the question of how these topics came to be included in the first place is found in the institutional practices of the broadcast television industry itself, and in what Betsy Williams (1994) has recently described as the “essential tension between aesthetics and economics” that has long informed those practices.

“Historically,” Williams writes, “that tension has played itself out in many ways -- in 1950s debates over live versus filmed programming, hour-long drama versus half-hour situation comedies, quiz show scandals, or in the network responses to regulatory criticism, such as FCC chairman Newton Minnow’s 1961 characterization of the medium as ‘a vast wasteland’” (143). In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the television industry found itself in yet another “moment of industry crisis,” this one resulting from a combination of factors:

- the FCC’s Cigarette Ad Ban cut the network’s revenue base by 12 percent and the FCC’s Syndication and Financial Interest Rules further reduced the networks’ profits from syndication, while creating opportunities for independent producers such as Grant Tinker, Larry Gelbart, and Norman Lear. More importantly . . . the A. C. Nielsen Company began measuring audiences demographically in response to advertiser pressures. (143)

  The television industry’s responses to these institutional pressures and shifts -- the movement out of the barnyard and into the age of relevancy and quality demographics -- along with corresponding changes in television’s textual and signifying
practices -- the creation of quality television and a comedy renaissance -- are now among the most familiar and oft-told historical tales in television studies (in addition to Williams 1994, see Barnouw 1984, Feuer 1984, Kerr 1984 and Boyd-Bowman 1985). For our interests here, what is important to recall from these histories is that when in 1970-71 it became apparent to the networks that including topical or controversial social issues that concerned the new demographically-defined and targeted audience groups could make the difference in attracting these audiences to the program and in turn selling those audiences to particularly interested advertisers, the producers of both half-hour comedies and hour-long dramatic programming began going out of their way to do just that. The principal signposts for this “shift to relevancy” from within comedic programming in particular were Grant Tinker’s The Mary Tyler Moore Show, Norman Lear’s All in the Family and Larry Gelbart’s M*A*S*H, comedies which, in Jane Feuer’s (1994) words, were “engaged with their times, often to the point of encompassing overtly political themes with a progressive bent,” and which pointed to the half-hour comedy’s decided status as that decade’s “form-in-dominance” (560).

Since that time the overt use of topicality and controversy in half-hour television comedies has varied from season to timeslot to series. Continued refinements in industrial conceptions of audience (Larsen 1992), significant political and cultural swings nationally, and a steady increase in the power and influence of citizen-based special interest pressure groups on network programming practices (Montgomery 1989) suggest some reasons for such variations. In fact, many were predicting the very extinction of the “sitcom domesticus” itself in the mid-1980s, when the overwhelming popularity of Dallas, Dynasty and hour-long melodramas in general, and the consistent inability of half-hour comedies to place regularly among the top-ten programs, appeared
to spell the exhaustion of television’s staple narrative form (S. Horowitz 1987). But as the television industry’s continual “creative” tension between economics and aesthetics would have it, these predictions proved premature.

The sharply rising costs of producing film-style hour-long dramas forced many independent producers to reconsider the far cheaper half-hour proscenium comedy. The scheduling and narrational difficulties of syndicating hour-long serials as opposed to half-hour episodic situation comedies became apparent as the megahit Dallas did less than spectacularly in syndicated reruns. The competitive inroads being made on “network territory” by non-broadcast alternatives such as cable television and the video rental market began to really take their toll on network dominance. And then came the The Cosby Show in 1984, whose hugely successful and widely imitated return to the traditional formal roots of television comedy seemed to push a renewed industry faith and audience faithfulness in the half-hour comedy. This renewal is spelled out in the following statistics taken from Brooks & Marsh (1992):

** 1983-84 season: twenty-two sitcoms are included in the initial line-up, none of which place among the top-ten shows by the season’s end.
** 1984-85 season: again, twenty-two sitcoms scheduled at the start of the season, but two of these (The Cosby Show and Family Ties) are rated among the top ten by the season’s end, with an additional four (Cheers, Newhart, Kate & Allie and Night Court) placing among the top twenty.
** 1985-86 season: The Cosby Show goes to the number one spot (where it will remain for the next five years), joining five other sitcoms among the top ten, and an additional five in the top twenty.
** 1990-91 season: sitcoms occupy seven of the top ten slots for the season, along with another five in the top twenty, while the overall number of sitcoms in the season’s starting gate climbs to forty-eight.

By the early 1990s, the period of programming from which our sample is taken, the industrial and cultural dominance of the television comedy was reestablished, albeit in a radically altered programming environment in which the networks could count on
reaching two-thirds of the audience they once reached in the early 1970s (Williams 1994: 144).

In reviewing the story lines of such late '80's and early '90s favorites as Roseanne, Murphy Brown, The Golden Girls and Designing Women, it is clear that including topical and controversial issues of the day remained a viable means of serving the industrial needs of these increasingly competitive networks, needs that included differentiating their product, piquing the interest of non-regular viewers with the promise of a particularly controversial episode, and continuing to pitch at and reach particular demographically-defined audiences by featuring particular kinds of issues and topics. We can presume that this industrial imperative accounts for the widespread inclusion of the topic of environmentalism in many of these comedies. Indeed, recalling how Fran McConnell, executive vice president of comedy at Columbia Pictures, put it, environmentalism is "one issue that everyone can get involved in. There's no downside to it" (Hickey 1990: 22). As was the case twenty years earlier in television's shift to relevancy, it remains good business to include socially potent issues in popular comedy forms, particularly issues which are perceived by those who stand most to profit from this shift as having "no downside."

And yet an important question remains concerning the aesthetic appropriateness of television comedy as a context for the cultural presentation or discussion of important social issues and questions. What happens to "serious discourse" such as environmentalist discourse when it is placed into the comic idiom of popular television comedies? Responses to this question vary widely.

There is a constant process of drawing and redrawing the often fine line between provocative and offensive to the imagined and desired audience. This process
is central to the balancing act that goes on between writers, producers, network censors, advertisers and lobbyist groups in determining programming content, particularly controversial or socially "relevant" material (Montgomery 1989). Specific to comedy, this process often calls up rather generalized and unexamined assumptions about the comedy format itself tending to undercut or trivialize whatever serious matters it might address. Buxton (1992) finds an example of this attitude reflected from within the industry in the comments of Cosby Show consultant Alvin Poussaint (orig. qtd. in Dyson 1989):

The sitcom formula also limits the range of what are considered appropriate story lines; audiences tune in to be entertained, not to be confronted with social problems. Critical social disorders, like racism, violence, and drug abuse, rarely lend themselves to comic treatment; trying to deal with them on a sitcom could trivialize issues that deserve serious, thoughtful treatment. (92)

Other television comedy creators, perhaps most particularly Norman Lear, reject the idea that comedy cannot be a serious or thoughtful narrative form, or that entertainment is simply a matter of maintaining apolitical laughter.

[O]ur primary obligation in theatre is to entertain and I try never to lose sight of that. If we couldn’t made a story entertaining, we would not do the story. But I didn’t feel the obligation was to make an audience laugh only. An audience is entertained when it’s involved, involved to the point of tears or laughter. So I began openly to say, “I don’t feel an obligation just to make an audience laugh; I feel an obligation to treat an audience to the best we could provide in dramatic entertainment -- laugh or cry.” (Newcomb & Alley 1983: 192).

Of course, this is Norman Lear, a television creator who is credited with altering “the entire concept of the situation comedy,” and creating “a new American television form” in the process (179). But even Garry Marshall, producer of The Odd Couple, Happy Days and Mork & Mindy, shows which are rarely cited for their controversial or topical
content, has suggested, albeit obliquely, that comedy is in some ways the preferable form for the investigation of social issues: "You take it from Pogo better than from a man in a suit" (248).

Other responses seem to suggest that the emphasis on programming format as a determining factor is overstated, if not beside the point. For members of the Environmental Media Association (EMA), for instance, the Hollywood environmentalist lobbyists who work to create and then applaud the mere mention of recycling in a television program as roundly as they do the inclusion of entire storylines concerning recycling, the enthusiasm for primetime environmentalism of any sort, comic or otherwise, might be said to rest simply in its existence. If the comedy is popular, their approach seems to say, this means the message is seen by millions. Whatever that popular comedy "brings up" topically is thus brought up publically, disseminated on a mass scale. Members of the EMA have invoked what we might call "The Fonzie Incident" several times in interviews and organizational newsletters, displaying a belief that formal or aesthetic questions remain secondary to the presumed ability of narrative elements or occurrences to transcend their narrative context in ultimately unpredictable and hopefully socially proactive ways. EMA President Andy Spahn synopsizes "The Fonzie Incident" in this way: "There is the famous incident where the Fonz on ABC's Happy Days goes into a library and gets a library card -- utterly tangential to the plot. And the next day literally millions of kids inundated the nation's libraries to the extent where [the libraries] couldn't meet the demand. That's the reach of the TV medium we want to tap into" (Wood 1990). The apocryphal power of this tale, and of "the reach" it suggests television has, is simply accepted. The seemingly inherent "power" of environmentalist thought will simply "do its work" once "out there," and the EMA can
Communications and popular culture critic Neil Postman (1985) might also dismiss the question of comedy's appropriateness as a secondary concern at best, though for reasons far different from those of the EMA. Regardless of the specific context or program type, Postman suggests, our primary worry over television is that the very epistemology created by and manifested through the medium of televisual communication strips our culture of a seriousness and an ability to maintain rational discourse and so logical thought. Comedies are only one program type within the larger problem, which is television itself. It is via television, and not simply comedy that we are, as Postman's famous phrase puts it, amusing ourselves to death.

As we see in the work of Gitlin (1987), on the other hand, formal concerns can matter very much, and The Fonzie Incident may simply exemplify the hegemonic process that is central to television's role as a primetime ideology machine to relay, reproduce, process, package and refocus "ideology that is constantly arising both from social elites and from active social groups and movements throughout the society" (510). This is a process of domesticating potentially divisive issues through formal storytelling devices which "encourage viewers to experience themselves as anti-political, privately accumulating individuals," rather than as members of politically--and culturally-determined social groups (510). We laugh away the issues situated into the comedy, issues which individualized characters must respond to, assimilate for the moment, and then forget about from within their preordained world of formula and genre, of setting and character type. We change our habits as individual consumers or as families of consumers, we recycle our bottles and cans, while remaining oblivious to the
industrial and social systems which define us as consumers in the first place (see also Ewen 1988).

Hamamoto (1989) offers a far more positive reading of the half-hour television comedy, seeing its ability to go beyond the insidious flexibility and reach of hegemony and extend what Kellner (1987) has described as “emancipatory popular culture” to society at large. “To a greater degree than perhaps any other popular art,” he writes, the situation comedy has offered oppositional ideas, depicted oppression and struggle, and reflected a critical consciousness that stops just short of political mobilization. More than the simple reflection of hegemonic class interests, reduced to the “dominant ideology” of the corporate capitalist order, the situation comedy has embodied emancipatory beliefs proven to have had deep resonance with its diverse audience. (2)

The process of domestication and containment of these “emancipatory tendencies in situation comedies” occurs not from within the formal aspects of the program itself, but as a result of the larger commercial broadcast system through which these comedies are produced and distributed.

[The logic of the commercial media and communications industries admits only the “profitability factor, not the viewer/listener’s wants and needs,” which tends to repress the full development of democratic culture and society. Although emancipatory democratic values have always informed the situation comedy, the realization of such values in actual practice has been woefully restricted by the commercial system of television (2).]

For Jane Feuer (1994), the issue is best confronted in a question having less to do with its being a comic form per se than with a series narrative strategy common to both comedies and dramas: is the series primarily episodic (thus requiring a resolution of a given storyline for the sake of weekly closure) or open-ended (allowing storylines to remain unresolved)? Considering situation comedies from the “relevancy period,” Feuer suggests that
Although sitcoms contained overtly liberal “messages,” their strong drive toward narrative closure tended to mask contradictions and force a false sense of social integration by the end of each episode. For example, the problems raised by All in the Family had to have easy solutions within the family so that a new “topical” issue could be introduced in the next episode. (560)

Thus the narrative form known as the situation comedy is assumed to be “limited by its own conservatism,” and so not a particularly good or effective narrative context in which to explore, for instance, the progressive potential of environmentalism.

Though Feuer and Gitlin at least begin to move into formal specifics with which to support their critical claims, a good number of specifics remain to be considered, questions having to do with formula (situation comedies vs. domestic comedies, character comedies vs. domesticated workplace comedies), character constellation (central axial vs. ensemble), production style (proscenium vs. film style) and the types of humor constructed and laughter induced by these comedies (e.g., laughter of surprise vs. laughter of recognition). Indeed, central to each of the formal narrational elements of television comedies is the “telling” of the good joke, the comic moment, the funny character, the hilarious storyline. Perhaps this is what Alvin Poussaint meant by “audiences tune in to be entertained.” There exists an implicit contract between creator and receiver; the expectations of comic entertainment are deeply ingrained and expected on both ends. But implied in this use of “entertainment” is the idea that comedy, humor and laughter exist somewhere outside the serious construction and reconstruction of culture itself.

This misguided idea is challenged by Jonathan Miller (1988), who conceives of and explores the nature of jokes and joking as a “serious laughing matter.” Like a sneeze, laughter (or “convulsing respiratorily”) is an involuntary action. But unlike
sneezing, responding to humorous prompts requires a certain “frame of mind” through
which to receive and interpret the comic construct. As with the engagement of any
fictional or imaginative discourse, in other words, there is in the discourse of humor a
willing suspension of disbelief, an act of attendance to the comedy.

This activity, this cognitive process of interpreting and making meaning of a
joke, is defined by Brownell, Hiram & Gardner (1988) in the following manner (which I
quote here at length as I will be returning to its particulars later in the chapter):

Several scholars in different disciplines have identified two components of
the joke as a unit of discourse, i.e., as a narrative form. We have labelled
these components “surprise” and “coherence.” A joke begins by
establishing an expectancy in the opening lines. Listening to the beginning
of a joke, a subject uses his or her knowledge of the world to predict what
should happen next. The punch line, however, is surprising in that it
violates the expectancy. Upon hearing the punch line, the subject realizes
that his or her prediction has been disconfirmed and that the punch line is
incongruous. After that realization, the subject must work to establish the
coherence of the punch line with the beginning of the joke. The subject
reinterprets the punch line by figuring out how it might fit with the
beginning of the joke after all. Indeed, the success of a joke rests on the
“goodness of fit” between the punch line and what has come before, once
the initial incongruity has been appreciated. (22)

The “value” of this decidedly discursive process, speculates Miller, and its physical
embodiment in the form of laughter “may lie in the fact that it involves the rehearsal of
alternative categories and classifications of the world in which we find ourselves” (11).
Thus when exploring the cultural realm of jokes and laughter, we are imagining the
“spatial” distinctions and differences between humorous discourse and serious
discourse: “When we are in the domain of humorous discourse -- i.e., those cognitive
situations which actually bring about laughter -- we almost always encounter rehearsals,
playings with and redesignings of the concepts by which we conduct ourselves during
periods of seriousness” (11).
Miller, who is an M.D. among other things, posits an “evolutionary pay-off” in this process: as social creatures, we operate by “rule of thumb” in everyday life, holding to the familiar structures through which we construct a common sense. But were we to lock onto these structures, these “categories and constructs” rigidly, inflexibly, “we would not continue to be a successful, productive and above all socially cooperative species” (11-12).

What we require, then, is some sort of sabbatical let-out in one part of the brain and one part of our competence to enable us to put things up for grabs; to reconsider categories and concepts so that we can redesign our relationship to the physical world, to one another, and even to our notion of what it is to have relationships. (12)

Humor is thus conceived of in powerful and actively cultural terms of both stasis and change. Jokes “rub our noses in some of the basic ideas by which we live [while allowing] us to reconsider these notions, and (if appropriate) to revise them” (13). Or put another way, jokes provide “opportunities for us to throw previously rigid categories into the air, and thus to reconsider the concepts by which we think and live” (14).

Of course, what is for Miller the means by which we survive as a species, and by which social structures are both created and maintained, may well be for Gitlin the means by which the status quo is maintained, the uneven distribution of social and economic power is achieved, and dominant powers hegemonically maintain themselves and their control:

[T]he hegemonic system itself amplifies legitimated forms of opposition. In liberal capitalism, hegemonic ideology develops by domesticating opposition, absorbing it into forms compatible with the core ideological structure. Consent is managed by absorption as well as by exclusion. The hegemonic ideology changes in order to remain hegemonic; that is the peculiar nature of the dominant ideology of liberal capitalism. (326)
Still, the power that resides within the hegemonic, and which must carry the capacity to link up with or itself become a force which operates beyond the hegemonic, if indeed change is even a possibility, is ultimately the power of change, of contradiction, of conflict. Miller’s thoughts on humor and laughter, along with social histories of American comedy (Marc 1989), remind us that humor is often considered dangerous precisely because of its capacity for change from within its status as entertainment, or recreation. “I think what we are seeing here,” writes Miller,

is the notion of the jocular as a kind of sabbatical section of the mind in which ‘off duty’ is celebrated. Being off-duty is bound up with refreshment and recreation. I would remind you that recreation is in fact re-creation. It is the rehearsal, the re-establishment of concepts. (15)

Here Miller is invoking Bakhtinian (1981) notions of a world whose structures are “subverted during carnival time,” allowing us to “rehearse and revise the categories by which we live for the rest of the year.” One may also hear echoes of the ideas of liminality offered up by Victor Turner’s (1974, 1977; see also Newcomb & Hirsch 1983) studies of ritual and the cultural experience of engagement. “Through humor”, Miller (1988) writes, “we are not so much the slaves of the rules of life as the voluntary survivors of them” (16). If voluntary is the key word to understanding the power of hegemony under a liberal late-capitalism, it is also central to understanding on a micro-cultural level, the power of cultural stasis and change. In volunteerism is choice.

Thus I remain centrally interested in that theoretical space, activity or relationship between text and reader -- between television and society -- with particular interest in recognizing the place and function of the aesthetic and formal elements of the text in that relationship. Because these are comedies we are studying, texts with a primary purpose, arguably, to create humor and induce laughter as part of the

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experience of active engagement, we might rephrase this as being a critical interest in
the relationship between the joke (a textual matter) and laughter (an interpretive matter).
Questions as to whether the televisual text is open or closed, whether it functions
hegemonically or embodies emancipatory tendencies, are in a sense being recast
through this single inquiry: what is happening when I laugh at television comedy? What
is specific, that is, about the engagement with comedic narrative? What are the
functions of the jokes (irony, ridicule, satire) that are told through the narrative strategies
of the episodes, or that the episodes themselves, as self-contained comic structures,
“tell” in an overall sense? And, what does all this “do to” a “serious” issue such as
environmentalism?

To pursue these questions as they apply to the inclusion of environmentalist
discourse in particular, I analyze individual episodes of the seven television comedy
series included in the study’s sample according to how each comedy has narratively
posited and explored the political complexities and potential meanings of
environmentalism. The seven comedies have been organized into two chapters based
on one of their primary narrational components, their genre or story formula. Chapter
Five will consider the four variations on the ensemble workplace comedy (Night Court,
Murphy Brown, Major Dad and A Different World), and Chapter Six will follow with a
look at the remaining three comedies, the fantasy comedy or magicom (Harry and the
Hendersons), the dramedy (Dream On) and finally the anti-sitcom (The Simpsons).
The analysis will focus on the ways in which these series work narratively, according to
their charge as comic forms, to “lighten up the heaviness” of the environmental topics
they have included, while still allowing the topic some degree of wholeness and
consistency unto itself. As we will see, the very idea or possibility of “progressive"
television comedy may well include the processes of ridiculing, satirizing or skewering the characters who bring into their comic world some very serious and very important environmentalist ideas and discursive threads.
Chapter Five

Environmentalism and the Ensemble Workplace Comedy

As is the case with all seven of the half-hour comedies being considered in this study, the four comedies to which we turn in this chapter, Night Court, Murphy Brown, Major Dad and A Different World, are each very different comedies from one another. Each is constructed around a distinct set of aesthetic features and formal variations, and so establishes a unique delivery and rhetorical voice through a highly structured comic context. But of course this is television, popular art emerging from a massively imitative, recombinatory system of creation and recreation. So each series also shares important formulaic qualities with the others, and with the nearly half-century’s worth of half-hour television comedies that have preceeded them. Central to the qualities held in common by these four comedies is the story formula we might label the ensemble workplace comedy.

As the moniker itself suggests, the ensemble workplace comedy is typically structured around a constellation of regular, recurring characters who have by circumstance come together to share, for better or worse, a common and usually public space outside of their respective homes and domestic lives. This shared space is usually a workplace, as with the courtroom in Night Court, the military base offices of the Major and his staff in Major Dad, or the FYI newsroom in Murphy Brown. And though not literally workplaces per se, the campus dorm rooms, classrooms and food joint hangouts of A Different World serve that series’s ensemble of college students in much the same manner. As we will see, this focus on the shared workplace as the central setting does not preclude these comedies from “going home” on occasion, and

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exploring the explicitly domestic or non-professional lives of its central characters. But it is primarily in the “domesticated workplace,” the “home” made of a shared public space and marked by an emotional, psychological and interpersonal interconnectedness among its “family members” of employees, bosses, friends and regulars, that we find the narrative and comic nucleus of ensemble workplace comedies (Schatz 1987).

The narrative possibilities of this domesticated workplace were initially explored decades earlier in such 1950s comedies as Our Miss Brooks, Mr. Peepers and The Phil Silvers Show, or later in such 1960s comedies as The Dick Van Dyke Show and The Andy Griffith Show. These comedies offered an alternative to what Hamamoto (1989) describes as the “cult of domesticity that centered around mom, pop, and family” that informed the situation comedies (I Love Lucy) and domestic comedies (Father Knows Best) of the 1950s (Newcomb 1974). They did so in part by expanding beyond the fairly strict concentration in the earlier formulas on the idealized post-war suburban homes and lives that white, working-class (The Honeymooners) or ethnically-identified (The Life of Riley) American families were struggling to achieve, or in which newly-defined middle-class white Protestant families (The Donna Reed Show, Leave it to Beaver) were already firmly ensconced. This narrative and ideological expansion was physically realized to a large extent by including in the comedy’s setting the central character’s workplace as a context for character interaction. This setting became as integral to the series’ narrative as that of their homes, and often threatened to in fact replace it, perhaps particularly in the 1950s comedies.

Thus, while Rob and Laura Petrie from The Dick Van Dyke Show spent a great deal of narrative time exploring domestic comedy in their Kennedy-era suburban tract home with their only child Richie and neighbors Millie and Jerry Helper, Rob also had
his work-family of Sally, Buddy and Mel with whom to explore and in many ways define the comedic potential of the domesticated workplace (Marc 1989). Likewise, when Sheriff Taylor of The Andy Griffith Show wasn't dealing with the foibles of domesticity at home with Aunt Bee and son Opie, he was down at the courthouse functioning as father figure to Barney, Opie, Floyd, Goober, Otis, Howard, Emmet or Thelma Lou.

By expanding the physical boundaries in which the comedic interactions between the regular characters could occur, the domesticated workplace format in turn increased the number of those both regular and recurring characters, as the list just given of supporting characters from The Andy Griffith Show indicates. Important to this workplace setting and character constellation was the consequential expansion of the topical range of concerns available to the comedy, moving from generative narrative conflicts based on situated issues which directly affected and were resolved by the Father-dominated nuclear family in its suburban home, to conflicts raised by what we might think of as the more public or community-based concerns of the workplace. This is not to suggest, as Newton Minow would remind us, that Our Miss Brooks, The Andy Griffith Show or The Dick Van Dyke Show situated overtly controversial or socially immediate topical material into its weekly episodic turns in a regular manner. As was explored briefly in the previous chapter, it would take a major change in advertising and programming strategies during television's rather abrupt transition from "wasteland" to the "land of relevancy" during the early 1970s before any significant shifts in the overt topical concerns of popular television comedy would occur.

But the point remains that the narrative contexts through which commercial television might fulfill its function as the culture's centralmost storytelling forum
expanded with the creation of the workplace comedy. The move from a singular focus on the new suburban idealized family and home as the context for “working out” (ideologically as well as comically) that week’s situation, to one which included this multiple-charactered workplace, allowed for the series to create an expanded context and a greater number of ideological positions in the guise of character traits and viewpoints. While father still seemed to know best at home, he began finding he had much more ideological variety to deal with in his quasi-family at work. Indeed, these differences often served as the very source of narrative conflict and comic potential in workplace comedies.

It was All in the Family, of course, which quickly established itself as the flagship series of what is commonly called the “comedy renaissance” of the 1970s, a renaissance marked by an unprecedented alignment of topical concerns and episodic conflicts with difficult, controversial political, social and cultural issues of the day. But formally, All in the Family reached back to a blend of the traditional domestic and situation comedies of the 1950s (most obviously to Jackie Gleason’s The Honeymooners), and planted itself firmly in the Bunker home (Barker 1987). It is in M*A*S*H, and more particularly in The Mary Tyler Moore Show, whose formal roots are directly tied to workplace comedies of the 1960s, that we find instructive connections to the ensemble workplace comedies of today.

Perhaps the most important of these connections was the shift brought on by The Mary Tyler Moore Show in narrative balance between the nuclear family at home and the workplace family at work that the earlier workplace comedies had established. Gone were Andy Taylor’s Opie and Aunt Bee, or Rob Petrie’s Laura and Richie, or any immediate family waiting for Mary Richards back in some semblance of a 1950s home.
Instead, Mary was a single professional broadcast news producer whose only “family” was that of her numerous coworkers at the station, along with a few friends and neighbors (also mostly single) from her apartment building. This pushed the narrative balance well to the side of the increasingly domesticated workplace as the primary site of character conflict and comic negotiation. And though Mary remained the character around whom the overall series was centrally organized, in the same way that Murphy Brown’s character functions in *Murphy Brown*, or the Major’s character does in *Major Dad*, she was just as importantly a single member of an ensemble of regular and often equally-weighted primary and secondary characters. If the larger character constellations of the 1960s workplace comedies began to anticipate a larger range of ideological positions around narratively-positioned social conflicts and issues, it is fair to suggest that the move into ensemble-based comedy begun by *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* and continued by subsequent ensemble workplace comedies such as *Alice*, *Barney Miller*, *Taxi* and *Cheers*, forced that anticipation into overt and active use.

It is both through and against the traditional elements of this comic formula, which I have suggested turns most particularly on a domesticated workplace setting and an expanded ensemble of regular, primary characters, that *Night Court*, *A Different World*, *Major Dad* and *Murphy Brown* distinguish themselves, and thereby situate the particular thread of environmentalist rhetoric that each incorporates into its narrative world. Though we remain interested in exploring and considering the dialogical relations of every formal element and discursive voice in these story forms, I foreground what I take to be the more prominent structural and narrational features of each sampled episode in order to consider the extent to which structural prominence means ideological dominance, and to explore what in each case these questions might tell us
of the manner in which environmentalist rhetoric and discourse is being “lightened” and entertained in these comedies.

Thus, I have organized and focused much of the analysis of these four comedies according to the relative centrality of the characters who have been assigned the narrative task of introducing and representing the language of particular environmental issues in each episode. I begin with Night Court and Murphy Brown, both of which assign their environmentalism to disposable, one-time-only episodic characters, and then move to Major Dad and A Different World, in which regular, recurring characters “speak” as environmentalists. As we will see, these differences in narrative agency matter, though always in relation to the corresponding franchise elements specific to each series.

Night Court

Night Court is in many ways a definitive ensemble workplace comedy, and thus a useful one with which to begin. It is set in a “carnival-like” New York City night courtroom. Its character constellation includes a cast of six to seven regular and centrally-positioned court employees (depending on the season), situated around the axial character of Judge Harry Stone and supported by a handful of recurring characters and a seemingly endless stream of episodic characters. Each of the ensemble of regular characters exhibits a set of predictable series-based character traits which are displayed, comically played off of, and ultimately reinforced within the context of virtually every episode. It is a narrative world, that is, in which the regular viewer can always depend on finding Harry’s style to be “unconventional and flippant,” or on “the bald, towering bailiff” Bull’s unflappable dimwittedness, or on the “nattily-dressed” D.A. Dan
Fielding’s “sex-starved” antics (Brooks & Marsh 646). These episodic traits are occasionally mixed on a series level with long-term narrative concerns. These larger, more expansive concerns are typically framed around interpersonal relationships and occurrences “outside” of (but rarely untouched by) the characters’ professional lives “inside” the night court. For instance, Brooks & Marsh describe one ongoing storyline during the 1990-91 season in which “sexy [legal-aid lawyer] Christine [Sullivan] married undercover cop Tony Guiliano and bore his child while he was off on a case, but they were divorced the following year. Shaken, she fell into Harry’s arms -- however, they finally decided that they made better friends than lovers” (646). These “ongoing” narrative lines did little to diminish the episodic qualities of individual installments, however. Indeed, in terms of character and overall series development, Night Court remains the most episodic and ultimately static of the four ensemble workplace comedies we are concerned with here. These “cumulative” tendencies seem to have been restricted to serving as expanded “base lines” against which to continue to play the weekly topical and episodic material.

The public nature of the courtroom setting lends itself to, perhaps even insists on, the introduction of a large range of public concerns, social issues and controversies. In Night Court, however, these concerns are typically introduced by way of the comic weirdos, sad sacks and street creatures of the fictional New York nights who are arrested and brought before the judge and his “family” to plead their case. These episodic and sometimes occasional characters, and the situational issues they drag in with them, function by definition as narrative foils for the pre-established episodic world to find and re-situate itself. But as the essence of Night Court’s humor, and so the focus of its franchise elements, is the constant barrage of wisecracks and one-liners from the regular
characters, the social issues these episodic characters introduce rarely function as sources of narrative exploration. Instead they serve to initiate and contextualize the familiar and expected character traits of the regular characters. And the episodic characters who embody these issues tend to serve as comic fools, grist for the Lear-style insult mill.

The episode of Night Court included in our sample follows these series-based "rules" of narrative formula and franchise closely: the environmental idea that there are inherent dangers in introducing human-made viral strands and biocides into the ecosystem is introduced to the show, but ultimately serves the narrative as little more than a plot device. The episode opens with a "crazed" scientist, complete with white lab coat and bug-eyed intensity, being brought into the courtroom on charges of breaking and entering into Sunrise Chemicals, his former place of employment. "They had me experimenting with new viruses," the scientist explains, "bacterial weapons that could run amuck and threaten the world." Trying to "blow the whistle on the whole mad operation," as defense attorney Christine Sullivan puts it, the scientist was caught breaking into the lab at night and stealing what he took to be a sample virus to use as proof of this company's ecological irresponsibility. When he pulls the stolen sample out of his labcoat pocket to show the court, Bull, the court bailiff, sneaks up behind the scientist and tries to grab the glass container from him. In the ensuing scuffle, the container falls to the floor and smashes, its contents exposed to all in the courtroom.

Here the episode's environmental issue, based on a whistle-blowing variation on a direct-action environmentalist strategy, becomes "the situation" around which the remaining episode is constructed and to which the constellation of regular characters must respond. Sealed and quarantined in the courtroom until experts can determine
that the spilled material is and what its effects on those in the courtroom might be (something the scientist, who is trapped there with them, conveniently doesn’t know himself), the episode becomes a string of flashbacks “told” from the point of view of each regular member of the ensemble. The flashbacks account for the “twists of fate” which led each of them to this job in the New York City night court system. Structured around the breaks for advertisements, each flashback is punctuated by the insults that each of the principal ensemble members hurl at the scientist, whose personal actions, and not those of the company and its production of potentially deadly bio-chemical agents, are taken to have caused their problems. In the end, of course, all turns out well. The stolen and spilled material, much to the relief of the regular characters, and to the further embarrassment and ridicule of the environmentally-concerned scientist, turns out to have been pesto sauce that the Sunrise Chemical employees had concocted for that night’s dinner.

Given the franchise elements and requirements of Night Court, the crazed scientist and his ecological concerns over bioengineering serve the comic needs of the series well. An episodic character with very limited narrative agency, the scientist’s concerns and consequential actions are limited to providing a sort of topical backdrop against which to exhibit and laugh at the familiar character traits of our regular cast members. Interestingly, the flashback/backstory conceit of this episode adds to the regular viewer’s overall series-based knowledge of these regular characters, while simultaneously reinforcing their unchanging episodic qualities. In the surly court matron Roz’s flashback, for instance, we find that she was once a surly (and therefore unsuccessful) airline stewardess. Or we learn that Christine, the attractive and somewhat
politically-conscious defense lawyer, was once an attractive and somewhat politically-conscious (and therefore unsuccessful) beauty pageant contestant.

In the meantime, we learn nothing of the scientist, the implications of his former company's work, or of the environmental issues and ecological dangers surrounding the practices of bioengineering. Of course, we must recognize that the character of the scientist does at least give voice to the idea that there may well be environmentally-troubling questions surrounding bioengineering, and represents the environmentalist strategy of direct action (ends justifying means) and the ecophilosophical questions of trade-off and balance. These are important things that his character introduces to the discursive forum or arena created by televisual storytelling (Newcomb & Hirsch 1983). But in considering the power that his role in the overall narrative schema has in shaping that arena's representation of these ideas, we recognize that this scientist functions solely as a narrative disruption. Once this disruption is overcome, and the equilibrium of the narrative world is reestablished, the environmentalist scientist, like so many episodic characters before him and after him, is left to disappear into the episodic New York night, just another Night Court crazy.

There is little in this comedy's narrative structure as it is defined by its episodic format and its constellation of characters and the consequential agency of those characters, that lends itself to being an effective dialogic site for the introduction and examination of "serious" social concerns. The "hegemony of its textual intentions," to borrow a phrase from Newcomb's (1984) introduction of Bakhtinian dialogic analysis to the study of mass-mediated texts such as television programs, certainly suggests "the ascendancy of one 'word' over another" -- in this case, the "word" of familiarity and hilarity as presented by the wisecracks of the regular ensemble of characters over that of
the scientist. Yet Bakhtin argued for analytical attention to be paid to the minor and seemingly inconsequential textual elements as well.

Arguments among characters outline and highlight points of view. Resolution is usually, though not always, structured in dominance, in an acceptance, often strained, of the perspective of dominant ideology. But individual differences within the discussion may be equally as important as outcomes. These specific, perhaps aberrant perspectives may form the basis for individual responses to the program rather than the "narrative wholes" that attract the attention of critics. (42)

With this in mind, we might take note of the public relations officer from Sunrise Chemical. His is a one-shot episodic throwaway character, like that of the scientist. The reliability of Sunrise Chemical, and so the presentation of their pro-industrial "side" in the larger environmental discussion being comically introduced to the series, is satirically-skewered by this character's being played in a broadly suspect, comically untrustworthy manner. His motives are as shady as his slogans are silly: "Sunrise Chemicals, where we took the 'sick' out of toxic." Surely his character serves to "balance" or offset or complicate the "dialogue" initiated by the scientist's arrival in the courtroom and shaped by his treatment once there.

And what of the individual jokes embedded within this narrative construct? While we are invited through alignment with the regular characters to laugh at the environmentalist scientist, and so presumably at the discursive constructs he embodies, Miller (1988) reminds us that individual jokes carry the potential to "enable us to put things up for grabs," and to rehearse the "alternative categories and classifications of the world in which we find ourselves" (11-12). Might the jokes and wisecracks which surround the appearance of the environmentally-concerned scientist be doing different discursive and ideological work than Night Court's overall narrative strategies seem to
be doing? Or must they simply and inevitably follow the suit established by their narrative world?

For instance, when the scientist is first brought into the court, and desperately explains himself and his environmentally-concerned intentions, District Attorney Dan Fielding responds exactly as his character would dictate and as we would expect: with contempt and ridicule.

Dan Fielding: *You earth-loving wimps. ‘Save the trees.... save the whales.’ Ugh! Any fool could save a tree. It took American business to invent styrofoam.*

Close analysis indicates the ways in which this joke operates as a cognitive rehearsal of some of the categories and classifications through which environmentalist discourse is constructed and understood. Here we revisit Brownell & Gardner's (1988) formal description of how jokes work from Chapter Four. (I use italics to offset their writing from my application of it here.) A *joke begins by establishing an expectancy in the opening lines*, Brownell & Gardner (1988) remind us. The “expectancy” established in the opening lines of Dan’s joke is clearly based on an anti-environmentalist discourse. In this case, the anti-environmentalism is given a popular Bush-era macho inflection by relegating all who might “love the earth” as “foolish wimps.”

The punchline, however, is surprising in that it violates the expectancy. Upon hearing the punchline, the subject realizes that his or her prediction has been disconfirmed and the punch line is incongrous. Dan’s punchline -- “It took American business to invent styrofoam” -- makes the incongruous suggestion that “American business,” which is often popularly constructed as an “opposing force” to environmentalism, proved its comparative “non-wimpiness” by inventing styrofoam. This line is only incongruous with what came before it, of course, if the referent
*styrofoam* is understood by the listener to be among the most inherently unsustainable and ecologically damaging of industrial products. Thus the joke invokes and depends upon the listener's familiarity with, though not necessarily sympathy for, a systemic, ecological discourse of interconnectedness as it concerns styrofoam?

*After that realization, the subject must work to establish the coherence of the punchline with the beginning of the joke. The subject reinterprets the punchline by figuring out how it might fit with the beginning of the joke after all.* Dan's choice of this particular image as the ultimate in manliness and the "knowhow" of American business serves as an ironic means of undercutting the anti-environmentalist discourse with which the joke began, and on which the listener's expectancy of an anti-environmental discourse was established. Presuming a certain knowledge and corresponding attitude toward styrofoam on the part of the listener, this joke does manage to put often contentious and difficult discursive constructs up for grabs, juxtaposing them in an unexpected and comic fashion. *Indeed, the success of a joke rests on the 'goodness of fit' between the punch line and what has come before, once the initial incongruity has been appreciated.* From a pro-environmentalist perspective, it seems safe to claim that the result of this juxtapositioning is a skewering of anti-environmentalist attitudes by tying them to stupidly macho and blindly reactionary pro-industrialist beliefs of the sort that Dan Fielding consistently represents in this series.

Of course, the closeness and specificity of this sort of analysis should warn us away from making corresponding generalizations or claims as concerns its rhetorical "power." But it also serves to remind us of the multi-layered complexity of cultural construction. And so we must entertain the possibility that this joke alone may well

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have served to mix and rework "the cultural vocabulary of everyday life," as Condit (1990) would have it, in a pro-environmentalist or anti-industrialist manner.

With that stated, however, do we really "understand" the textuality of a joke such as this when we consider it apart from its narrative context? After all, the potential richness or full resonance of this joke is not simply a matter of its internal workings. For the regular viewers who have come to know on a series level the predictable and static character traits that make up Dan Fielding's character -- sex-starved, obnoxious, sexist, right-winger -- this joke should be seen as in fact reinforcing rather than violating their expectations of the narrative world they know of as Night Court. While the laughter on the soundtrack that accompanies this joke may well have been "induced" by the formal discursive means of anticipation, violation and appreciation explored just above, it is simultaneously a laughter of character recognition and reward that, like the joke itself, is embedded in its series-based narrative context. The regular viewer who knows Dan in fact looks for the joke to go this way. The expectancy is met and all is right with the world when Dan comes out with a line like this; the introduction of environmentalism is once again merely the contextual material against which this series-based character can test his predictability.

This suggests a dialogic dynamic between the insistently disruptive cultural role played by individual jokes and by humor in general, and the simultaneous function these same jokes serve as moments of reinforcement from within a relatively static and predictable narrative universe. This dynamic is found in the jokes of each regular character in Night Court, not simply in that of Dan Fielding. Indeed, it is a dynamic that exists in every comedy we are considering in this study. The environmentalist ecocentric "worry" over bioengineering, and the decision to employ direct action
environmentalism in response to that worry, is arguably lightened up. But in the process, the franchise demands on the narrative world of Night Court would seem to drain the issue of any other discursive function other than to serve as contextual fodder for its episodic string of jokes and its series-based flow of ridicule.

This critical judgment becomes clearer as we compare this episode of Night Court with one from the very popular CBS ensemble workplace comedy Murphy Brown. As with Night Court, we again have an example in which discursive threads of ecological threats to the environment and the political strategies of direct action are voiced or represented by episodic characters. Much like the scientist in Night Court, the three environmentalist characters in this episode of Murphy Brown are played primarily for laughs, and they get them. But there are distinct differences in their overall function as episodic characters as well, differences having to do with other narrative strategies that structure the comedy of Murphy Brown, differences which allow the environmentalist characters to exist -- and so allow their environmentalism to resonate -- as something more than the sum of their parts as enablers of episodic comedy.

Murphy Brown

Murphy Brown is a direct descendant of The Mary Tyler Moore Show in several ways. Most obvious among them is the central premise of the series: single woman making it in the world of television news. And, like The Mary Tyler Moore Show, Murphy Brown is formulated as an ensemble character comedy centrally located in the central or axial character's domesticated workplace: the newsroom of FYI, the 60 Minutes-styled news program that brings this fictional workfamily together. The ensemble cast of series regulars includes: Murphy Brown, an "opinionated, sarcastic,
overbearing, and driven" veteran reporter; Jim Dial, "FYI's stuffy [and humorless] anchorman;" Frank Fontana, "the show's investigative journalist and Murphy's longtime friend;" Corky Sherwood, "a perky former Miss America;" and Miles Silverberg, the "enthusiastic but neurotic" young executive producer of FYI (Brooks & Marsh 1992: 610). Of course, these quick little descriptions seem woefully inadequate to those viewers who over the course of five years have watched these characters develop both group and individual identities and traits that go beyond these simply drawn ones, and that are the very essence of a successful ensemble comedy such as this one.

The comedy derives primarily from weekly ventures into this group of coworkers, with situations and comic conflicts arising most often from some episodic imbalance in the combined working and quasi-familial relations. Like the comedy of The Mary Tyler Moore Show, Murphy Brown's comedy, while certainly situational in context and physically performative in style and tone, also turns on character interrelations as well. This is what Jane Feuer has defined as character comedy, which is based on a "far more psychological and episodic formula in which . . . the situation itself becomes a pretext for the revelation of character," rather than simply a display of previously known and established traits (Feuer 1984). In addition, the newsroom setting insists upon the inclusion (or intrusion, as the case may be) of public "news" items from without that come into the workfamily's world to disrupt and provide the sort of "clash of languages" (Newcomb 1983) on which to base its episodic, ensemble comedy.

The use of settings outside of the newsroom include an almost weekly visit to Phil's, the bar and restaurant where the FYI team spends most of their mealtimes together, and a less frequent but still regular visit to Murphy's home. An interesting
recombination was made when Murphy became pregnant and, with the help of then Vice President Dan Quayle, became America's most famous single mother. This pulled in an interesting element of another dominant 1960s story formula, the single-parent domestic comedy. This time around, though, the single-parenthood was neither the result of a mate's untimely death as in The Courtship of Eddie's Father nor divorce, as in One Day at a Time, but of choice.

This episode is an excellent example of the ways in which series-based character traits -- those elements of identity which become a part of a character's predictable bag of tricks and ticks -- can be successfully isolated and played off in a given episode's situation or central point of conflict. In this case, it is Murphy's tendency to play practical jokes on people -- a tendency she is famous for within the narrative universe itself, and a character trait within the ongoing series text of Murphy Brown -- that is called up and used as a means of creating the situation which will inform this episode's variation on the theme. Again, this points to an important formal element of richness and quality in series-based half-hour comedies such as this: seeing what we already know about Murphy Brown's character being put to yet another test is a central source of pleasure in engaging with primetime televisual comedy.

It is into, or, rather, through this essential series narrative move, that the environmental aspect of this episode is introduced and given narrative life. As the episode opens, each member of the FYI ensemble is angry at Murphy for the recent string of practical jokes she has been playing on each of them. Miles's car has been towed away because Murphy put a handicap parking sign on his parking space. Frank has just discovered that Murphy has been paying his dry cleaner to take all of his pants in one inch, causing him to think he has been gaining weight. Corky is angry at
discovering that Murphy has sent an "autographed" photograph of Corky to Manuel Noreiga, a recent interviewee of hers, with "I'll be waiting for you..." handwritten on the photograph. And so on.

It is in the midst of this comedic riff on the defined interrelationships among characters that Murphy receives a call from someone claiming to have information on covert CIA operations in Chile. She rushes out of the newsroom, and we cut to a set built specifically for this episode to resemble the interior of a small RV. Murphy arrives at the trailer to find three men inside. One of the three men, Alex, explains to Murphy that in fact the CIA story had been a ruse of theirs to get her attention. In reality, he explains, the three of them are environmentalists from the Coalition to Preserve America's Resources.

Alex introduces the other two men, and as he does, it becomes clear that these three men are going to be played broadly as comic characters, each displaying the exaggerated and ultimately one-dimensional character traits that are typical of episodic characters in half-hour episodic comedies. Eliot Niebling, the group's microbiologist, is initially speechless at meeting Murphy Brown, but quickly proves to be the hot-headed, "overly-committed" character type who screams, "Why don't you people carpool!" out the RV window at other drivers. Marshall Caldwell is the group's "sensitive and earnest guy," who writes the group's newsletter and who belongs to Sierra Club, Common Cause and Mothers for a Nuclear Free World. "It's a pleasure, Ms. Brown," Marshall says gently to Murphy. "And let me commend you for not wearing ivory on your show." By comparison, Alex seems the more "normal" one, appearing to be a "nice guy" who is committed to his cause, and who has a few more leadership skills than his friends, and so has been designated the group's leader and spokesperson.
Immediately following the comic introductions, a clearly annoyed Murphy starts to leave. “Wait, please,” pleads Alex, the apparent leader of the three. “Let me get to the point.” And he does, embedding the external environmental issue with the internal structural imperatives in a comically-efficient manner.

Alex: For six years our group has been fighting to save Las Rivas, one of the most pristine stretches of wetlands in Oregon. Wetlands that are about to be destroyed to make way for a five-acre commercial development.

Eliot: A development that will dump millions of gallons of waste product into the waterway each year, creating a black hole out of what was once a richly diverse ecosystem that represents the very womb of our existence.

Marshall: They’re going to build a Sizzler. [big laugh]

Murphy: Let me guess. You want me to do a story on it.

All Three: Yes!

Murphy: Guys, guys... You didn't have to lie. I care about the environment. I separate my trash. I try not to use disposable products. I don't order water in restaurants unless I'm choking. I'd be more than happy to help you with the story.

All three men giggle and cheer with ridiculous delight.

Marshall: I knew you'd help us. You have kind eyes and you smell like sandalwood. [big laugh]

Murphy: Wait a minute. I don't think you understand. At this very moment, bulldozers stand ready to plow Las Rivas under. These wetlands help to filter our water and clean our air. We need you to do this piece on tomorrow night's show.

Murphy: Guys, I'd love to. But it doesn't work that way. Besides, tomorrow's show is already set. If I want to do a fair and accurate story, I'd need to fly to the area myself, talk with people involved, check out the facts...

Eliot (to the others): I knew it! I knew it! She's giving us the brush off. She's just like all those other newspeople. You know, last year the media couldn't wait to traipse all over the countryside, taking pictures of spotted owls and dying forests. Now... they're onto something new. Like this Twin Peaks thing. Who cares who killed Laura Palmer!?! [big laugh]

Murphy: Okay, that's a low blow. I don't view environmental issues like some passing fad. I respect your goals. I do. So give me your research. I've gotta go....
Murphy steps for the door, but the three stop her, voting on the spot to "move to plan B," which involves holding Murphy hostage until FYI agrees to produce and run their story immediately. Thus the exposition is established, and the episodic narrative is set to come out of its first commercial break and play off of this firmly situated issue: Murphy is being held hostage by ecoterrorists.

Let us consider this first or expositional act in detail for a moment. The three environmentalists are played as comic characters. Their portrayal takes full advantage of the performative aspects of the proscenium production style employed by Murphy Brown such as physical gesturing and timing to create the comic trio they become. This buffoonery on their part surely undercuts to some degree the seriousness of their "message," or the environmentalist concerns their dialogue and actions give voice to. The destruction of wetlands through industrial growth is a major concern of environmentalists for precisely the ecosystemic reasons that these three state: the cleansing of our air and the filtering of our ground water depend upon the continued existence and protection of these wetlands. It is an idea that insists upon an ecocentric worldview by insisting on the ecological interconnectedness of human life and something so seemingly incidental as wetlands. The fragility of balance is suggested here, and the short-sighted industrialism that threatens that balance is comically implicated by the "reason" for all of this: another Sizzler.

On the other hand, from within the narrative world of Murphy Brown, virtually everyone Murphy runs into is a buffoon in her eyes, at least until they prove otherwise. There is nothing inherent in the environmentalist message that is the object of ridicule or scorn in this narrative. The comedy turns more on the delivery and style of the characters, and of course on Murphy's response to that same style. The critical question
is, to what degree does the performance style of the character determine the text's intentions toward the ideas and discourses these characters embody? There are ways, in fact, in which the environmental angle is given serious discursive space in this episode. For instance, when Alex and Eliot are explaining their organization, and telling of the threat to the wetlands of Las Rivas, there are several reaction shots of Murphy listening seriously and intently; no eyes rolling, no checking of her watch. Likewise, the soundtrack signals a quiet audience, and so signifies a sort of seriousness led by Murphy's serious attention to what these men are telling her.

This seriousness of presentation is continued by Murphy's verbal assurances to the three that, as an individual citizen, she is herself environmentally concerned and committed, but that her commitment to environmentalism as a professional journalist is something different. She also addresses the important issue of journalistic responsibility in relation to covering the environmentalist front. ("If I want to do a fair and accurate story, I'd need to fly to the area myself, talk with people involved, check out the facts.") Removed from the context of the full half-hour narrative, this scene arguably serves to textually construct or suggest a positive interpretation or reading of environmentalism on the part of a viewer. After all, here is the axial character of this ensemble comedy stating in serious and narratively supported tones her support of environmentalist commitment and action. As the Environmental Media Association would surely remind us, this carries a certain potential to give positive narrative weight to the content of the moment. Furthermore, this is Murphy Brown, a series character who rarely "believes" or supports anything without some degree of cynical distance. We expect her not to, in fact. That she is relatively uncynical and straightforward in her support of the cause these three men have brought into the Murphy Brown narrative universe carries a
potential difference in pattern and expectation that might well be cited as narratively supportive of this social issue as a “serious” one.

Upon returning from the commercial break, the remainder of the episode is a comic combination of the series-based nature of Murphy’s character as identified by her love of practical jokes, with the specific episodic complications and concerns of the environmentalists having kidnapped Murphy. What results is a "girl who cried wolf" scenario in which no one among the thirty-seven people that the environmentalists telephone to tell of their abduction believe them, assuming that it is just another of her practical jokes. "I told you to go with Joan Lunden," Eliot chastises Alex at one point, following the series’ tendency to reference actual news figures. "People love Joan Lunden."

This frustrating situation for the environmentalists, and comic situation for the viewer, is compounded by having to be around Murphy in their cramped quarters in the trailer for a much longer time than they ever imagined. They begin bickering among themselves. As the night drags on, these episodic characters are inundated with a number of variations on series-based character traits which define Murphy for us. As we saw in Night Court, part of the narrative function of episodic characters such as these is to allow regular viewers to witness yet again the comic potential of regular ensemble characters reacting in predictable ways to these “outsiders.” In the specific case of Murphy Brown, the predictable pleasure rests in part in witnessing Murphy’s obnoxious traits being unleashed on the characters around her. Murphy overwhelms these three well-meaning environmentalists, and therefore overwhelms their concerns. We wind up aligned with and relating to these environmentalists, yes, but less because of the fate of the Oregon wetlands than because of their experiences with Murphy Brown.
Finally, as Murphy screams off-camera complaints about the condition of the bathroom, the three environmentalists recognize that their patience is strained to the breaking point and that their plot is foiled. They decide to leave the main door "accidently open," so that Murphy will see it, rush out, and leave them alone forever.

Alex resists the idea for a moment.

Alex: What? What about our cause? What about the six years we've fought to save the wetlands? You going to just toss that aside because of one woman's petty annoyance?

Murphy (screaming in from the bathroom): Okay. Who left hair in the soap?!

Alex: Let's dump her. All in favor say "aye."

Of course, Murphy is in such a state of agitation over the shoddy manner in which stockings are produced these days as evidenced by a run in her stockings -- so busy, that is, being everything that the franchise guarantees us that Murphy will be -- that she doesn't notice the open door. Frustrated to the breaking point, Alex turns to Murphy at last.

Alex: Look, Miss Brown. We have something to say. The end doesn't justify the means. Terrorism is no way to solve conflicts.

There is some laughter in response to Alex's words here, in as much as they are motivated by Murphy Brown's character traits, and in no way by a real shift in their beliefs or their commitment to their cause.

Alex (continuing): We still have a few legitimate avenues open to us, and that's where we're going to put our energies.

Murphy: What are you saying, Alex?
Alex (screaming): Get out!!!!!!

At the door just before leaving, Murphy turns back to the three environmentalists, who sit before her looking quite dejected.
Murphy: Look, fellas. You're not ecoterrorists. You just got lost in your passions. You're fighting a battle more people should be involved in. I respect that. I really do. So I'm going to keep the promise I made from the beginning. When I get back to the office, I'm going to look into your story.

Following the comic rules of character comedy, particularly as developed by *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, this line and its delivery create a humanizing moment, a warm spot of authentic caring which bores through the comic veneer created by the situation at hand. But in keeping with the same rules, such a moment is ripe for a sudden comic reversal, which is exactly what happens. Alex looks up at Murphy, looking as if he is touched in some way by her honest concern after all that has gone on. Marshall, the sensitive and caring one all along, also looks up. But instead of what we've come to expect of Marshall, and of what the moment would seem to be leading us to, Marshall turns to Alex and says painfully "She's still here, Alex." The laughter from the audience underscores this classic comic reversal.

What this sort of comedy allows for is a combination of presentational factors. On the one hand, the text allows for us to feel the seriousness or weight of the issues at hand. This is especially the case with the final moment just described. Murphy has honestly endorsed their cause, and has honestly allowed, therefore, the wetlands issue to have a legitimate voice or presence in this comedy. This is something rarely if ever allowed to occur on *Night Court*.

But the rules of the narrative world in which this issue is contained insist that these serious moments be punctured in some way. Again, we might see this in one way as puncturing the perceived validity or political import of the issue voiced by these episodic environmentalists. As regular viewers, we have the advantage of knowing much more than they do about the narrative world they have stumbled into, and
certainly more about Murphy herself. Indeed, we might well have advised them to go with Joan Lunden instead. So in a sense, we laugh in Bergsonian manner at them, and perhaps at their ideas. And yet we are also invited to laugh at what they are bringing out in Murphy, which is a laughter of recognition and ritualized response. Indeed, our sympathy is with these three environmentalists for having had to put up with her. This serves to remove them from the camp of simplified and ridiculed nut cases where the scientist of *Night Court* is kept, and into the more empathetic and rounded world of *Murphy Brown* in which nothing, not even the destruction of life-sustaining wetlands, is as important as getting Murphy out of your trailer after being with her for 24 hours.

The potential effect of such laughter and engagement is a *lightening up* of the popularly-constructed meanings and connotations of the terms “direct action” and “ecoterrorism.” The characterization of these environmentalists as “well-meaning guys” who are simply in way over their heads may well serve to undercut, or at least counter by playing off of, the negatively-constructed and perhaps threatening overtones of the very phrase ecoterrorism. This reading suggests that ecoterrorism is a term that overinflates what it is that many of those who are involved, for one set of reasons or another, in direct action and grassroots environmentalist politics are actually up to. These three ecoterrorists are simply everyday Joes, like “you and me,” and as such, the ideological notions motivating their attempts at direct ecological action are depoliticized, as Gitlin (1987) and others would have it. As such, they may be made more available, more understandable, less frightening. If this is the case, it is enabled by the narrational strategies and structures which make this example of popular art *at once* just another example of ensemble workplace comedy *and* a unique expression of that same comic structure. It is a structure that may well have given the scientist from *Night Court*...
Court, and so the environmentalist “language” which he embodied, a bit more of a “a
break” by providing his character with the possibilities of character comedy inherent in
the narrative strategies of Murphy Brown.

In our analyses of both Night Court and Murphy Brown, we have emphasized
the function and relative importance of episodic characters in the overall narrative and
the comic potential of each series. In the next workplace comedy to consider, Major
Dad, we shift to see what is made possible and impossible when the environmentalist
rhetoric is positioned not in a one-shot episodic character, but rather through the
“presence” of a regular ensemble character.

Major Dad

A military comedy and a popular CBS staple for six years, we might initially
categorize and discuss Major Dad as a military comedy, and so trace its narrative roots
to The Phil Silvers Show (CBS, 1955-1959) McHale’s Navy (ABC, 1962-1966), Hogan’s
(CBS, 1972-1983). While M*A*S*H surely exploited its narrative charge further and
more seriously than its forebearers, all of these popular television comedies used their
military settings and contexts in part to celebrate and examine through satire the codes
and conventions of military life through the episodic situational antics of an ensemble
cast of military men (and women, on occasion). Major Dad continues this tradition. But
as the name of the series indicates, it does so by returning to the formula established in
the domesticated workplace comedies of the 1960s, such as The Dick Van Dyke Show
and The Andy Griffith Show, which found a more even balance between the settings of
home and domesticated workplace. The "action" of Major Dad, that is, takes place as much at work as at home; the two places offer distinct comedic contexts.

At home, the Major ("Mac"), his wife Polly and their three daughters live in a stable middle-class home located on a military base near Washington D.C. As a narrative setting, their home functions as an neo-traditional nuclear family. They are in many ways as unified around the ideals of god, family and country as were the Andersons of Father Knows Best or the Cleavers of Leave it to Beaver. But there are clear differences as well, differences that are central to the episodic conflicts and comedy at home. Polly is a liberal newspaper reporter, a fact which often puts her into conflict with the generally conservative views of the Major, and so opens up a clear discursive space within the comic structure for ideological agreement, disagreement, discussion and, ultimately, comedy. Polly is widowed, and has brought her three children to her marriage with the Major.

But just as Sheriff Taylor had Barney, Floyd and Goober down at the sheriff's office, and Rob Petrie had Buddy, Sally and Mel waiting for him at the comedy writing office, the Major has a work family to go to as well. His domesticated workplace on base includes General Craig, the somewhat nutty commanding officer for whom the Major serves as staff secretary, along with 2nd Lt. Gene Holowachuk, the aide-de-camp, and that Major's secretary, Gunnery Sgt. Bricker ("Gunny"). At work, the Major is often the last hope for common sense, surrounded by fairly one-dimensional comic character types who, like Goober, Barney and Floyd the barber before them, must be fathered by the Major.

The primary story line or A-plot of the episode included in our sample centers around the foibles of a reluctant Major and a confident Polly to fix Lt. Holowachuk up
with one of Polly's co-workers at the newspaper. Through the predictably comic turns of event that make up this episodic story line (again, "episodic" in the sense that it is introduced, exploited and resolved in the course of this episode), this half-hour of Major Dad is on a series-level about what every episode of Major Dad is about: Lt. Holowachuk's slight nuttiness, the Major's conservative tendency not to trust Polly's ideas, Polly's liberal tendency toward giving things a try, and the nutty things that happen when those traits are brought together once again. It is yet another variation on these episodically-created and -maintained character traits. No one will grow here. There will be very little in the way of lessons learned. Which is exactly the point of episodic situation comedy, as we have discussed above, the essence of its comedy and the pleasure of engagement.

The overt environmentalist discourse included in this episode of Major Dad is not planted in the A-story plotline in which the Major and Polly fix Lt. Holowachuk up with a date. It is relegated instead to secondary or B-story status, which in this episodic instance is assigned to "the girls at home," daughters Elizabeth, Robin and Casey, with some interaction from mother Polly, and very little from the Major. The girls get involved in a contest at school centered around the idea and practice of recycling household products and waste. It is perfectly feasible that this same issue could have been explored at the Major's workplace as well, though with arguably different dialogic results. The Major and his workfamily members could have undertaken recycling as, perhaps, a base-wide practice, as has been the case in several other domesticated workplace comedies. But this episode chooses to locate the issue of recycling in the home, and so literally domesticate it. To the degree that the issue of recycling is one of domestic lifestyle and consumer choice, this storyline serves to significantly reinforce
and explore that ideological association. Within the intentions of this particular narrative, recycling is an issue for girls.

There is no attempt to thematically link this B-story concerning recycling with the primary A-story line. Instead, the B-story makes three short 1-3 minute appearances over the course of the episode, serving almost as transitional material between the primary story line and the advertisement breaks. The first of the three segments of the B-story line is in fact the first scene of the episode itself. In it we find the two youngest girls rooting through their household garbage. When asked by their older sister Elizabeth what they are doing, the girls explain that the PX is holding a contest that involves coming up with the most creative re-use of household waste. The contest is being held in recognition of Earth Awareness Week.

Girls (to Elizabeth): Wanna help?
Elizabeth: Are you kidding? I don't want to mess around with garbage.
Girls: First prize is a mountain bike.
Elizabeth: (after a moment's thought) Get out of the way!!!

Elizabeth runs to join her sisters.

This pre-credit sequence opening is funny enough, playing in part off of our series-based knowledge of the three daughters and their relationships with one another. But it does its episodic narrative work as well, and establishes with an economy and brevity that only series-based narrative of this sort can create the episodic context and storyline in which these regular characters are to be engaged. The comic turn on which this small vignette operates -- Elizabeth's less-than-dedicated commitment to "the cause" is brought "into line" with the proper incentive: a mountain bike -- places on the narrative surface "the issue" to be held up or entertained in this episode: the idea of
personal commitment to social movements in general and to environmentalism in
general.

This issue is further introduced and explored in the second scene. The girls are
busy in the kitchen working through their excavated waste items and plotting ways to
use them. The girls' mother Polly walks through with a laundry basket full of clothes,
sees them at the table, smiles, stops next to them and begins to reminisce.

Polly: Girls, seeing you take a stand for the environment like this takes me back
to when I was a teenager.

In reaction to their mothers words, the girls roll their eyes knowingly at one
another.

Robin: Here we go again. The Age of Aquarius.

A knowing laugh erupts from the audience.

Polly: Laugh, but what you're demonstrating here is that each person, by doing
their part, can turn the tide and heal Mother Earth.

Another reaction shot of girls, who are bored absolutely stiff with their mother. This
quick reaction shots brings on a another big laugh from the audience. But their mother
continues.

Polly: Years from now, you may look back on this moment as the passing of the
torch from one generation to the next. Power to the People!

Yet another big studio audience laugh erupts as Mom gestures with a clenched fist and
leaves kitchen to rejoin the Major and the A-story line waiting in the living room.

Here again the idea of personal commitment is raised, this time through its link
to the generational identity that Polly's character carries on a series-based level from one
episode to the next: the liberal newspaper woman who fell in love with and married the
conservative military man. Laced with the broadest comic signifiers of "sixties rhetoric"
-- the Power to the People slogan, the clinched fist -- Polly's exaggerated recognition and celebration of the idea of commitment to "the cause" is humorous and enjoyable because it plays yet again, as it has in so many episodes in the past, and as it will in so many episodes in the future, on her series-based and so predetermined set of "liberal" signifiers and discursive threads. A stylized riff on the familiar is being laughed at, we could argue, more than anything specific to the content of her words. Of course, that is not to say that she could be saying just about anything; there are places within the discourse of popular environmentalism that are easily referenced to discussions of generational identity and commitment in this way, as we will see in several of the dramatic series to be analyzed in Section III below.

What is being laughed at in this scene, and so devalued as a source or topic of public discourse, one could argue, is not simply, or even necessarily, the idea of liberalism per se, or the move towards an embrace of environmentalism as part of that liberal agenda. We must also consider that these are elements of the character traits of a recurring central character in a series narrative, and are being employed as such according to a comedy of recognition, a recognition of Polly's immediate episodic behaviors in relation to her character's series-based set of traits and qualities. After all, at the same time that they are rolling their eyes at their mother's words, the girls are hard at work, engaged in a project which would seem to promote the very shift from anthropocentric short-sightedness that Polly would have them "commit" to: each person "doing her part," "turning the tide" and "healing Mother Earth." So what is being lightened up here is rhetoric and style, one could argue, more than cause and substance. Again, this fits one strain of the critique of environmentalist rhetoric that is circulating both within and outside of environmentalist "circles"; Polly's excesses can be
laughed at and “written off,” in effect, as comic variations. But the practice and ecophilosophical ideas of recycling remains very much “endorsed” by the actions of Polly’s daughters, if not by their own rhetoric.

The third and final scene of this episode’s environmental B-story pursues this “critique” of environmentalist rhetoric a step further. The scene takes place again in the family home, on the day of the PX contest. The situational comedy explored in the A-story has been episodically resolved, and this half-hour installment of Major Dad will end, as it began, with this B-story line. At the very moment when Polly asks the two older daughters what they have come up with for the contest, the youngest daughter Casey walks downstairs wearing an outfit covered with pieces of trash attached from head to foot. Casey is their project, they tell Polly. As the audience’s laughter at Casey's appearance dies off, Polly asks the girls if they would like a car ride to the contest.

Robin responds with a tone of self-righteous shock.

Robin: Mom! It's for ecology. The judges have to see us walking. (She pauses as she walks toward the door, then turns back to Mom). But if we lose, we'll call you to come pick us up.

And so this storyline’s “discussion” of commitment to the ecocentric cause of recycling is undercut in a comic fashion, while providing the requisite sense of episodic closure. What began as a commitment more to winning a bicycle than to the larger set of liberally-inflected environmentalist ideals expressed by Polly, ends with that commitment, or lack thereof, rearticulated and presumably reinforced.

We can argue here that this story line introduces into the discursive arena of popular television the sort of “third wave” incentive-based and market-driven environmentalist strategy that in Chapter Three we found to be circulating in contemporary environmentalist discussions and politics. This environmentalist strategy
is interestingly positioned through this comedy’s narrative strategies along generational lines, set in both comic and ideological opposition to the earlier, indeed comically outdated, environmentalist strategy represented by Polly. What is “lightened up” in the process is Polly’s heavy-handedness, and what is naturalized along the way is the marketplace environmentalism apparently held to by the daughters. Or at the very least, these are the environmentalist discourses that are discussed or entertained in this comedy by forming the central comic conflict on which the B-story turns.

Though relegated to B-story and so arguably secondary narrative importance in the structured hierarchy of episodic comedy, we find again, as was the case with both Night Court and Murphy Brown, environmentalist themes and topics serving as a narrative foil for character display, a term better suited than character development for episodic comedy. Yet, as should be clear at this point, being part of a B-story line alone does not definitively determine the dialogic role this topic could play within the episode itself, or the overall series, or the wider cultural discussion it is inevitably a part of as television. Though relegated to a backseat position narratively, B-story environmentalism still plays key functions, both to the formal narrational integrity of the episode -- as counterpoint, as comic relief -- and in terms of potentially “lightening up” environmentalist rhetoric.

Structurally, the two episodes of the ensemble comedy A Different World included in our sample function in much the same manner as Major Dad, in that they both relegate their chosen environmentalist topics to a secondary narrative level, and assign their environmentalism to a regular central ensemble character, Winifred “Freddie” Brooks. But to the character Freddie, this commitment to environmentalism is not simply a school assignment, induced by the promise of material gain and intended
to function as an episodic variation, but is in fact one of her series-based character traits. Freddie is an environmentalist. The analysis of these two episodes of *A Different World* that we turn to next, suggests that this narrational move makes a significant difference in the rhetorical treatment of the environmentalist theme, and the way in which it is lightened up by this comedy.

*A Different World*

Designed originally as a spin-off series for Lisa Bonet’s *Cosby Show* character Denise Huxtable, *A Different World* didn’t really find its narrative footing until moving its focus from Denise’s first-year college adventures at the traditionally African-American Hillman College to a much more ensemble-based comic exploration of student life at the college. Denise’s character was in fact written out of *A Different World* after the first season. During the 1990-91 season, the series regulars included dorm director Walter Oakes, “uppity Southern belle Whitley, super-cool math major Dwayne, and best friend Ron, as well as . . . free-spirit Freddie, and strong-willed Kim” (Brooks and Marsh 1992: 229).

Where *Night Court*’s ensemble of characters usually relies on episodic, throwaway characters to bring the episodic issues into the narrative world, *A Different World* operates more in the manner of *Murphy Brown* and *Major Dad* by having its comedic conflicts typically arise from within the shared context of the ensemble and the concerns that bind them as a pseudo-family of college students. *A Different World* puts a particular spin on this process by having the conflicts be specific to the experiences of young, predominantly middle- and upper-middle class African-American students. Perhaps most significant among those concerns is *A Different World*’s regular
exploration and inclusion of specifically African-American social and political issues, Afrocentrist challenges to the established (read: Eurocentric) traditions of canonized knowledge, and other popular inflections of the contemporary Black American intellectual experience. The mere mention of environmentalist issues in this narrative context creates a potentially significant link between popular African-American discourses and those of environmentalism, which is often perceived of as an “all-white” game for “upwardly mobile, Harvard-educated elitists” (O'Keefe & Daly 1993).

The possibilities of normalizing or naturalizing environmentalist rhetoric within such a narrative context are enabled in part by assigning environmentalism as a central character trait of one of the ensemble’s regular African-American characters. Freddie is, in fact, “into everything,” including astrology, vegetarianism and environmentalism. Dressed in a combination of African and clean-but-scruffy late-hippy attire, her character is constructed and played as “out there,” and is sometimes the object of some amount of ribbing and light ridicule as a result. But in keeping with the overall tone of  

A Different World she, like virtually all the characters, is ultimately respected and embraced by the community. Though A Different World remains dependent to some degree upon Night Court-like wisecracks and a physical or situational comedy that primarily revisits and reinforces static character traits, the franchise elements of the series ultimately work to construct much more of a character comedy, resulting in a comic style and tone that is much friendlier and more embedded in the interactions, concerns and emotions of the characters.

For instance, in one of the two sample episodes, the A-story line concerns dorm director Walter’s decision to take another job and leave Hillman. (Walter was played by popular comedian Sinbad, who was leaving this comedy to star in his own
series.) The precredit cold opening, however, which serves in this case to reestablish the series-based expositonal sense of place and character constellation, begins in “The Pit,” the student eatery and hangout, and frequent “workplace” setting for this comedy. Freddie is seen running from table to table, grabbing any and all styrofoam cups seen in use and replacing them with recycled paper cups. “C’mon, people,” she yells out, “let’s save the earth.... think before we drink!” Ron, Freddie’s mirror opposite and conservative nemesis throughout the series, resists her efforts and suggests that she is nuts to care about this issue to such a degree. Freddie responds: “I’m doing my part, Ron, because the manufacturing of styrofoam is destroying the ozone layer.” Within a line or two after this, the two are squared off in mock boxing stances, ready to duke it out. Of course, this is all done with comic exaggeration, as if to make light of the physical situation comedy that A Different World is not. Not unlike Polly and the Major in Major Dad, Ron and Freddie function in ideological opposition, and so often serve as the narrative’s topical center. But this is a series that doesn’t simply find its comedy in difference, but is about difference, about discussion and consideration, and ultimately about getting along. It is a significant popular articulation and exploration, that is, of the social narrative known as multiculturalism, which holds that racial and cultural differences are not to be worked out so much as recognized and embraced as “shared differences.”

The idea that Freddie is a bit too committed is echoed again toward the end of the episode, during the A-story, which has developed into a goodbye “roast” for the departing Walter. When it is her turn, Freddie gets up to the podium to share fond memories of Walter. “

Freddie: There are so many wonderful things to say about Walter.
She pauses, as if to reflect on those “many wonderful things.” Suddenly, she continues with all the histrionics of a college-aged thespian.

**Freddie:** *But there are so many more important things to be talking about! For instance, the planet’s in pain, and we’re responsible!*

As we saw at work in one of Dan Fielding’s jokes in *Night Court,* here again is the classic construction of expectancy and violation that is central to the immediate joke. But because she is a character in a series narrative, this “unexpected” shift from emotional goodbye to environmentalist diatribe is precisely what we expect of Freddie’s character at that moment. She has let her passion get the better of her. Again. And again she, along with her ideological commitment, is reeled back in by both the ensemble cast and by the expectations of ensemble comedy.

In the second of the two episodes of *A Different World* from our sample, Freddie’s strong commitment to environmentalism is positioned differently. Positioned again in a B-story line, the ensemble decides to create a video time capsule for future Hillman students. Freddie’s involvement with this project inevitably leads the video to be a “message video” about environmental responsibility and the stewardship of earth. The video is taken very seriously by those students who are creating it, and the scene during which we presumably watch the group perform and produce the tape is likewise presented in a serious manner. Contextualized in pseudo-MTV choreography and primarily African costumes, and set to soul great Marvin Gaye’s early 1970s “ecological hit,” *What’s Goin’ On?* Freddie’s lines are typically serious:

**Freddie:** *I have a medicine pouch for the earth. Four kernals of corn, a vile of water and a spoonful of soil. You see, man already has everything he needs on this planet. But if he doesn’t start paying attention, in 20 years, this may be all he has to start again.*
Even Ron "gets heavy" with his symbolic offering of a condom for the time capsule:

Ron: My message is responsibility, Freddie. You want to preserve the planet? I want to protect it.

This time, however, the seriousness is played straight, and not undercut or reeled back in by the reactions of the ensemble.

While the inclusion of environmentalist rhetoric in these episodes is of decidedly B-story status, the franchise elements of A Different World offer an interesting narrative "role" for the B-story structure to play in series comedy. Freddie’s character is a regular member of the cast, whose character traits include a passion and commitment for environmentalism. She is played as a kook, but an irrepressible one. Coming on a bit too strong is a key feature of her character. But the point is that she does “come on,” week after week. Through this regular, recurring member of the cast, a deep personal commitment to environmentalist strategies of grassroots activism becomes an element of the naturalized, expected, series-based aspects of A Different World. As such, it is established as a narrative element off of which other ideas and situations must in some way play. Seen in this way, the "uses" and entertainment of environmentalist themes in A Different World, whether as secondary story interests as in the case of these two episodes, or more centrally-figured story lines in other episodes, creates a narrative context that is distinctly different from those of Night Court, Murphy Brown or Major Dad.

Freddie’s character is very much about the idea of “lightening up” environmentalist rhetoric. Her “need” to lighten up a bit becomes part of the series-level narrative of the comedy. But her commitment, and the gentle respect it inevitably receives in A Different World, may well signify a type of environmentalism that need
not spell "sell out" or depoliticization, and may instead position environmentalist rhetoric and the change it promotes into mainstream culture -- comfortably, accessibly -- where it must exist and circulate after all if it is to lead to significant change.

In Chapter Six, the next and final chapter of this section of the study, we explore other story formulas through specific examples and find still more variations and possibilities that work to shape and determine the public discussion and understanding of contemporary environmentalism. Conclusions to be drawn from the present chapter's specific look at the ensemble workplace comedy will be included in the final pages of Chapter Six.
We complete this section’s focus on the inclusion of environmentalist rhetoric in half-hour comedies with a look at the three remaining comedies in our sample, each stemming from a different comic story formula: Harry and the Hendersons (magicom), Dream On (dramedy) and The Simpsons (anti-sitcom). Though we have only single examples of each, as opposed to the four examples of workplace ensemble comedies included in the previous chapter, we remain interested in the manner in which these story formulas, in relation to the particular franchise elements of each series, situate or entertain the “serious ideas” posed by contemporary environmentalism, and what that manner of entertainment or address winds up “doing” to these ideas.

Harry and the Hendersons: Environmentalism in the Magicom

In the first-run syndicated comedy Harry and the Hendersons, we find an example of environmentalist themes and discursive threads that are embedded directly into the franchise elements and thematics of the series itself. As we saw in the case of each of the four domesticated workplace and character comedies discussed in the previous chapter, the overt inclusion of environmentalism is typically tied to episodic story lines which play themselves out in the course of the single episode. These topical story lines might be introduced into the established constellation of characters and their pre-established narrative universe by way of episodic or disposable characters (Night Court, Murphy Brown), or by secondary but regular characters (Major Dad), or by regular, primary members of the ensemble (A Different World). In the case of Harry and
the Hendersons, however, the premise not simply of individual episodes, but of the overall franchise and formal elements of the series as a whole, is formulated around the informing opposition of contemporary environmentalist philosophy: nature vs. culture. This becomes clearer with a closer look at these two episodes.

The first of the two linked episodes of Harry and the Hendersons included in our sample is in fact the premiere episode of the series. First episodes are significant to series narrative because they are forced to do the sort of expositional or establishing work that no subsequent episode in the series must do. While establishing the operating rules, given circumstances and character constellations necessary for the viewer to engage in the episode itself. That is, series pilots or premiere episodes are simultaneously laying the groundwork that establishes what the ongoing setting, shape and narrative context of the series is to be. The story that this episode tells functions as a sort of “origin myth” for the series as a whole, a myth which is then retold iconographically through the opening credit sequences of subsequent episodes, and held in the minds of regular viewers.

Briefly, the story this first episode tells is this: Once there was a nice, white neo-traditional nuclear family -- two working parents, two children, and a dog -- who all lived happily together in a house in the wooded suburbs of Seattle. One night, while driving home in the family four-wheel from a weekend camping trip, a very large creature runs out into the road in front of their car. They hit it. Taking it for dead, they strap the “carcass” to the hood of their car, and take it home with them. The creature turns out to be a Bigfoot, the mythical anthropoid of the Great Northwest. It also turns out to still be alive. The family nurses the loveable and gentle Bigfoot back to health, falling in love with him and naming him Harry in the process. Once Harry is fully
recovered, the Hendersons dutifully but tearfully drive him back to his home in the forest, where he belongs. But when they arrive at Harry’s “home” in the woods, they find that it has been logged, clear-cut, destroyed.

Picking up immediately from that point, the second of the two linked episodes finds the Hendersons bringing Harry back to their suburban home, where he will remain until . . . when? That, of course, according to the narrative logic of series television, is left purposefully “open” to further dramatic development. As long as Harry wants? As long as the Hendersons can stand it? Until Harry’s presence is found out by misguided neighbors or authorities? Until the forests regrow? Until the series is cancelled? Of course, it is all of these things, though the latter “option” will ultimately force the matter. In the meantime, we have constructed a series narrative whose weekly episodic situations and conflicts arise from this overarching question: can Harry (“nature”) and the Hendersons (“culture”) coexist? It is a question, in fact, that not only informs the narrative charge of the series, but points to the story formula out of which the series extends.

The formulaic roots of *Harry and the Hendersons* reach back to another of the dominant comic formulas of 1960s network television: the *fantasy comedies* or *magicoms*, as David Marc has dubbed them (1989). Usually set in the suburban middle-class homes and the corresponding narrative contexts and concerns that we associate with 1950s domestic comedies, magicoms like *Bewitched* and *My Favorite Martian* took the possibilities of this earlier formula in decidedly different directions. For years, the critical approach to this prolific and truly popular comedy format has been to lump all of its variations together and to dismiss the lot as deeply “escapist” material which enabled its loyal viewers to avoid addressing the sort of social, political
and cultural issues that were raging through American society at the time. But in recent years there has begun a re-evaluation of the magicom (Alvey 1985, Buxton 1992).

While the sitcom had seen its share of hocus-pocus in the fifties -- the ghosts in Topper, Cleo the Talking Dog on The People's Choice, George Burns's omniscient TV set -- a concentrated profusion of animals with human intelligence, aliens from outer space, families of monsters and supernaturally powered women who could do the dishes by sheer will, inhabited the genre during this period. Had an urge to zap America into an alternative universe been liberated by the fears, promises, and changes in consciousness that accompanied the national confrontations with war, racism, drugs, and hi-fidelity electro-erotic music? (Marc 1989: 130)

Among other things, these recent analyses emphasize the manner in which magicoms turned on the comedy of idealized families being deeply challenged and stressed by the "invasion" of exaggerated difference in the form of Martians, witches and talking horses. These fantasies of difference tended in fact to challenge rather than to reinforce, the argument goes, to point out the fissures and contradictions inherent in the ideals of social integration that were so central to the myth of middle class suburbia.

We find in the formula of magicoms such as Bewitched, My Favorite Martian, Mr. Ed, Green Acres, I Dream of Jeannie, The Munsters and The Addams Family a story type which readily played modernity off of traditionalism, pitted urban against rural, and explored the otherwise white-washed questions of otherness and multiculturalism in relation to the social narrative of the "melting pot" that was simply no longer holding.

Central to these stories, Buxton reminds us, was a narrative line which operated in "direct contrast" to those of the 1950s domestic comedies by maintaining a "constant state of conflict," rather than introducing and overcoming such a state in each episode. "The [typical magicom] narrative began with a disparity between the values of the dislocated family and the society that engulfs it. Comic situations emerged from attempts to reconcile the differences. However, reconciliation, for the most part, failed
so that the narrative returned to its initial state of instability” (143). Thus, like Alf, Samantha Stevens and Uncle Martin before him, Harry the Bigfoot functions narratively through his otherness in *Harry and the Hendersons.*

In the story, Harry has been dislocated and displaced by the clear cutting practices that have ravaged the forests of the Pacific Northwest. In the formula and series franchise, the culturally constructed values of the neo-traditional family who has taken him in are continually challenged by Harry’s dislocation. His presence in the Henderson home in effect forces an exploration of particularly inflected environmentalism through formulaic magicom themes. In *Harry,* nature is found to be “out of place.” This in turn is a source of conflict and disruption within the “normalcy” of “the family,” a normalcy which relies on the myths of progress and industrial expansion on which late-capitalist consumer culture depends, and through which it thrives. This “normalcy” is arguably challenged by Harry’s very presence; its inherent fissures and contradictions are made available as long as Harry remains. After all, it is this very industrialist expansion that has destroyed his home, and upset the “narrative balance” of nature.

But the fissures may well be found between the lines as often as within them. For instance, the first episode’s final shots of the clear cut forest are presented with a narrative flair much more in line with the dramatic series that will concern us in the chapters of Section III. An impassioned version of Woody Guthrie’s “This Land Is Your Land” plays non-diegetically on the soundtrack. Long shots shot on film rather than the series’ standard medium, videotape, dissolve into close-ups of the remains of the ravaged forest. Reaction shots of a shocked Henderson family and distraught Harry echo the teary-eyed Native Americans of anti-pollution ad campaigns of the 1970s. This is
the tragic and episodically atypical note on which the episode ends. According to convention, the text then fades from this image to an exterior shot of the Henderson home over which the series title is superimposed. This logo serves as a transitional device into and out of advertisement breaks.

The Henderson house, of course, appears to be a sort of celebration of the use of wood as building material. It is adorned in shingled siding and surrounded with redwood decks and stairs. It is snuggled into a wooded area, replacing wildlife habitat with rustic lifestyle. Are we to see the contradictory connections between this home and the Henderson’s lifestyle, and the horrors of clear-cutting through this juxtapositioning of images? Probably not. Do the Hendersons see it? Certainly not.

It is significant as well that what we are “intended” to see -- the dramatic situation and the episodic comedy it yields -- turns on Harry staying with the Hendersons, and not the other way around. Perhaps Harry will teach the Hendersons a lesson or two along the way, lessons which will make for an improved suburban environmentalism. For instance, in the second of these two linked episodes, George and Nancy Henderson attend a press conference held by their district’s congressman to find out why these clear cuts are occurring in the first place. The press conference they attend is filled with loggers all sitting on one side, whose livelihood and family stability is rooted in the logging industry, and suburban environmentalists like the Hendersons sitting on the other side, who are sympathetic but insistent that there remains a larger ecological imperative. Because the congressman speaks cleverly in support of both sides, and against neither side, the episode ultimately does the same. It remains a difficult contradiction, unresolvable by the congressman, and at the very heart of the conflict that will propel and sustain this comedy.
Heading home to their series-life with Harry, George and Nancy Henderson are frustrated, though a bit wiser as to the complexity of the question of logging. Which is to say, they have no answers, and so push no solutions. They are against clear cutting, yes. Harry lost his home as result of it, so how could they not be? But their response at the end of the episode is telling in its embarrassing and anthropomorphic naivete: if we continue to clear cut, Nancy asks the two-faced congressman, where will all the animals go to play?

In the episodes that followed these two sampled ones, it remains Harry’s forced relocation to the suburbs, to the social, to the constructed culture of “nature lovers,” that gives the series its surface tension and comedic potential. Thus the environmentalism we find embedded in the ongoing series narrative of Harry and the Hendersons is “asked” and explored from within a shallow ecological perspective which looks not to radically alter our destructive relationship with nature, as a deep ecological perspective would certainly insist upon, but to more liberally adjust to an integration, a cohabitation. What is being lightened up in this comedy, then, is the discursive opposition between nature and culture that informs the very constructed ideas of environmentalism and, for that matter, of “nature” itself. It informs a comic game of deception and discovery in which Harry is stuffed away in closets but starts to sneeze when neighbors come to visit. Nature is made loveable, anthropomorphically tamed, a boy’s best friend.

The comedy of Harry and the Hendersons, which is therefore principally based on the clashes of anthropocentrism and ecocentrism, is ultimately an anthropocentric narrative. Of course, as was suggested in the juxtapositioning of the wooded house with the clear cut, it is a conflict that can never be too far from the surface of this narrative.
And the story formula it is an extension of is based on the out-of-placedness of Harry in this man-constructed environment. It is sad that Harry misses his home. But it is even sadder from an environmentalist perspective that Harry feels so at home with the Henderson family. He shouldn't be there. But then, neither should the Hendersons.

**Dream On: Environmentalism in the Dramedy**

Martin, the axial character and protagonist of the HBO half-hour comedy series *Dream On* to which we now turn our attention, has fallen for Nina. Nina is a deeply committed environmentalist who is willing to engage in direct action strategies to pursue that commitment. Martin, whose series-based traits include a real inability to commit to too much of anything, finds Nina's level of commitment to "the cause," and to her group of fellow environmentalists, threatening and maddening. He wonders if she privileges her environmentalism over her relationship with him. In the end, Nina is put in jail for her actions, and their relationship is ended.

As was the case with *Major Dad*, this episode of *Dream On* explores the issue of personal commitment to an environmentalist cause from within a comic context. And as with *Murphy Brown*, this environmentalist theme is brought into the pre-established comic universe of *Dream On* by way of an episodic character who is reacted to and dealt with by the comedy's axial character and his supporting cast of regular and secondary characters. And again we find that this episodic character's narrative task is completed come the end of the half-hour, and except for its possible place in the overall cumulative narrative of the series, the issue represented by that character is all but forgotten by the following week's episode.
But there are important differences between *Dream On* and these other comedies as well, differences which are initially accounted for in part by the particulars of the comedy formula from which *Dream On* stems: the dramedy. Developed late in the 1980s in such off-beat and too-quickly cancelled network comedies as *The Days and Nights of Molly Dodd*, *Slap Maxwell*, *Frank's Place* and *Hooperman*, the dramedy is a formal blend of television melodrama (dram-) and half-hour comedy (-edy). In many ways, this “blend” is as simple as losing the laughtrack that the networks insisted accompany telefilm comedy through *M*A*S*H*, and pushing the character-based melodramatic tendencies of telefilm domestic comedies much closer to the narrative’s surface. Indeed, the character relations and narrative contexts of these early dramedies, or even of more recent examples such as *Wonder Years* or *Doogie Howser, M.D.*, are not that different from the ensemble character comedies we considered in the previous chapter: a tendency toward larger ensemble casts, though usually centered around a single axial character, the juxtaposition of issues and comic situations raised from within both domestic and professional spaces, and greater use of and reliance on cumulative narrative and a serial “feel.”

In addition, an important and related difference between *Dream On* and comedies such as *Murphy Brown*, *Major Dad* or *A Different World* is *Dream On*’s use of the film-style production process. Film-style comedy contextualizes the anticipated actions and reactions of the axial and regular characters through the representational mode of psychological editing, as opposed to the use of the more presentational mode that is part of the live-on-tape, three-camera proscenium style of shooting and editing used by the other comedies (Marc 1984). The latter supports a physical comedy, comedy that is found as much within the performance, delivery and timing of the
actors/characters as in the lines they speak. The thoughts, emotions or points-of-view of proscenium characters, those stable representatives of their episodic worlds, are physically-expressed in this sense. This physical, presentational comedy is at the heart of each of the four workplace comedies in the previous chapter, as it is in *Harry and the Hendersons*. Psychological states, emotions, frustrations and the like are necessarily displayed more than enacted in these programs. The daughters must roll their eyes at Polly’s embarrassingly “old-style” environmentalism in *Major Dad*. The environmentalists who are experiencing the misfortune of having kidnapped Murphy Brown must hold their heads, sit slumped over, and wave their arms to express their anguish in *Murphy Brown*.

In film-style dramedies such as *Dream On*, on the other hand, the engaged viewer is more directly privy to the thoughts and emotions of the axial and regular characters. Again, this is a function of the classical Hollywood narration that film style comedies engage. Always a feature of telefilm domestic comedies such as *Father Knows Best* or *The Donna Reed Show*, this psychological and emotional alignment with the comic character is pushed and incorporated in a far more “aggressive” and self-conscious manner in dramedies such as *Dream On*. In this way, these comedies have as much in common with the hour-long melodramas to be considered in the next chapter as they do the five other comedies we have considered to this point. They made available a psychological realism that lends itself to narrational tones and character performance we associate with the melodramatic. But it also enables a type of comedy that the proscenium comedies can only approximate: a comedy based on ironic distanciation. This offers up a particularly significant way in which to entertain the environmentalist strategy of direct action, and the personal commitment such a strategy exacts.
In *Dream On*, this narrative function is made explicit by the series' principal "claim to fame," as it were: the relentless ironic incorporation of clips and scenes from old B-movies and serials. Indeed, as the story goes, the series was created out of a particular company's need to "make use of" its acquisition of crates of old movies. As we learn from the "backstory" quickly told in the opening credit sequence, our axial character Martin has been a television junkie since the moment he could sit and take nourishment, such as it is, from the screen. He watched constantly, and watched everything. As a result, we are to assume, his points of reference are almost entirely rooted in old television programs and the B-movies that filled so much of the early network era television schedule, and now fill many of the cable channels that compete with HBO. And thus, throughout the episode, the narrative cuts constantly and comically between the scene in which Martin is involved and clip after clip of B-movie responses that are "called up" in Martin's mind by the moment in which he is involved.

For example, Martin is introduced at one point early on in the episode to one of Nina's friends and fellow environmentalists whose name is Little Star. Upon hearing her name, Martin laughs, and attempts to establish an insider's bond by suggesting that "you can always tell whose parents were hippies." Little Star then informs Martin that in fact she is Native American. In alignment with Martin's sudden feeling of embarrassment at his gaffe, the narrative cuts immediately to a black and white clip of an old Jane Wyman and Ronald Reagan vehicle in which Wyman is helping Reagan put on a feathered Indian headdress. Though decontextualized entirely from the narrative it was originally a part of, this ridiculous clip is recontextualized here to ironically signify Martin's intense remorse and feelings of ideological complicity in the devaluing of Native American culture and tradition.
The psychological editing patterns, along with these ironic admissions into Martin’s B-film-fevered head, align the viewers with Martin’s character in ways one could never be with Murphy or Polly or Freddie or the Night Court ensemble, all of whom exist in a proscenium-style narrative world in which deeply subjective fantasies and point-of-view shots are virtually impossible to include. Interestingly, the ironic reflexivity of Dream On’s narrative line creates a surface tension in the relationship the viewer is invited to develop with Martin and so with the series narrative as a whole. The B-movie clips, which are more or less rooted in the protagonist’s “mind,” and so serve as extensions of his thoughts and emotions, serve at the same time to distance us from the sort of emotional alignment with characters found in conventional melodramatic narrative. This reflexivity is furthered by the running commentary made by the supporting secondary characters in the episode, who break the fictional frame and directly address the camera/audience to discuss in character and in comic form whatever is going on in the episode.

This reflexive narrative context pushes ironic detachment, and intends a distanciation or detachment from emotional involvement. It signals as well Martin’s unwillingness to fully engage in the patterns of daily life that emerge for him. In this sense, we can say that the issue of commitment in a more general sense, emotional commitment to the moment, to the relationship, to the “cause,” is rooted in the franchise itself. The series, in this sense, is about Martin’s being stuck in a sort of postmodern relativism. It is from within this narrative context of ironic distanciation that the series attempts to tell meaningful, comic-melodramatic stories concerning the daily trials of Martin’s life.
Again, in this particular episode, the dramatic and comic conflicts center around Nina putting her environmental commitment above her commitment to Martin and their relationship. Of course, this conflict is narrated from Martin’s point of view, meaning that his reaction shots, point-of-view shots, and incessant black and white flashbacks dictate the narrative’s interests and reaches, and in that sense work to structure the intentions of the text, and define the potential viewer response. Given this narrative control, how easy it might have been for Martin to force the narrative to make Nina out to be an overly zealous environmentalist nut case for Rush Limbaugh or the Night Court ensemble to make fun of. But he doesn’t. Nor does the narrative. Instead, the narrative pulls in the melodramatic elements made available in part by the film style production process, and explores the limits of commitment, be it to direct action environmentalism or to love. This “exploration” is established at the top of the episode, when Nina tells Martin she’s off to a Save the River meeting.

    Martin: But it’s Saturday.
    Nina: I’ll tell the fish.
    Martin (frustrated): Last night you’re with the ozone people. If it’s not that, you’re throwing fake blood on animal research labs. (softens tone) You know, I miss you.
    Nina: I don’t think you realize how important all this is to me.
    Martin: No, I do. Look, I’ve done political stuff. When I was in college, a group of us took over the administration building.
    Nina: Did you get laid?
    Martin: Well, yeah... But we also helped end the war.
    Nina: Oh, that was you.....

With that, Nina heads out the door, promising to fix Martin dinner the following night as a way of making up for things. Predictably, their romantic dinner the next night is interrupted by Nina’s fellow environmentalists, who come to her apartment to tell her that the injunction that they have worked to have placed on a major polluter of the Hudson River has been lifted. Off Nina goes with the group,
leaving Martin frustrated and angry. And alone. Martin’s increasingly barbed cynicism serves to position Nina’s commitment as hurtful and excessive.

Nina: Why don’t you stay and eat. I’ll meet you here later.
Martin: No thanks. I just got a craving for baby seal.

Soon afterwards, Nina and Martin meet at a taping of The Eddie Charles Show, a talk show hosted by Martin’s good friend, and series regular, Eddie.

Nina: I’m all yours this evening.
Martin: What, no meetings, no midnight cabals?
Nina: Nope. The planet can save itself for one evening.
Martin: Thanks. (They kiss.)
Nina: So what’s the topic of tonight’s show?

The topic is on local business executive who has developed an exercise tape for office workers. But the executive being interviewed turns out to be the CEO of the very company Nina and her group have been battling. Though Nina tries to hold her tongue, once Eddie brings the microphone into the crowd for questions, she cannot help but press the CEO on the sludge his company has been dumping into the river, and so “ruining” the light-hearted exercise video discourse of the day. Martin is mortified.

Once the taping is over, Martin apologizes to Eddie for “Nina’s behavior,” a patronizing move which angers Nina. Their dialogue here takes them to the edge of their relationship, and to the heart of this entertainment-based environmentalism.

Martin: Okay, but why can’t we have one evening that doesn’t end in a speech or a protest?
Nina: Look, Tupper. (Martin’s last name). I’m sorry if this embarrasses you, but this is who I am. This is what I believe in. What do you believe in?
Martin: What’s important to you?
Nina: “Nuclear stuff”?! Very enlightened. It’s moments like this I don’t even know what the hell I’m doing with you.
Martin: Look, I’m sorry. I’ve never staged a rally, I don’t have a police record, I’ve never even had a beard. So if that’s a problem for you, I don’t know what you’re doing with me, either.
The episode cuts from their fight in Eddie’s studio, to a direct address comment from Eddie concerning their relationship: “It’s never going to work. I mean, she’s this committed environmentalist activist, and he’s a regular person.” The dialogue here only reinforces what the narrative has been setting up all along: our hero Martin is inherently positioned in a narrative such as this as “regular,” and Nina as something outside of that. Eventually, Nina is arrested for illegally blocking the waste pipes of the targeted corporate polluter. Nina confesses to the action. Martin is confused and angry as the cops begin handcuffing Nina.

Nina: Somebody had to do it.
Martin: But why did it have to be you?
Nina: They were dumping toxic sludge.
Martin: I’m not talking about toxic sludge. I’m talking about us!

They pause. A shot-reverse shot patterns shows each of them looking wordlessly at the other. The cops hustle Nina out of Martin’s apartment.

Nina’s character never wavers from her commitment to fighting industrial pollution of river waters. Indeed, she is put into jail for her commitment. Within the episodic structure of this comedy, her cause does take precedence over her relationship with Martin. But unlike the response that Polly’s daughters gave in Major Dad, Martin, Dream On’s protagonist and primary narrative force, winds up respecting Nina’s level of commitment. He does this even while recognizing that he could never share it, that he is too identified with (and the comic essence of this series narrative is too dependent upon) a distanciated relativism to even consider it. If in the end the committed Nina cannot hold a regular spot in this narrative world of Martin’s, it is not a fault of hers or of her politics. The center of Martin’s world has no place for that sort of commitment.
It is instead a center that is paradoxically defined as undefined, as unstable on a regular basis, on a series-based level. This is quite different from the “centers” of the other comedies we have considered, in which outside “challenges” such as the one Nina represents are ridiculed, or entertained, or used to further the predictability and so the humor of their defined, episodic narrative worlds. The nature of series narrative, of course, and particularly of situation-based comedy, is to always be susceptible to this sort of challenge and imbalance, but never to wind up unstable at the end. Even Dream On must hold to this principle. The episodic events which mark its weekly installments will never really threaten its franchise, its structure as a series. Martin cannot himself become committed to environmentalism, or to an active committed environmentalist, because that would throw his essentially de-centered narrative world off center, and so run the risk of definition and redirection.

The ending is, within the allowances of the dramedy formula, bittersweet and emotional. Martin, like “us,” is just a “normal” guy, as his best friend Eddie says. It is this “regular” person who, of course, controls this narrative, and with whom the viewer is invited to align and sympathize. His Everyman inability to really commit to “the cause” is challenged by Nina and her commitment. He feels challenged in part because he is in love with her, but also because he is impressed and convinced that what she is up to is, in the long run, important for “us all.”

The final scenes of the episode suggest this. Martin visits Nina in jail, where she will be staying for a few years, it appears. Martin reads a story from the New York Times to her which reports that the sludge being dumped by the factory they attacked was indeed toxic, and that all of that industry’s sites have been forced to shut down. The two of them share a smile, enjoying the fleeting feeling that something has changed for
the better. Nina then shifts to the personal, reminding Martin that she simply won't change, that she will be in jail, and that she will likely end up back in jail again because of her commitment to environmentalism.

Martin leaves the jail, and walks around the city, hearing voiceovers of Nina's statements of commitment from earlier in the episode. Once home, he walks past Nina's apartment door, which is open. Inside, a young couple are unpacking their housewares. They saw the story about Nina in the paper, which to them was a story about a vacant apartment opening up. They managed to get Nina's apartment. Martin looks at them, gives them his extra key, and before walking away, reminds them to recycle the newspapers they used for packaging. It is a small gesture, perhaps a bit silly. But it is one which is played straight. In a melodramatic merge of interpersonal and political such as we will see in the following chapter, it is a gesture which may well signify an endorsement of Nina's fringe work as a direct action environmentalist from the undecided, uncommitted center.

**The Simpsons: Environmentalism in the Anti-Sitcom**

The mix of reflexive irony -- which posits Martin's condition in *Dream On* -- and access to melodramatic terms of attachment give way to a thoroughly satirical narrative structure in the final comedy to be considered here, *The Simpsons*. Starting out as vignettes used as commercial bump material on the FOX comedy variety show *The Tracey Ullman Show* (FOX, 1987-1990), *The Simpsons* was “spun off” into its own full half-hour domestic comedy in December 1989, and very soon after that proved itself as FOX's first full-scale hit, placing regularly among the top twenty network shows of the week.
In many ways, The Simpsons is the most densely layered of the comedies being considered in this chapter. By narrative density, I mean in part a type of lateral compression resulting from the rapidity of both its dialogue and its sequence of scenes. Watching this series often means suppressing laughter one moment so as not to miss the next moment’s joke, reference or plot shift. This is due in part to the program’s narrative style as a cartoon, a style which echoes the tradition of condensed and often associatively linked frames of daily newspaper comic strips, such as is found currently in Calvin and Hobbes, for instance. Each scene of a typical Simpsons episode tends to offer up only what it needs to in order to establish or continue the surface story line, tell the joke, or riff on the expected traits and behaviors of a regular or occasional character, before then racing off to the next scene. The production style of animation also allows for an incredible, even infinite, flexibility that allows the narrative to “cut” to any scene, to any angle or to any point of view at any moment it chooses. We might think of this as an expanded film style narrative, that is freed of cameras, actors, crews, lighting, sound recording and virtually every other potentially “limiting” factor in “live” (non-animated) comedies such as Dream On.

It is a rapidity in any case that demands a particular type of knowledge and “reading style” of the viewer, and so creates a different type of comic environmentalism than we have encountered so far. On one level, the narrative “expects” the viewers to know the series franchise and to have developed some cumulative sense of the series narrative. Which is not to suggest that The Simpsons leans toward seriality in its storylines and topical concerns. Indeed, The Simpsons may well be the most episodic of the comedies we have considered in this chapter so far. Consider, for instance, the
opening *minute* of the episode included in our sample (I will continue to use the

Bart and Lisa are fishing one day in the local stream. The setting is self-
consciously idyllic. The camera tilts down through the bows of the green canopy of tree
branches above to reveal the two of them, fishing side-by-side. A beautiful flute melody
accompanies this pastoral scene. Just then a man happens along, perhaps struck by the
poignancy of the scene. The man asks who they are. Bart brusquely identifies himself
and his sister, then follows with, "And who the hell are you?" This punctures the
pastoral construct, and pulls the narrative back to the world of rude Bart Simpson.

The man introduces himself as a reporter in search of a story, adding, "You
know, in my day, we didn't speak that way to our elders." "Well, this is our day," Bart
responds, "and we do." The reporter then begins to wistfully recall his own "youthful
and carefree" days of fishing. Suddenly, Bart catches what turns out to be a three-eyed
fish. For Bart, of course, his catch is nothing less than "cool." For the reporter, whose
glance we follow directly to the neighborhood nuclear plant that is just upstream from
where Bart and Lisa are fishing, Bart’s catch is more than cool. It's a front page story.

A close-up of Bart’s fish hanging from his line, dissolves into a black and white
photograph on the cover of that evening’s edition of the Springfield newspaper,
accompanied by a headline and story implicating the nuclear plant as the possible
"cause" of this fish’s mutated state. Bart pastes this photograph and story into his
scrapbook. We cut to a close-up of second newspaper headline announcing that
Governor Mary Bailey, who is up for re-election, has called for a full-scale investigation
of the plant. This newspaper is being held by Bart and Lisa's mother Marge, who is
sitting at the breakfast table with husband Homer and their children.
With tremendous efficiency, an episodic context is established and a chain of events is set in motion around this three-eyed fish that will propel the surface narrative of this particular episode. The scene simultaneously re-establishes the satiric tone of the series -- the opening pastoral is tongue-in-cheek from the start -- and allows Bart to display through his exchange with the reporter, and through his reaction to having caught the three-eyed fish, the series-based character traits for which he is loved and mass-marketed. Of course, as we have seen repeatedly in the pages above, this expositional efficiency is an essential feature of series narrative, and so is shared by each of the comedies we have looked at. What is different about The Simpsons, however -- and this is a difference that returns us to considering the density of its overall narrative -- is located in what we might call its “anti-sitcom” narrative strategies. Like other self-conscious and satirical sitcoms such as Roseanne (ABC, 1988-present) and Married... With Children (FOX, 1987-present). The Simpsons plays its narrative off of the half-hour domestic comedy form of the 1950s. Here is how Brooks and Marsh (1992) describe the basic structure of the series:

The seemingly idyllic town of Springfield had all the important things a city should have -- a mall, a prison, a dump site, toxic waste, and a nuclear power plant. The safety inspector at the plant was Homer Simpson, a lazy, balding slob of a man. Homer, who wasn't too bright (his boss, Mr. Burns, referred to him as 'bonehead'), spent his spare time guzzling beer at Moe's Tavern and bowling at Barney's New Bowlerama. Although Homer and his wife Marge had their disagreements, they did love each other and their three kids. Marge was the family peacemaker, a gentle, caring woman with an enormous blue beehive hairdo held together by a single bobby pin. Maggie, the youngest child, an infant who had just started walking, was never seen without a pacifier in her mouth. Her older sister Lisa, an eternally optimistic second grader and baritone saxophone prodigy, was the smartest one in the family, but nobody seemed to notice. And then there was Bart, television's most popular underachiever. An obnoxious misfit with spiked hair who masked his intelligence with sarcasm, he tore around town on a skateboard, grossed out his friends at every opportunity, and drove his fourth-grade teacher, Mrs. Karbappel, crazy. (806)
In this description, the traditional situation comedy form is turned on its head. In this narrative context, the trappings of the post-war, idealized, middle-class, suburban white family that so informed the 1950s domestic comedies now signify that family's disintegration and struggle. So I can amend the claim that the narrative of *The Simpsons* expects its viewers to be familiar with its cumulatively established franchise elements, to say that it expects its viewers to be thoroughly familiar with the formal and aesthetic history of the situation comedy itself. While every situation comedy references and expects from its viewers some shared knowledge of the formal qualities of previous television comedies, the point here is that *The Simpsons* does so intentionally, specifically, satirically.

Beyond its specific references to the history of situation comedies, *The Simpsons* is also thick with layers of references to television culture and history more generally, as well as to popular culture at large. In this sense, it is a narrative that expects its viewers to be active "consumers" not simply of television comedy, but of mass media and mass mediated culture, if those viewers are to pick up on the satiric intent of the references. Thus we can argue that the series text of *The Simpsons* is *about* popular political and cultural discourse, in as much as its attention to character display is equalled by its attention to the popular cultural constructs which function to give simultaneous meaning to the characters' lives, and by implication ours, in a mass mediated environment. Through the distanciating or objectifying effects of satire and parody, we recognize these popular constructs; the story in effect holds them up as constructs, and examines them against the recontextualized backdrop of *The Simpsons'”
franchise elements. As always, this process relies on the propulsion of the surface
narrative.

Of course, the inspection team find huge violations in virtually every corner of
the plant: chewing gum used to repair a crack in the retaining walls, a hot plutonium
rod used a paper weight, pipes leaking material burns through the inspector’s clip
board, Homer asleep at his plant safety monitoring station, an ankle-deep spill of
greenish liquid near a reactor. Plant boss Mr. Burns tries unsuccessfully to bribe the
inspector. The inspector in turn leaves a list of discovered violations, with a price tag of
$50 million in estimated repair costs.

Mr. Burns is stunned. We find him alone and very drunk in his office that night,
singing “Brother, Can You Spare A Dime?” In the meantime, Homer wakes up in the
monitoring station, having fallen asleep at his post, as usual, and slept into the night.
He calls home to Marge with a lie about a meeting, then heads out to the parking lot.
There he meets up with Mr. Burns, who is stumbling to his car. Burns spots Homer and
invites him to join him in his car.

Burns: Homer, they’re trying to shut us down. They say we’re contaminating the
planet.
Homer: Well, nobody’s perfect.
Burns: Can’t the government just get off our backs?
Homer: You know, I was just telling the wife, that if I was governor, I’d do
things a lot differently.
Burns: Oh get off your soapbox, Simpson. Do you realize how much it costs to
run for office? More than any honest man could afford.
Homer: I bet you could afford it.

Burns suddenly looks at Homer intently. Music begins. Homer, thinking he has
blundered and offended Burns, tries to cover his tracks.

Homer: I mean, if you were governor, you could decide what’s safe and what
isn’t.

Burns smiles his crooked smile, says nothing, starts the car, and begins to drive off.

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Homer: Where are we going, sir?
Burns: To create a new and better world.
Homer: If it’s on the way, could you drop me off at my house?

Of course, Homer has inadvertently given Mr. Burns the idea to run for Governor as means of “getting the government off his back,” which is to say, to reduce or remove the legislated actions that have lead to this “unfair” policing of his “free enterprise,” the nuclear plant. In this way the introduction of the explicitly environmentalist issue -- the potential dangers of polluted surface water in general, the potential dangers of nuclear power more particularly -- is linked within the story to the issues attached to Mr. Burns’s political campaign for Governor. In effect, the character of Mr. Burns gives voice to an overt anti-environmentalism. His is a variation, albeit a narrowly-drawn one, on the anti-regulatory and pro-business stance that shapes the critical rhetoric of “wise use” in contemporary environmentalist/anti-environmentalist debates.

Mr. Burns’s decision to run for governor expands the story further into a satirical look at the election process, with particular emphasis on the role of pollsters and the news media in such elections. After setting his staff on the task of destroying the public image of incumbent Mary Bailey, Mr. Burns makes a live televised address to the voters in which he attempts to shift the connotative (read: environmentalist) meanings of “Blinky,” the three-eyed fish that began all this, to a set of pro-nuclear, pro-business, anti-government meanings. His tactics include bringing “an actor playing Charles Darwin,” as he introduces him, onto the set with him, and having “Darwin” speculate that in fact Blinky is the result of natural selection, and is actually a “superfish.”

Burns: You see, friends, if our anti-nuclear nay-sayers and choose-up-siders were to come upon an... oh, say an elephant frolicking in the waters next to
our nuclear plant [he walks up next to an elephant], they'd probably blame his ridiculous nose on the nuclear boogie man. The truth is, this fish is a miracle of nature, with a taste that can’t be beat.

Burns ends his message with a plea to the voters not to “slander poor, defenseless Blinky.” The “people,” as represented by drunk men in the local tavern, and a group of cantankerous elderly men and women watching from their “old folks home,” respond positively. The polls show Burns gaining on Bailey.

Indeed, the only characters who see through Mr. Burns are, as usual, wife Marge and daughter Lisa. Of course Bart must see it all as the scam that it is, too. But his series-based role is to remain an observer and ironic commentator on the goings-on, but not to get involved in any way.

Mr. Burns’s handlers cook up the scheme of getting Mr. Burns, along with the media mob that hover at the edges of his action, invited to eat dinner at some “Joe Working Guy’s” house, as a way of appealing to the working class. Of course, Homer and his family are chosen for their typicality. This angers Marge, who is a real Mary Bailey supporter, and has been campaigning actively for her reelection. But she is caught between her role as independent thinker and that of her socially- and series-assigned role as dutiful housewife of the nuclear family. It also angers Lisa, who serves as the narrative's intellectual and moral center, but is caught as well by her socially- and series-assigned role as dutiful daughter of the nuclear family. When Mr. Burns' political handlers come to the Simpson house on the day before the appointed “dinner,” they hand out prewritten questions for each of the family members to ask of Mr. Burns.

Lisa: Well, as long as I’m asking something, may I ask him to assuage my fears that he’s contaminating the planet in a manner that may one day render it uninhabitable?

Handler: No, dear. The card question will be fine.
Marge (stepping in to support Lisa): *Well, I think the non-card question is a valid one.*
Homer (always the toady): *Marge!!!*

That night, after the handlers have left, Marge and Homer are in bed. Marge is still very upset, chafing at the idea that she is not allowed to express herself in any of her roles. Homer tries to reassure her with the constructs of 1950s sitcom logic: “But of course you do. You express yourself in the home you keep, in the food you cook...” Marge’s eyes light up. Homer has given her an idea.

At the dinner the next night, the media mob is in place, the pollsters are buzzing about the 50-50 dead heat between Mr. Burns and Mary Bailey, and the staged questions are asked of Mr. Burns. All is going well, until Marge arrives with the main course of the night: baked Blinky, the three-eyed fish. Gasps go up in the room. Marge serves Mr. Burns up a slice. Forced by the moment, Burns puts a bite in his mouth, then spits it out. And there goes the ballgame. The media mob run from the house with the story, the pollsters and handlers file out, knowing it is over. “Ironic, isn’t it, Smithers?” Mr. Burns asks his right hand man as they leave the Simpson’s house, defeated.

Burns: *This anonymous clan of slack-jawed traglodytes has cost me this election. And yet, if I had them killed, I would be the one to go to jail. That’s democracy for you!*

In the end, Marge’s actions are the only things that keep public and political corruption from virtual completeness. By using the trappings, ironically, of her 1950s sitcom role as food provider, she has found a way to exercise her role as an active participant in the public discussion of the 1990s.

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In the three chapters of this section we have sampled the ways in which enviromentalist issues and ideas have been included in the narrative structures and strategies of some of primetime television's best (and worst?) half-hour comedies. Our primary interest in doing so has been to investigate the textual intentions of these series, and the manner in which those intentions might work to shape the public “discussion” or construction of environmentalist discourse. It is a process that has reminded us at the very least that the discursive layers of television storytelling are many, and the aesthetic “dialogues” within and between those levels and layers, those structures and strategies, are complex.

We saw that the “layer” or programming format we call “comedy,” its particular styles and strategies, its types of jokes and laughter, performs deeply significant cultural work. Empathy and ridicule, laughing at and laughing with, subjective alignment and distanced observation, these are means by which we create and recreate meaning and culture through humor and laughter.

We approached the “layer” of story formula as a sort of storytelling base against which these strategies of laughter take shape, and out of which the differentiated product from a marketer’s standpoint, or the unique aesthetic and expressive form from an viewer’s standpoint, both defines and distinguishes itself.

The ensemble workplace formula seems to lend itself to public issues -- cultural conflicts, topics of the day -- being framed in domesticated and pseudo-familial settings, always in the context of interpersonal relations and group dynamics. As comic structures, this “framing” takes the shape of ideological conflict, misunderstanding, ridicule and satire. The formula further lends itself to multiple voices and points of
view. Central characters remain the focal point, but they are not afforded the authority enjoyed by Jim Anderson or Ward Cleaver; these workplace fathers, majors, judges, students and reporters do not always know best.

We explored the extent to which franchise elements serve as narrational factors. For instance, one assumes that because the narrative agency of a character who introduces and so represents an episode’s environmental issue is compromised when s/he is an episodic, throwaway character, then the issue appended to her/him carries less narrative power as well. And indeed, this is the conclusion drawn from our reading of Night Court. But this conclusion is based not solely on the scientist’s status as an episodic character, but in the relation that status takes to other franchise or contextual features. The manner in which he was both played and received by the pre-established narrative world into which he was dropped has everything to do with the judgment that the environmentalist issue he represents is not lightened up, but is made light of and rejected as something worthy of cultural weight.

This was underscored by the example we then found in Murphy Brown, which also introduced its environmentalist issue of the week through episodic, throwaway characters. But in that case, due to the particulars of that comedy’s franchise and story formula, their ideas were ultimately lightened up and made available for serious consideration or treatment. In Major Dad, the environmental issue is brought into the home and away from the workplace. Here we found a more clearly drawn “dialogue” between the environmental strategies of deep ideological commitment and marketplace bargaining.

In A Different World, we found ecocentric philosophies embedded in the everyday discussions of the ensemble. In the case of Night Court, we found an episodic
comedy of verbal dueling and insult among carefully drawn but static and predictable characters. The “serious topic” concerning the environmental risks of bioengineering, and the ecophilosophic questions of ecological balance and interrelation remained unexplored, a plot device through which to further explore the human comedy rather than discourses of environment and nature. In Murphy Brown, the same set of environmental issues and strategies were certainly made light of through their association with stereotypically comic characters. But as topics of public concern, they were more fully discussed and entertained, more embedded in a comedy of expectation and development.

Environmentalist rhetoric gets caught up in this process of discursive recreation, and is made to seem silly and overwrought (the crazed obsession of myopic scientists, the fanciful whims of idealistic college students, the strained connection for a laundry-toting mother to her romanticized past), gentle and safe (nice guys trying to “do the right thing” through “ecoterrorism”), domesticated and depoliticized (a powerful and mythical creature of the dwindling forests living happily in a house made of wood), normal and important (a traditional housewife stopping the coupling of political corruption and industrial pollution by serving her family dinner, a lover proving to be an enviable model in her commitment to direct action ecotage).

Nowhere in this section, or anywhere in this study, has my intention been to suggest that these formal and textual matters determine meaning in the precise ways that my readings suggest, or that these narratives play into or determine the larger cultural conversation in the ways that I suggest here. And yet, as I have written at several points in the pages and chapters that precede this one, I agree with Condit’s general claim that there are — that there must be, in a popular, centralized system of representation such as
television -- limits to that polysemy. This is what I mean by exploring the textual
intentions of these comedies, intentions that are never anchored, never assured, always
at stake, yet intentions nevertheless. Rules of storytelling insist on things. These
insistences, these narrative rules, these culturally-determined (however ideologically
motivated) factors of storytelling, need not be limitations, Thorburn has reminded us.
They may well be enabling factors.
Section III

Feeling Globally, Thinking Locally: Melodramatic Environmentalism

Introduction to Section III

In this section, we turn our attention from comedies to the other of primetime broadcast television’s two primary fictional programming formats: melodrama. As we found in the previous section, “serious” social issues such as environmentalism need not always be positioned in dramatic narrative contexts in order to be seriously entertained. Close analysis indicates a number of ways in which the aesthetics of television comedy -- from the level of individual jokes, to characterization, to plot and story, to the episode in relation to the series, to the series in relation to the formula -- lend particular rhetorical power and the potential to color the cultural conversation around environmentalism in significant and serious ways. Both environmentalist strategies -- marketplace or “third wave” environmentalism, direct action or “ecotage” environmentalism, legislative environmentalism, grassroots environmentalism -- and the philosophical grounding that each of those environmentalist approaches entails -- from conservationist to ecological, from anthropocentric to ecocentric -- are introduced and inflected by the essential turns of series comedy: indifference, privilege, satire, honor, disrespect, ridicule, stereotype, juxtaposition, variation, irony, expectation and repetition.

And yet as we now shift our focus from situation and domestic comedies to cop shows, law shows, action-adventures, Westerns and ensemble dramas, we are reminded of the distinct ways in which the “burden of seriousness” does weigh upon the narrational shoulders of hour-long melodramatic programming. In important ways,
many environmentalist strategies are inherently dramatic in as much as they are
discursively constructed and received as actions and responses. The very tensions
elicited by the “discussion” of environmentalism in contemporary culture at large -- the
practices of anthropocentrism meeting the ideals of ecocentrism -- are negotiated and
played out as dramatic conflicts: forces pitted against counterforces, old ways and old
ideas in conflict with new ways and new ideas, traditions butting up against innovation
and change, class wars and generational differences, legacies maintained and lost.

So there is far less of an impulse to introduce this section as we did the previous
one by asking why or how it is that “serious” topics such as environmentalism have
made their way into the topical world of primetime melodrama. The health risks of
pesticides and chemical use in agri-business farming for the farm workers who handle
the crops, the illegal dumping of toxic wastes by companies attempting to bypass the
regulations and expenses of proper disposal procedures, or the politics of setting aside
land as public preserves are each topics that may well seem more “at home” in
primetime melodrama. Common sense, supported by nearly a half-century of plots and
content, of institutional and signifying practices, seems to tell us that serious social
issues belong there, and that dramatic programming has the proper narrative ranges from
within which to carry and deliver that burden.

Indeed, as David Thorburn (1987) reminds us, “television melodrama has been
our culture’s most characteristic aesthetic form,” adding that it has been “one of its most
complex and serious forms as well” (628). He makes this claim in the face of continual
denigration by critics, for whom melodrama’s characteristic enactment of “fantasies of
reassurance,” its tendencies always toward happy endings and so “moral simplification,”
its “lust for topicality, its hunger to engage or represent behavior and moral attitudes that
belong to its day" are conventional elements which prove its unworthiness as a "serious" narrational context (629-630). But Thorburn's initiatory study of televisual melodrama asks cultural critics and textual analysts to see and know what melodrama viewers have always seen and known:

[that] these recurring features of melodrama can be perceived as the enabling conditions for an encounter with forbidden or deeply disturbing materials: not an escape into blindness or easy reassurance, but an instrument for seeing. And from this angle, melodrama becomes a peculiarly significant public forum, complicated and immensely enriched because its discourse is aesthetic and broadly popular; a forum or arena in which traditional ways of feeling and thinking are brought into continuous, strained relation with powerful intimations of change and contingency. (630)

In that single paragraph, and in the single phrase enabling conditions, Thorburn spells out a shift not simply in our critical evaluation and judgment of the television melodrama as popular text, but a shift to a larger cultural understanding of what Peter Brooks (1976) has called "the melodramatic imagination." This move to critically re-examine "the old dispraised attitudes of melodrama" includes the television studies of Newcomb (1974), the popular literature studies of Cawelti (1976) and Brooks (1976), and such early film studies as Willemen (1971), Elsaesser (1973), Nowell-Smith (1977), Mulvey (1977-78) and Schatz (1981). In addition to more recent work continuing the focus on cinematic melodrama (e.g., Gledhill 1987, Byars 1991), there has appeared a good deal of significant work that concentrates specifically on the televisual melodramatic text [Feuer (1994), Schulze (1994), Joyrich (1988), Torres (1989), Allen (1985)] and its loyal viewing communities [Ang (1985, 1991), Brown (1994), Morley (1992)].

Thorburn's earlier words on televisual melodrama serve to initiate some connections between what they suggest of the cultural and discursive nature of the form.
and what we explored of the nature of television comedy in the three chapters of Section II. We supposed in those chapters that an active engagement with a "comic moment," or a willing entry into "the domain of humorous discourse" to recall Jonathan Miller's (1988) words, enables us to "encounter rehearsals, playings with and redesignings of the concepts by which we conduct ourselves during periods of seriousness" (11). We will explore in the following four chapters the ways in which the "melodramatic moment," or textual engagement with "the domain of melodramatic discourse," might put us into a related imaginative "space," a "frame of mind" in which the categories and concepts of our culturally constructed "real" are heightened, put into relief, removed from the seeming smoothness of commonsense and the everyday. This is what I take Thorburn (1987) to have in mind when he describes melodrama as a "forum or arena in which traditional ways of feeling and thinking are brought in continuous, strained relation with powerful intuitions of change and continency" (630). Just as jokes and laughter and half-hour comedies offer particularly packed moments of cultural work in which constructed categories are momentarily decontextualized, denaturalized and made available, melodramas and an emotional alignment with their "performances" may well offer similarly packed moments of cultural (re)consideration and (re)construction, though obviously through distinctly different textual means, and with presumably different cultural and political "effects." What is made discursively possible, we are asking, through the textual experience of "reading" melodrama, or by engaging in what one critic has called "the enactment of emotional entanglements"?

Of course, the textual, political and imaginative possibilities of these "packed moments" are what have most interested critics of melodrama all along. What matters most in the melodramatic experience, Thorburn suggests, is "not the plausibility of the
whole but the accuracy and truthfulness of its parts, the extent to which its various strategies of artificial heightening permit an open enactment of feelings and desires that are only latent or diffused in the muddled incoherence of the real world" (italics mine, 635). This description echoes the critical notion of textual “excess” that has informed much of the fundamental criticism written on melodrama, particularly cinematic melodrama (see Feuer 1994)). This critical idea usually posits the excessive tendencies of melodrama -- a self-consciously pushed mise-en-scene, a stylized acting performance, a focus on family and emotional alignments between characters, a frequently forced and arbitrarily imposed narrative closure -- and the contradictions, gaps and fissures which stand to accompany such narrative tendencies, as the viewer’s only hope of avoiding alignment with the melodramatic, bourgeois, classical narration from which it springs. “Despite the changing theoretical stances,” Feuer writes, “all see the excess not merely as aesthetic but as ideological, opening up a textual space which may be read against the seemingly hegemonic surface” (555, italics hers). It is a critical approach drenched in a Brechtian faith in reflexivity and the breaking of bourgeois narrational frames.

It is the hegemonic surface that the smart money works to avoid. Caught within its excesses, a term which insists on the existence of some preferred and presumably recognizable non-excessive narrative form, the viewer is thought to be stuck in a depoliticized narrative world in which issues of social importance are turned into “little personal stories” (Gitlin 1987). “A preferred fictional context for addressing disturbing social materials,” Schulze (1994) writes, melodrama is seen to invoke desires and anxieties “only to put them back into the box again” (169). The structure of melodrama, in Ellen Seiter’s view, “limits it to the presentation of only those conflicts
which can be resolved within the family” and of only privatized problems, manageable
through privatized solutions (quoted in Schulze 1994: 170). Melodrama domesticates
“profound social conflicts,” argues Jane Feuer, by “pulling them down to the personal
level of the individual character” (quoted in Schulze 1994: 170).

But for Thorburn, the power of the melodramatic imagination -- and his rhetoric
indicates that it is a significant cultural and political power that he sees at work -- is in
the “open enactment of feelings and desires” that occurs through the viewer’s willing
suspension of disbelief and active creation and participation in the melodramatic
moment. It is being deep within the re-creation of specific or “local” cultural constructs
which, through the conventions of melodramatic narrative, are experienced as universal,
mythological, “global” truths. The power being imagined here resides not in reading
against the hegemonic surface, but rather in going deeply into its content and exploring
its potentials as personal experience, desire, imagination and textual intention might
have it.

Here we might return to the words of environmentalist and historian Theodore
Roszack (1994). As we briefly explored in Chapter Four, Roszack’s is one of a growing
number of environmentalist voices concerned with the anti-environmentalist backlash
and with what lessons might be learned from it. Part of that concern has led Roszack to
consider, or perhaps re-consider, the idea of inclusive, personalized and privatized
experiences as part of an overall environmental education and awareness.

It’s true that we haven’t integrated the ecologist’s understanding of the
web of life into our psychological view of human nature. To do that,
we have to recognize that human emotions and motivations are at the
heart of ecological issues. Thus, the environmental movement has to
recognize that there is a psychological dimension to every
environmental issue. These issues are not simply matters of facts and
figures, not just impersonal economic forces. They are deeply personal
in character, and if you haven't included that personal dimension, then you haven't included enough to solve the issue. (10)

Centering the construct of human emotion at "the heart of ecological issues" is a significant political move, and one which can be tied into this study of televiual melodrama. Can I experience the idea of, for instance, deep ecological philosophy through deep emotional involvement with a melodramatic televiual text which has included such a topic in its content? Or is "idea" the right term? What else might be happening in that experience? What else might I be learning? Or is learning the right term? Should I ask instead what I might be feeling?

As always, the proof of the pudding remains in the eating. In the end we are, like all critics, left only to offer up informed speculation as to what melodrama's "strategies of artificial heightening" do or do not "permit" in the interpretive experience of viewers. But we certainly are able to isolate and discuss the formal, textual elements which serve that strategy, and indeed, which serve the larger strategies of series-based classical narration on which television melodrama relies: the codes and conventions of generic formula, the requirements of narrative format, and the narrative qualities particularized within the franchise of each series.

In Feuer's (1994) view, the issue of narrative format is particularly pertinent to the discussion of televiual melodrama. One of the key concepts on which the 1970s studies of cinematic melodrama and excess turned was that of the narrative closure that was required of it as an extension of classical Hollywood cinema. In the films of Douglas Sirk, for instance, some argued that the 3-Act structure simply could not contain the contradictions and excess that the previous two acts of the narrative had created. Again, this was perceived as being one of the form's only chances to climb
above the bourgeois celebration it otherwise wanted to be and create something progressive out of the melodramatic imagination.

One of the most important differences between classically-rendered, self-contained cinematic melodrama and series-based, primetime televisual melodrama is also the most fundamental difference: the potential open-endedness of series narrative (Feuer 1994). Here is the very essential difference, that is, between what we might more accurately call cinematic melodrama (its roots in theatrical and literary melodrama) and broadcast melodrama (its roots in radio and daytime soap operas). It is precisely in relation to a given series’ placement on the continuum between episodic closure and serialized open-endedness (as discussed in Chapter Two) that Feuer distinguishes between what she considers “true” televised melodrama per se, and what is “merely” straight dramatic primetime fare.

Feuer holds to this because it fits her perceptions of the melodramatic serial as an inherently progressive narrative format. For Thorburn, on the other hand, melodrama is a much wider category, and includes “most made-for-television movies, the soap operas, and all the lawyers, cowboys, cops and docs, the fugitives and adventurers, the fraternal and filial comrades who have filled the prime hours of so many American nights” (631). This reflects his emphasis less on the constraints of narrative format, and more on the performative aspects of melodramatic aesthetics found throughout the melodramatic, though perhaps most immediately in its styles of acting and performance.

The present study casts its definitional net as widely as Thorburn’s, and so includes many of the same fictional comrades. These characters must work their way through environmentalist themes and issues that are dropped into their formally pre-
established and distinctive narrative universes. In the process, each episode gives voice
to a number of environmental issues and to the common strategies through which these
issues are made socially or publically present. As was the case with the comedies,
virtually every strategy will be adopted, observed or reflected by the primary characters
of the melodramas in our sample. Lawyers defend direct action environmentalists.
Action heroes adopt and enable grassroots strategies. A Western sheriff takes legislative
action against marketplace imperatives. A suburban housewife loses legislative battles to
market forces beyond her reach. A selfish doctor adopts selfless conservationist
principles.

Of course, these environmentalist strategies are ultimately constrained and
determined by the narrative strategies of the fictions in which they appear. Each of the
nine hour-long melodramas these characters inhabit has been grouped according to its
formal conventions and generic conventions into one of five categories or storytypes:

** action-adventure (EARTH Force, MacGyver)
** cop show (21 Jump Street, In the Heat of the Night)
** Western (Guns of Paradise)
** legal drama (Against the Law, Shannon's Deal)
** ensemble drama (Northern Exposure, thirtysomething)

As suggested in the previous section, categorization by genre and formula is central to
the creation, distribution and reception of virtually every popular narrative (Cawelti
television has proven to be no exception to this rule. There are specific codes and
conventions to which dramatic storytypes adhere and from which they vary. These
conventions need to be spelled out and located in the case of each of the dramatic
series to be analyzed below.

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But as with the comedies, it remains equally important to consider the franchise elements of each series as well. These formal elements, which are particular to series-based narrative and which include regular characters, general setting, ongoing thematics, narrative structure and production techniques, often cut across the specifics of generic conventions. Moving from the most episodic, static and contained of narrative structures to the most serialized, organic and open-ended, we will begin this section with a close look at two action-adventure series (Chapter Seven), then move on to consider cop shows & Westerns (Chapter Eight), legal dramas (Chapter Nine) and finally, serial-ensemble dramas (Chapter Ten).
Chapter Seven

Heroic Action, Adventure and Environmentalism

We turn first to primetime melodramatic environmentalism as it is framed and expressed by two action-adventure series, one the long-lived and popular series MacGyver (ABC 1985-1992), and the other the very short-lived (three episodes aired) series E.A.R.T.H. Force (CBS 1990). As a “genre of order” (Schatz 1981), many of the formal qualities of the action-adventure genre are shared by the story types being considered in the following two chapters as well. Like the narrative worlds inhabited by sheriffs on the western frontier, small town cops or big city lawyers, that is, the action-adventure centers directly around the actions of a proven, capable hero (as in MacGyver) or heroic team (as in E.A.R.T.H. Force) in the removal of some disruptive force and the restoration of a previously held order. Beyond their franchise-specific traits, the action-adventure heroes of primetime are particularized embodiments of the classically-rendered protagonist outlined in Chapter Two, with roots extending into American popular culture and into the wider stories and myths of Western culture itself. Operating episodically from within the formal confines of a three-act structure, the hero/protagonist is introduced to a problem or imbalance, and must then size up the contextual factors of his narrative universe, determine the actions that need to be taken in order to redress the apparent problems or imbalances, and finally act in some way to resolve the conflicts which confront him and the individuals or social structures that are threatened. The classical narrative thus serves as an emplotted test course on which the hero or heroic team's resolve and capabilities are challenged.
Of course there is virtually no chance that the test will be failed. This is particularly the case with popular series-based narratives, in which the heroes must succeed if only to insure their return in the next installment. Still, the ritualistic engagement with this **storyform** insists that the **possibility of failure** be raised, and so the hero's resolve and capability be put at stake each time the form is deployed. If the need for the re-establishment of order ultimately drives classical tales, it is more likely the disorder, and the tests and conflicts that such disorder gives rise to along the way, that informs our repeated and ritualistic involvement and pleasures. And it is within these pleasures of generic repetition and formula that we locate the ideological or socio-political significance of this ritual: the regular reactivation of popularly-held, familiar and irresolvable cultural conflicts and contradictions situated in generically-specific conventions, plot formulas, and what Schatz (1981) identifies as "generic communities."

[T]he determining, identifying feature of a [popular] genre is its cultural context, its community of interrelated character types whose attitudes, values, and actions flesh out dramatic conflicts inherent within that community. The generic community is less a specific place (although it may be, as with the Western and gangster genres) than a network of characters, actions, values, and attitudes. (21-22)

It is the function of formula -- the Western, the detective genre, the lawyer drama -- to frame and regulate this hero's repetitive journey in particularized ways so that we may then have and choose among a sheriff's journey, a detective's test, a lawyer's problem. "All melodramas depend on a structure that sees the central characters as threatened," writes Newcomb (1974).

Each week the hero must put his own life on the line in order to "protect" his constituency, and in order to prevent his own death he might be called on at any moment to kill. Surrounding these central lines of plot are all the trappings of "adventure." Mysterious characters, exotic locations, cryptic messages, dark streets, and the skills of battle
assure us that our entertainment will move out of the “normal” world of mundane experience. (134)

What distinguishes the action-adventure formula from the Western, mystery or lawyer formulas -- and so what distinguishes MacGyver and E.A.R.T.H. Force from the other melodramas being considered in this chapter -- is the relative “freedom” that action-adventure heroes have from the confines of formula. Newcomb locates this freedom in two principal defining features of the adventure formula: movement and motivation. Movement is essential: “Episodes begin when the central characters arrive on the scene; they end when the action is finished and the characters leave” (136). Of course, as we will see in the pages that follow, the tales of lawyers, cops and sheriffs all depend on movement as well, and the episodic structures follow suit. But what Newcomb argues is that within their narrative worlds, “the idea of adventure is confined by the structures that make use of it but that subordinate it to the meanings emerging more directly from standard and repeatable characters and content” (136). Their movement and actions are therefore role dependent, motivated by the pre-established rules of formula: “The formulas define the roles -- detective, cowboy -- and the formula makes possible the occasional movement” (137).

The action-adventure hero is “internally motivated” instead; his motivations arise more from individual character traits than from role requirements. It is in this sense that we can say that in relative terms he operates with “minimal restrictions:”

What this means is that the content of any given episode of an adventure series is not restricted to a certain type of encounter. The adventures are random, and other characters move in and out of the lives of the central figures. Again, the distinction between this type of encounter and that experienced on other series lies in the minimal restriction of the adventure formula. (138)
Of course, it is still a formula. Both *MacGyver* and *E.A.R.T.H. Force* are examples of the formula Alvey (1989) has described as the “disguised anthology.” Like the episodic anthology series of the 1950s, each episode of the disguised anthology takes place in a previously unexplored, self-contained and distinct narrative world occupied by characters and situations we will come to know for the length of the episode, and then never see again. Narrative continuity on the series level is gained by the weekly appearances of MacGyver or the members of the E.A.R.T.H. Force team in these episodically contained narrative worlds. These heroes certainly have formulaic roles to play and regulated cultural expectations to meet. And likewise, the formulaic narrative constructs of *Guns of Paradise*, *21 Jump Street* or *Against the Law* must be relatively flexible, if only to remain topical and so competitive in the shrinking primetime marketplace.

But the important point of distinction here is that Westerns, mysteries or cop shows are all deeply informed by narrational qualities and elements that are specific to the popularly-constructed and -held nature of their formulas. As we will see, these formulaic features are as much enabling features as they are restrictive requirements. The traditional Western offers up one lens through which to consider environmentalist issues, while legal dramas provide another. The action-adventure formula, however, is much more “unspecified,” much more unrestricted. The heroes *need not follow* doctor show codes, lawyer show conventions, cop show ethics, though they may choose to adopt these codes in particular episodes. Nothing *need occur* from week to week except the reappearance of the hero/heroic team in a classically-rendered hour-long episodic narrative which ends with the resolution of particular problems.

*The problems* are not solved in terms of formulaic structures such as the Western, or in terms of predetermined roles such as the country
doctor, however, but in terms of values embodied in the central characters. Values that determine the outcomes of various encounters are directly related to the attitudes that motivate the movement of the characters in the first place. The values that make it necessary for the characters to move are those that prevent their lives from becoming formulaic, their personalities from becoming roles. (139-140)

Thus it is not as accurate to say that an environmentalist topic has been “dropped into” the pre-existing narrative world of MacGyver as it might be in the case of domestic and situation comedies, or even with other melodramas in which character constellation, setting and so forth are all regularly repeated elements of series-based formula. Instead, it is the heroic central character MacGyver, a pre-wrapped bundle of series-based traits, tendencies, qualities and values, who is dropped into a self-contained and classically-structured narrative world in which he will solve a problem, test and exhibit these traits and values. In the case of the episode included in our sample, it is the world of California fieldworkers whose health is put at risk through the use of pesticides and chemical growth enhancers in the fields in which they work.

What are the values MacGyver brings into this narrative world? Of course, the answer to this depends upon the extent of our experiences with MacGyver as a series, the cumulative knowledge of him we have picked up over the weeks, months or years. He was once a “Special Forces Agent” in some branch of the military, and now works for a semi-clandestine organization called the Phoenix Foundation, a “think tank’ dedicated to righting wrongs and defeating bad guys around the world” (Brooks and Marsh 535). He is a do-gooder, working just outside the law in a sort of legal liminal space where things are “allowed” for the sake of moral good and universal justice. Like the Western hero he in many ways refigures, MacGyver prefers avoiding the use of violence as a solution, if possible; but he is willing at any moment to resort to violence

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to get the job done. His preference is for scientific reasoning, for “slipping past the enemy’s defenses and undermining their foul plans with ingenuity rather than brute force, using tidbits of scientific knowledge and ordinary items that happen to be laying around; for example, the paper clip might be used to short-circuit a nuclear missile, the candy bar to stop an acid-leak, or a cold capsule to ignite a makeshift bomb, all just in the nick of time” (535). Short of the effectiveness of that cleverness, however, as the opening credit sequence montage of “action” leaps, rolls and punches promises each week, he will take the bad guys on. Rational, thoughtful, and good looking, MacGyver is a man who lives for fair play. As such, he inevitably is drawn to (and into) the plight of the community of farmworkers in the episode included in our sample. Once there, he, along with the narratively-engaged viewer, is forced to confront the health risks as well as the ecological conflicts and implications inherent in the use of pesticides in food production.

* * *

The episode opens with MacGyver’s car overheating. This is a convenient coincidence, to be sure, though one which makes sense on a series-level if we know that MacGyver likes to collect and work on old cars. He pulls off the interstate into the small California town of Kasabian, in search of a repair garage. There he comes upon a demonstration being held just off the main street. A Chicano man by the name of Tony Garcia is soapboxing to a supportive crowd of fellow field workers. Curious, MacGyver parks the car and walks to the edge of the crowd. The narrative’s primary protagonist,
MacGyver's actions and glances bring us into this event, allow for the initial expositional work that must be done.

Garcia speaks of the use of pesticides and poisons in the fields in which they work, the betrayal of government agencies that allow for such things to continue, the need for work contracts, and other needs arising out of their bad working conditions. "I believe that the future generations will look back at the use of toxic substances in food production as total madness," Garcia shouts. The crowd shouts back in agreement. MacGyver watches, his arms folded.

The continued use of pesticides and toxic chemicals in agricultural practice is an issue that reaches back to Rachel Carson's 1962 expose *Silent Spring*, and so in a sense to the beginning of contemporary environmentalism itself, as we discussed in Chapter Three above. Indeed, Tony Garcia's belief that such practices will be looked back on "as total madness" by future generation virtually paraphrases Carson's written warnings some 30 years earlier:

As man proceeds toward his announced goal of the conquest of nature, he has written a depressing record of destruction, directed not only against the earth he inhabits but against the life that shares it with him. [...] Now, to these and others like them, we are adding a new chapter and a new kind of havoc -- the direct killing of [...] practically every form of wildlife by chemical insecticides indiscriminately sprayed on the land. [...] The question is whether any civilization can wage [such] relentless war on life without destroying itself, and without losing the right to be called civilized. (quoted in Sale 1993: 3).

To the degree that it might be attached to the historical trajectory of Carson's thoughts and worries, this particular piece of environmentalist discourse brings to this episode of *MacGyver* the potential to call up and explore questions concerning a fundamental ecophilosophical shift from a short-sighted and end-driven anthropocentrism to a far-sighted, means-driven and systems-based ecocentrism.
worldview. The very idea of pesticides and chemicals being used in the production of food as it is stressed through Garcia's dialogue produces a narrative conflict which insists in part on the reconceptualization or remapping of commonly-held perceptions of ecosystemic interconnectedness. One must imagine a circle of interrelated, interdependent moments in the production, distribution and consumption of food to see the "total madness" that Garcia and Carson see. Just how disruptive this discursive environmentalist thread ultimately proves to be remains a function of the generic conventions, the franchise variations and the episodic specificities of this particular hour-long story.

As suggested above, these action-adventure conventions and variations are generated by the actions of the narratives's primary agent, MacGyver himself, whose narrative function this early on in the episode is to "take in" the unfolding scene and conflicts. As Tony Garcia continues his speech, Casper Kasabian arrives on the scene with his son and a few supporting thugs. Kasabian is the owner of the lands on which, and the company for which, these people work. Indeed, the town itself is named after him. Kasabian steps into the crowd and begins to challenge Garcia's ecological assertions. The crowd angers, and fights break out between Kasabian's men and the workers. MacGyver, who has worked his way well into the crowd by now, sees three of Kasabian's men gang up on a single fieldworker. MacGyver's series-based traits and values cannot let this violation of fair play go unchecked; he jumps into the fight, and so into the episodic narrative world before him. "Values that determine the outcomes of various encounters are directly related to the attitudes that motivate the movement of the characters in the first place," writes Newcomb (1974). The police rush in and arrest MacGyver along with a good number of others.

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While in the holding tank in the local jail, MacGyver meets and talks with
Garcia and with Garcia's angry and impulsive young brother-in-law, Alex Sylva.
MacGyver comes to know more of the farmworker's plight from these two men,
exhibiting in the process his faith in empirical evidence and on the scientific method.
At one point in their conversation, for instance, Tony Garcia cites reports of cancer
clusters, or unusually high percentages of cancer among farmworking communities such
as theirs, as an extremely pressing reason to organize and demand change. Speaking
from within the official discourse of scientific caution, and so reflecting a key series-
based character trait of his, MacGyver reminds Garcia that in fact government reports of
cancer clusters of this sort remain "inconclusive," and that the studies on which these
reports are based are "ongoing." Not surprisingly, both Garcia and Sylva react with quick
anger at MacGyver's apparently unsympathetic response. "What we need," Garcia states
firmly, the camera placed squarely on-axis in a tight medium shot in order to further
align the viewer with his subjectivity, "is recognition from the growers that addresses our
concerns for what we believe is happening to us!"

That MacGyver, the narrative's central character, gives voice to a centrist,
cautious response to the issue at hand is what might well be expected of a story told
from within a socio-industrial system's central most storytelling medium. And yet, what
is being set up here is not simply, or even necessarily, the promotion of the sort of
cautious, even depoliticized status quo line that MacGyver seems to be towing here,
but rather an examination of this line through the formal requirements of action-
adventure melodrama. The force of the melodramatic formula in fact personalizes and
particularizes the issue by taking MacGyver "into" the lives of the Garcia family, and so
metonymically into the community and subculture of the fieldworkers. Or, we might

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say that the viewer is initially positioned, along with the protagonist, as the center against which the personal pronouns “we” and “us” are posed. The melodramatic invitation (the textual intention) is to then draw that viewer into the experiences and ideological positions represented by those personal pronouns. This standard narrational strategy works in this instance to hold up to challenge, and so to examine, officially-held assumptions and discursive variations that MacGyver embodies concerning the continued use of chemicals and pesticides in the production of food. This “challenge” unavoidably references environmentalist strategies of marketplace environmentalism and the reactions of grassroots/workers organizations, along with the short-sighted anthropocentric ecophilosophy that supports “the madness” of poisons being included in the cycle of food production. It takes the remainder of the opening act’s surface narrative to get MacGyver positioned for that examination.

In spite of MacGyver’s qualified sympathy for their cause, Tony Garcia takes a liking to MacGyver, whom he judges favorably as an outsider who joined their fight unasked. This patriarchal father-son relationship prefigures and parallels the more central father-son dynamic that we will see play out in this episode through the relationship between Kasabian and his son. Garcia invites MacGyver to stay with him and his family until MacGyver’s car is fixed. MacGyver accepts. Soon afterwards, they are all released from jail. On the night drive home, Garcia continues speaking of his work. At one point he indicates that he is in possession of some information that "will really change things," but resists telling MacGyver anything more specific than that. Only moments later, Garcia and MacGyver are intentionally run off the road by a large truck. As instructed by Garcia, MacGyver runs for safety from the crashed car into the
surrounding fields. He then hears gunshots in the distance. Seconds later, he is knocked unconscious by an unseen attacker.

When MacGyver recovers consciousness, he finds that he has been drawn more deeply yet into this narrative world by having been taken into the Garcia home, where son-in-law Alex, whom he met in jail, along with Garcia's wife Carmen and young daughter Natalie, help him to recover. They support him in his subsequent decision to stick around and solve the mystery of Tony's disappearance and probable murder. In this way, the issues of pesticide usage and farmworker conditions are situated into a problem-solution format. Through a chain of cause-and-effect events on the narrative's surface, this places the protagonist MacGyver into the very position that Tony Garcia wished all of "us" outsiders could be placed, where one can develop an awareness of what "they" claim is happening to "them." With the solution of the apparent crime will come an exploration of the place and community specific to the setting and dynamics of this episode. Through alignment with character that is inherent in classical narration, the viewer is invited to explore "their" reality as well.

But what are we and MacGyver expected to do within this world? How are we to behave? Mostly, this is a franchise question. MacGyver will use his cunning and strength and solve this murder case, and perhaps even this community's larger problems if all goes according to formula. Which, of course, it does. This is his role and duty as an action hero, after all. But in addition to meeting the requirements of the problem-solution format, the narrative also creates the opportunity for the aligned viewer to experience what we might call an "embodied environmentalism." MacGyver's franchise, that is, has put him in this world to both learn about and to feel the impact of these chemicals on this community. His is a dual role, in this sense. He is
protagonist of a dual narrative trajectory in which he operates between the role assigned him as action hero by the series formula, and the more internally motivated role of sympathetic “outsider” that the episodic narrative creates for him. This echoes Newcomb’s (1974) analysis of David Jansen’s character in the famed 1960s action-adventure The Fugitive.

The adventure series quickly makes a role of the internally motivated character, of course. The Fugitive must always leave the scene of his current involvement before he is captured. But during the episode he has behaved as a complex human being, torn between his “role” as imposed within this formula and his own feelings, which are the ones that motivate his adventure. (137-138)

It is a narrative relationship between the linear trajectory of a problem-solution format and the moment-defined excesses available only in series-based episodic broadcast melodrama.

And so on one level, MacGyver takes care of the problem. With the help of Alex, he undercovers his way onto a picking crew one day, where he gathers some information from other workers, and secures samples of the allegedly sprayed crops to test for chemical traces. Using nothing more than sunglasses and nail polish remover, he later performs his requisite ingenious scientific experiment and determines that the Kasabian farms are spraying a growth enhancer named FIX on their crops. FIX is a banned chemical. This is apparently what Garcia knew, and what got him killed.

While trying to find evidence of FIX stored in the Kasabian warehouse, MacGyver and Alex are caught by Kasabian’s son and his thugs, who stick the two of them in a storage tank and attempt to kill them by piping in deadly gasses. MacGyver and Alex escape, of course, thanks again to clever know-how and last-minute actions of MacGyver. A fight ensues and, after two slow-motion low-angle shots of MacGyver
being hurled through plate glass, the cops rush in, just in the nick of time. The elder Kasabian, who apparently had no idea his son had begun to spray FIX on their crops, watches sadly as the cops take his wayward, fallen, murdering son away.

Thus the resolution of surface narrative plays off of a primary convention of what Schatz (1981) calls the “family aristocracy variation” of the family melodramas of 1950s popular cinema: the father-son relationship, which in this story contextualizes the relationship between Casper Kasabian, the patriarch and owner of the farm, estate and community, and his misguided son. Central to the family aristocratic variation of family melodramas, Schatz writes, is the theme of succession and the “behavioral and attitudinal traits of succeeding generations” (235).

The constellation of characters in this variation revolves around an aging patriarch (sometimes close to death), whose wife is either dead or else functions only as a peripheral character who has produced inadequate male heirs and sexually frustrated daughters. The patriarch’s search for an heir to his feudal monarchy usually sets up the conflict between his own spoiled, ineffectual son and an intruder-redeemer figure who is equal to the patriarch in strength, intellect, and self-reliance. (237)

Though we learn nothing of Kasabian’s marriage or family outside of his relationship with his son, it is MacGyver who functions as the intruder-redeemer figure in this variation. Indeed, it is MacGyver’s very presence which “helps the wealthy aristocrat to recover whatever values and attitudes had enabled him to attain his wealth” (237), but which he had lost somewhere along the way. The clearly-drawn inadequacies of Kasabian’s son signify this loss.

This thematic and character dynamic is most explicitly exhibited near the end of the episode, when Kasabian flags down his son along a farm road. The son is on his way to intercept and attempt to kill a snooping MacGyver at the warehouse. Of course,
the elder Kasabian does not know this. Indeed, he knows very little of what his son has been up to in the family name. Kasabian has stopped his son in order to tell him that since the demonstration, and since visiting a health clinic used by their workers, he has changed his mind and has decided to make some concessions to the workers concerning the company's use of insecticides and chemicals. The son is dumbfounded at his father's decision. An argument ensues.

Son: Are you crazy? You're gonna give in to a bunch of pickers? What has happened to you?
Father: Well, we didn't have DDT scares forty years ago, we didn't have changing climates. There was plenty of water. No acid rain. And whether there's scientific evidence or not, I've never heard of cancer clusters among school children.
Son: But do you want to lose the crop? Lose everything we've worked for?
Father: It wouldn't be the first time.
Son: I don't understand.
Father: I know you don't. And I take a lot of the responsibility for that.

After angrily telling his father that the farm has in fact been using FIX on the crops without his father knowledge or approval, the son turns his back on his father and rushes off to the warehouse. He leaves the elder Kasabian, who appeared to be the evil force of corporate greed and irresponsibility at the story's start, standing in the rain, a betrayed, failed father and so a sympathetic character. Why wasn't I told? he screams out to his son in a long shot. Why wasn't I told?

The son's "inability to negotiate the wealth and power of his legacy," as Schatz describes the generic convention being played upon here, and the resulting imbalance in the Kasabian family is tied generically and thematically to the imbalance in the Kasabian community. In addition to related issues of labor, economics and class, we can say that the environmental imbalance that cost Tony Garcia his life and initiated the surface narrative of this episode is implicated and even equated with the breakdown
of the patriarchal Kasabian family. On the one hand, this narrative strategy ties the ecophilosophsical question called up by the surface narrative to the popular and potent discourses of generation and legacy, a discourse which, as we began this analysis suggesting, echoes that of Rachel Carson's 30-year old version of this same story. On the other hand, it could be argued that the incorporation of the structures and strategies of family melodrama results in these important environmental issues being voiced simply as individualized, generational, family problems, and not as problems inherent to a larger ideological system grounded in an anthropocentric sense of place and self that enables the very madness of pesticide use in food production.

The final scene of the episode seems emblematic of this ideological move to blunt the edges of political discourse in this episode. As we ride with MacGyver back out of town in his now repaired car, we learn from a news announcement coming from his car radio that the elder Kasabian has decided to reduce the use of pesticides on his crops, and that he has challenged all other farm owners in the area to do the same. A bus load of workers near MacGyver's car at that moment send up a cheer and toss their hats from the bus windows to signify their happiness at this report, which they appear to have heard as well. The episode ends on a freeze-framed long shot of this image of celebration.

For whom or what are these farmworkers cheering? For MacGyver, the hero of the hour? For the benevolent decisions of Kasabian the patriarch, against whom they were demonstrating less than 55 narrative minutes earlier? For the apparent reestablishment of balance in the Kasabian family, and so in the Kasabian community? For the displacement of a regulatory or legislative environmentalist strategy by a
narrational stronger self-regulatory or marketplace environmentalist strategy? For the
domestication of yet another socially significant issue?

But along with, or perhaps even in spite of, the hegemonic tendencies that
inform the functions of this popular formula, there are other narrational elements within
this hour-long action-adventure melodrama that may be up to a different sort of
narrative work. Through classical alignment with our hero and protagonist, for instance,
we have learned that some thirty years after Rachel Carson's reasoned plea, some things
simply have not changed much. The question, the conflict, the continued use of
pesticides in food production is thus raised in a popular primetime story. As Condit
(1989) or Newcomb & Hirsch (1984) might remind us, this is in itself a major cultural
function of popular television: it is an issue that has not yet been resolved historically,
and so is renewed as a public topic of discussion and examination in the cultural arena
of primetime narrative television.

Furthermore, this melodramatic text has invited us to "feel the truth" of these
combined labor and ecological conditions. For instance, when MacGyver wakes up in
Garcia's home after having been knocked unconscious, his first image is that of the
large and cumbersome braces that are strapped to the legs of Tony and Carmen's only
daughter, Natalie. Crippled with underdeveloped legs at birth, Natalie can neither stand
nor walk without those braces. Set to music and constructed specifically from
MacGyver's point of view, it is a sad and harrowing image. As we come to know
Natalie a bit in the narrative to follow, and find in her qualities of quiet bravery and
strength, the connotations shift to include courage and endurance as well.

This is, to be sure, the stuff of melodrama. And therefore, recalling some of the
critical voices included in the introduction of this section, it may well be simply the
stuff of “little personal stories,” of “disturbing social materials” being addressed only to
be “put back in the box again,” or of “profound social conflicts” being “pulled down
to the level of the individual character.” But the “strategies of artificial heightening,” as
Thorburn (1987) might label the narrational elements of this melodramatic scene, might
also be seen as a means of articulating this storyline's individualized sadness to the
larger extra-narrational political issues of corporate responsibility and ecosystemic
awareness. Natalie's very existence as a character, an existence that is condensed and
removed artificially from the logical problem-solution structure of the surface narrative,
also functions within that problem-solution structure as an ideological challenge to
MacGyver's conservative tendencies to wait for the green light from official
governmental or scientific sources concerning the causal links between crop spraying
and disease.

Consider a conversation between MacGyver and Carmen, who sit together later
that first evening outside the family's home. Carmen explains to MacGyver that she
worked in the fields late into her pregnancy with Natalie.

MacGyver: And you think [Natalie's birth defect] was from the
pesticides?
Carmen: We're poor people, Mr. MacGyver. Many things contribute to
birth defects. There's no proof.
MacGyver: But that's what Tony believed, right?
Carmen: Yes.

Carmen begins to cry. MacGyver takes her into his arms. Music fades in soundtrack.

Carmen: His dream is dead, like Tony.
MacGyver: There's no reason in the world why Tony's work has to die, too.
Carmen: Who's going to follow in his footsteps? Alex? You?
MacGyver: No one. But we can all do our part.

These are moments which raise and then challenge the values and traits that MacGyver
brought into the episode, and that he is expected to leave the episode with. The
melodramatic "truth" of this moment lies in the pull between MacGyver's formulaic role and set of values, which Carmen herself gives voice to here ("Many things contribute to birth defects. There's no proof."). And melodramatically-induced feelings ("But that's what Tony believed, right?"). This moment might well serve as a clear indictment, in fact, of a very bad system in which birth defects are the results of anthropocentric actions and misguided ecophilosophical grounds. Whether or not these emotional truths override or serve to contradict the deflected, depoliticized "truths" of the surface narrative in any significant ways is speculation. What is less speculative, however, is that the text entertains or makes these contradictions available.

In this episode, then, we find the requisite problem-solution storyline cutting across two interrelated generic communities, or what we might call melodramatic zones: the zone informed by the Kasabian family succession drama between patriarch and wayward son, and the zone of quiet courage and endurance of the Garcia home that suffers (as the community suffers) from the imbalance in the Kasabian home. Because of the redeemer-action character's franchise-required actions, the elder Kasabian is "reeducated and rehumanized" as so many of his patriarchal counterparts are in family aristocracy melodramas of this type (Schatz 1981); when profit motives give way to greed, birth defects and cancer clusters seem to result. In shifting his priorities to correct this imbalance of patriarchal values, Kasabian shifts his ecophilosophical foundations as well. His visit to the health clinic proved harrowing and suggestive enough to outweigh the scientific evidence that is still pending: market-driven decisions are often at odds with ecocentrically-maintained community health. This is also what MacGyver "learns" in the course of combining rational inquiry with violent action to get his franchise-required job done. Without giving up the personal codes that make
him a hero, and the character traits that make him MacGyver, melodrama allows for
MacGyver to investigate the possibilities and experiences that sometimes exist outside
the discourse of scientific reason, and so beyond the strictures of a problem-solution
narrative line. This, too, is an environmentalist lesson, one which entertains a real
challenge to the anthropocentrism that supports a centrist, status quo approach to this
episode’s environmentalist issue of the week.

*  *  *

If there is more discursive activity going on in MacGyver than might first meet
the eye, it seems fair to say that there is far less occurring in the text of E.A.R.T.H. Force
than its series premise might indicate. At first glance, Brooks and Marsh's description of
the program suggests an immediate and important fictional vehicle for exploring
environmentalist themes, topics and concerns:

[E.A.R.T.H. Force] was sort of an environmental Mission: Impossible. The
team, organized by a dying billionaire concerned with the ecological
balance of the environment, traveled all over the world using guerilla tactics
to prevent ecological catastrophes. [They] recovered stolen plutonium that
was earmarked for nuclear weapons, stopped animal poachers from selling
endangered species on the black market, and prevented unscrupulous
developers from building housing on a toxic waste site. Their organization
-- Earth Alert Research Tactical Headquarters (E.A.R.T.H. for short) -- was
staffed by John, a trauma care expert; Carl, a maverick nuclear physicist who
had become an environmental activist; Catherine, a marine biologist and
expert on oil spills; Charles, a mercenary who was in it only for the money;
and Diana, director of the Earth Alert Foundation that provided their
funding (260).

After airing only three episodes in September of 1990, however, E.A.R.T.H. Force
became the first series of the new season to be cancelled. Because of its extremely short
run, there was no time for the series or its audience to develop the sort of cumulative
sense of values or identification with the series' heroic team that seven years of
**MacGyver** offered its audience. But a close reading of the episode of **E.A.R.T.H. Force**
included in our sample indicates that its overall narrative structure is informed by a
significantly reduced level of tension and conflict at its center than we find at work in
**MacGyver**. This formal feature makes **E.A.R.T.H. Force** a far more limited primetime
narrative context in which to explore the ideological complexities of environmentalism,
regardless of the weeks or years it might have stayed on the air.

The sole protagonist of a disguised anthology (Alvey 1989), **MacGyver** is
introduced each week to new episodic situations, settings and story lines. It is his
carer's task to figure not only his plan of action in response to each week's given
situation, but to bring his personal codes and values to bear on the operating rules and
given circumstances of each episode's narrative universe. To the degree that **MacGyver**'s
experiences with the Garcia family and their community raised potentially powerful and
affective possibilities for "public consideration" of the conflicts inherent in the issue of
pesticide and chemical use in the production of food, they did so in part by positioning
**MacGyver**'s character as a "carrier" or representative of status quo assumptions that are
challenged over the course of the narrative. This provided the episodic narrative line an
element of tension which was essential not simply to the propulsion of the surface plot,
but which served to raise and give voice to the broadly identified discursive strategies
circulating around and through the environmentalist issue at hand.

By contrast, **E.A.R.T.H. Force**'s team of heroes are gathered and held together by
their shared beliefs in environmentalist thought and action. They are already sold, that
is, on the implications of whatever set of environmental conflicts each episode poses
for them. They needn't be convinced with statistics or experience the "extra-logical

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truths" of melodramatic excess in order to take a pro-environmentalist stand on a given issue. The ensuing "discussion" that arises from their narrative world is more two-valued, turning more simply on the categories of good-and-bad, or right-and-wrong that propel the action-adventure formula. Fewer series-level questions or tensions can be raised or explored, and still fewer issue-based complications can be created on the episodic level. This simpler, more didactic approach is explained in part by the fact that E.A.R.T.H. Force ran in the "Family Viewing Hour" slot (8-9 p.m. Eastern, 7-8 p.m. Mountain), and so was designed and pitched with younger viewers in mind. There are ways in which this "straight-ahead" formulaic action offers an unquestioned "endorsement" of environmentalist beliefs and actions. If there little or no discussion or doubt reflected in the course of the story line, then it must be "the right" system, the "correct" set of questions, impulses and values that these action heroes represent. In addition, there is a good deal of information on the environmental "issue of the week" provided as the group receives and discusses its weekly assignments, Mission: Impossible-style, at the top of each episode. This is the narrative's "pedagogical function," to borrow Laurie Schulze's (1994) terminology, "educating the audience by having characters cite the latest statistics on whatever subject is taken up, describing a social problem with presumed accuracy (if within a fictional context), and indicating the solution to the issue" (167).

In the episode of E.A.R.T.H. Force included in our sample, for instance, the heroic team is assigned "the environmental problem" of endangered species of animals being illegally held, transported and hunted on private game preserves. The essential qualities of this issue are outlined and discussed among the individuals of the E.A.R.T.H. Force team as they receive their assignments and determine their course of
action. It is an issue that is informed by ecological questions of biodiversity and species survival. The concept of endangered species is explained. The need to stop this "wrong" practice is obvious and left unquestioned. The team need only figure its approach, gear up and put its plan into action.

They decide to send Charles, the Australian mercenary who joined the team primarily for the money, and Catherine, the team's resident biologist who is deeply committed to the cause of biodiversity, undercover as a recently married couple who wish to hunt and kill exotic animals for their honeymoon. Their task is to figure out how the organization they have isolated does its business. They do. The business and its practices are exposed. The endangered animals are scooped up and transported to safety in the team's getaway plane. The antagonists are busted and the problem is resolved.

But if the narrative strategies of this action series ultimately offer fewer avenues or arenas of "discussion," the decision to center this series narrative around a team of heroes offers a different way in which to explore multiple and conflicting points of view around particular issues. This "ensemble cast" narrative device mirrors the dramatic structures and intentions of ensemble dramas such as thirtysomething and Northern Exposure, the series we will analyze in Chapter Ten below. The personal and professional differences held among the individuals that make up the E.A.R.T.H. Force team are conveniently tied to ideological and political differences which might arise in the course of "dealing with" a given environmental problem: a former military mercenary with a decidedly non-environmentalist past who would need to be convinced and transformed; an environmental activist who could convince others of the usefulness of directed anger, and who could be convinced by the others of the occasional
inappropriateness of hot-headedness; and the axial team leader and medical expert
whose wisdom could occasionally be tested, but ultimately always counted on; and so
on.

The decision to assign Charles the task of being undercover point man on this
assignment points to the efficient manner in which certain environmentalist discourses
can be “entertained” through their attachment to the trajectories of given characters. It is
a position which catches Charles' character between his unreflective past as a dedicated
hunter and his not entirely comfortable or uncontradictory present as an
environmentalist action hero. It puts an internal character conflict (caught between self-
and human-centeredness and an ecocentered sense of species interrelationship) into
dialogic relationship with the larger conflict of the surface narrative: stop the illegal
trade of endangered animals.

Within the storyline, Charles and Catherine go out on their “honeymoon hunt,”
where they hope to find evidence of wrongdoing on the part of the outfitters. Charles-
the-ecocentric environmentalist is forced to barely miss the exotic animals that he is
expected to shoot, blaming the guns, or his bad aim. After several misses, however, the
outfitters around him begin to grow suspicious. To maintain his and Catherine's
undercover pretense, and so their safety, Charles is finally forced to shoot and kill one
of the animals.

It is a terrible moment. Shot from Charles' point of view, long shots of the
animal falling in slow motion to its death are intercut with tight melodramatic reaction
shots of his pained and conflicted face. The experience made available to the aligned
viewer from deep within that excessive or melodramatic moment is one of deep horror
and disgust. It is an experience, that is, which embodies the ethical essence of the
"issue" at hand: this is not hunting, it is murder. It is anthropocentrism at its baldest, calloused worst. Who better to "learn" this than Charles? And who better, therefore, for the viewer to align with and experience this "lesson" through than Charles? In the Environmental Education of Charles, then, there proves to be a rich context in which to melodramatically embody and explore the environmental issue which, from within the surface narrative, was a given. Though only a single moment in an hour-long narrative, it is a moment in which to "encounter forbidden or deeply disturbing materials," as Thorburn (1987) might phrase it. As such, it functions as an "instrument for seeing."

Even with these occasionally packed melodramatic moments, it is fair to say that the dominant force of this series' narrative lies in its action-adventure, problem-solution format. The usual critiques of such narratives certainly apply here: the environmental issues are constructed "problems" that are individualized in the form of antagonist forces who are inevitably overcome by the F.A.R.T.H. Force team. In the episode we have been considering, unscrupulous animal poachers are stopped, and the problem they presented is resolved. In a second episode, unscrupulous arms dealers are stopped before selling plutonium on the black market for use in nuclear weapons. In the third and final episode to air, unscrupulous land developers are stopped before building housing on top of what once was (and so still is) a toxic waste dump. These "eco-problems," which are systemic, complex, huge, are resolved by simply stopping the unscrupulous among us.

Thus the action-adventure model as it is incorporated into the franchise of F.A.R.T.H. Force is a limited narrative model through which to introduce and explore the complexities of contemporary environmentalism. This stands in contrast to the model as we saw it incorporated into MacGyver, where it served not simply its surface
narrative duties, but brought the viewer into a variety of melodramatic narrative structures and packed, metonymic melodramatic moments. A major difference is the inclusion of environmentalism on the series level of F.A.R.T.H. Force. Perhaps ironically, given that this is the only series of those we are considering in this study that devotes itself entirely to environmentalist themes, this total inclusion works to reduce the range of textual possibilities to entertain, explore or feel the implications and reach of primetime environmentalism.

* * *

Based on the particulars from the two episodes of primetime melodrama considered in this chapter, what conclusions can be drawn concerning the eco-philosophical efficacy of the action-adventure formula? What does this aesthetic context limit or enable in the “eco-drama” it produces? More specifically, who are the eco-antagonists in these melodramas? How is responsibility ultimately directed? blame assigned? causes located? Beyond the level of narrative resolution, what are the eco-protagonist heroes of these tales really able to do about these eco-problems? What do these stories suggest is the role, if any, of social institutions or legal agencies in solving the central conflict in environmentalist rhetoric and action between the questioned needs of industrial culture and the pressing needs of ecological culture?

In MacGyver, the central environmentalist conflict or “eco-problem” that drives the surface narrative of this episode is located in the actions of the wealthy, landowning Kasabian family. Particularly, it is the fault of the wayward Kasabian son, who has lost sight of the balance between an old-style paternalism represented by his father and a
profit-centered greed associated with industrial culture. The elder Kasabian is, in the end, guilty of a more benevolent variation on the same dynamic, having simply lost sight of the “right path” by having grown too old, complacent and trusting. In a sense, they are together this action-adventure’s “eco-antagonists,” though the responsibility for their actions is complicated and in some ways deflected by their being “placed” in a formulaic variation on the family melodrama. The generic rules and expectations of the family melodrama formula allow for a sense of loss and tragedy as the Kasabian son is led off to jail by the police at the end of the MacGyver episode.

By contrast, the eco-problem of E.A.R.T.H. Force is located in the activities of a far less complicated set of eco-antagonists. These are classically-rendered, two-dimensional “bad guys” with no apparent ecological consciousness to be gained or lost. There is nothing tragic about the defeat of these black market dealers of endangered animals.

When embedded in a narrative construct such as the action-adventure formula, eco-problems such as pesticide use and the willful killing of endangered animal species must be articulated as occurrences or actions, singular events that need to be “taking care of” and resolved. It is also a given that the protagonists in both of these action-adventure narratives are able to resolve the central episodic conflicts. MacGyver’s presence alone helps to expose the use of chemicals and poisons on the Kasabian farms, and so to draw connections between chemical use in the field and the health of the field workers. The son is arrested, the father shuts down further chemical use, the Garcia family learns the truth of Tony Garcia’s death, and the community of farm workers feel that their voice and story have been heard by people from “out there,” just as Tony Garcia wanted. Likewise, the E.A.R.T.H. Force team has little problem
successfully infiltrating and breaking up the ring of animal traders. This is satisfying
drama, to be sure. The equilibrium of the narrative world is predictably played upon
and left intact for next week’s adventure.

But what are these protagonists really able to do about the ecophilosophical
underpinnings and assumptions that underlie and support the misguided actions of
these eco-antagonists? They can certainly respond to and take care of the generic
requirements of the problem-solution format. But what are they able to “take care of” in
terms of ecological problems?

Other farms have agreed to join the elder Kasabian in a moratorium on
chemical and pesticide use. This suggests that MacGyver’s actions as a heroic
protagonist may have ripple effects, and leave behind results that reach beyond the
moment of his having “passed through” this episodic narrative universe. But short of
this, MacGyver has done little to alter the anthropocentrism that stands at the heart of
the capitalist industrialism that informs industrial agricultural practices. Indeed,
MacGyver has not challenged anything systemic, although his own understanding of
the scientifically-proven and -endorsed status quo has been challenged by
melodramatic excess -- the family melodrama -- of the Garcia home.

The E.A.R.T.H. Force team also does nothing to address the underlying eco-
philosophical assumptions that enable humans to hunt and kill endangered species
because they are endangered. The heroic team can simply stop this set of bad apples,
go back home and wait for the next bad bunch to appear.

Thus responsibility and blame for environmental problems are assigned to the
individuals who have gone astray. Kasabian’s son is a semi-tragic figure; the blame lies
with him and not with the system in which he and his father are major players. The
black market animal dealers are a bad group, but are only peripherally represented as being part of a larger problem, or being a logical outgrowth of deeply engrained anthropocentrism. This is reinforced by their being “turned in” by a worried zoo worker, who correctly suspects foul play. But are these similar impulses? Is the illegal trade in endangered animals systemically related to the legal trade in animals within the zoo system? These systemic questions cannot be adequately addressed, ultimately, by action-adventure aesthetics.

Of course, even in E.A.R.T.H. Force, the eco-problems are more widely addressed than this. We found the idea and desire to hunt, for instance, explored through the character of Charles, who serves as a rhetorical marker for the conflict inherent in this ecophilosophical “discussion” of the will to tame and control, and the “place of man” in the “great scheme of things.” But in the end, the very presence of these action heroes precludes the function of larger institutional or legal forces to have much leeway or strength to solve these eco-problems. These are individualized eco-criminals who are “taken care of” by quasi-official but ultimately non-aligned liminal heroes. The heroes are themselves individualized, left non-aligned with state or legal institutions. They are by formulaic definition loners themselves.

The environmentalism created here is thus insisted upon by the formula through which it finds form and meaning. Heroes of disguised anthologies such as MacGyver and E.A.R.T.H. Force drop in to new places, take care of things, and move on. By definition they are there to root out the symptoms, not the causes. Eco-problems are inherently episodic in this narrative world. Environmentalism, like so many other “topics” to be run through the primetime story mill, is just another problem to be solved.
In the next chapter, we turn to heroes of a slightly different order, cops and sheriffs. Law and order men. Formulas shift, franchises make different demands on the protagonists and antagonists. But how significantly do the outcomes, the answers to some of the questions we have explored in this chapter, shift as a result of generic and aesthetic shifts in narrative context?
Chapter Eight

Law, Order and Environmentalism

In this chapter, we shift our focus from the relatively free-spirited and extremely mobile heroic individuals and teams of the action-adventure genre to a set of stable, situated, and domesticated law-and-order men: the teenage undercover cops of 21 Jump Street (FOX 1987-1990; first-run syndication 1990-1991), the uniformed cops of In the Heat of the Night (NBC 1988-1991; CBS 1991-present), and the badge-wearing sheriff of our sample's single Western, Guns of Paradise (CBS 1988-1990 under title Paradise; CBS 1990-1991 under title Guns of Paradise). Of course, on the broadest of narrative levels, one could argue that the same adventure formula is at work in three series as in MacGyver and E.A.R.T.H Force. In all three series, heroic law enforcement figures must, like their action-adventure counterparts, step into a "situation" or crisis, remove the disruptive elements and set that episodic narrative world right, back into its former state of balance. Unlike the action-adventure hero, however, these law-and-order protagonists are bound not simply by personal codes and values, but by the "rules" of their "generic community" (Schatz 1981). This gives a formulaic specificity to the classical heroic journey which follows a more familiar set of patterns, people and events in "a world that carries its own limits, its own set of probabilities, its own characters and character types, all of which build a separate reality within which the viewer/reader is an active participant" (Newcomb 1974: 83).

While death, murder and elements of the mystery formula functioned at the center of the narrative conflict in the action-adventure narratives of both MacGyver (the disappearance and murder of Tony Garcia) and E.A.R.T.H. Force (the hunting of rare...
and endangered animals), they needn't have. The very essence of the cop show formula and the Western, on the other hand, is the criminal act or some transgression against the values and laws of the generic community. Similarly, while MacGyver and the E.A.R.T.H. Force team operated in a semi-official, semi-clandestine capacity, the cops of _In the Heat of the Night_ (Heat of the Night hereafter) and _21 Jump Street_, and the sheriff of _Guns of Paradise_ are clearly marked as representatives of the State, or of the defined generic community for whom they work. Furthermore, though Schatz suggests that this need not be the case, these law-and-order men work to protect fairly well-defined, geographically-positioned and graphically represented settings and communities. This embues both the cop show formula and the Western with a potentially stronger and more tangible sense of place and environment than was made available in _MacGyver_ or in _E.A.R.T.H. Force_. An environmental threat in this formula has, then, the potential of being more specifically recognized and drawn. The small, "new South" town of Sparta, Mississippi is the beat for the _Heat of the Night_ cops. The youth culture of Los Angeles streets, suburbs and high schools serve as the community protected by the teen cops of _21 Jump Street_. The frontier town of Paradise is both the location and the community that the sheriff of _Guns of Paradise_ is sworn to protect.

These are a few key elements of the more particularly-defined narrative lens through which characters still engage in "the trappings of adventure," and in the movements which initiate such adventures. All three groups of law enforcers are motivated by a dedication to the exploration of crime. Thus, an environmentalist issue dropped into a variation on this formula or on these genres is inevitably linked or understood in relation to the shared cultural meanings of crime, transgression, morality,
and law. We turn now from the commonalities to the specifics of each of these series, beginning first with the two cop shows, and ending with a look at the Western.

*       *       *

Both episodes of the cop shows included in our sample center their episodic narrative lines around the illegal dumping of industrially-created toxic chemical waste. And, as expected of the formula, both episodic narratives tie this environmentalist issue to a murder mystery. In 21 Jump Street, a high school football player dies on the field for no apparent reason, and an undercover teen cop is sent in to investigate. In Heat of the Night, a local woman disappears after a neighbor overhears a physical fight between her and an unknown man, and Chief Gillespie and his boys are quick to investigate. Both, therefore, are stories of bad judgment, morality and corporate greed. And both are marked by melodramatic moments which offer potentially significant means of exploring these issues in ways that extend beyond the surface structure of crime-discovery-resolution.

The A-story of the episode of Heat of the Night included in our sample -- the storyline which contains the requisite pattern of crime-solution -- centers around a young white blind woman named Julie Loften, who one night overhears the voice of a man loudly threatening her next door neighbor, Caroline Norris. Caroline screams, and loud thuds and crashes suggest that the man is following through on his threats. After a particularly loud crash against the connecting wall between the two apartments, the shouting and fighting stop. All Julie hears after this is the sound of someone leaving the
apartment, of a car trunk being closed and of the car driving off. Frightened and upset, Julie calls the police immediately.

Here, then, is the initial expository work required of the episodic storyline -- establishment of place, character, given circumstances -- but with the more specific requirements of a cop show: these factors have been established in the context of an apparent crime. With Julie's call to our heroic team of cops, featuring Chief of Detectives Virgil Tibbs, Sgt. Bubba Skinner, Deputy Parker William and their Chief and father figure, Sheriff Bill Gillespie (played not insignificantly by Archie Bunker/Carroll O'Connor), the episodic narrative line of the episode and the ongoing, cumulative narrative line of the series are merged. It is Parker who initiates this necessary merge by taking the call and arriving at Julie's apartment to investigate. Parker interviews Julie, then inspects the missing woman Caroline's apartment. The apartment is empty, with no immediately apparent signs of foul play, nothing that evidences the sounds that both Julie heard. When Caroline doesn't show up for work the next day, however, Virgil Tibbs, Parker and others return to her apartment where, with the help of Julie's familiarity with the apartment, they do find some suspicious signs, including Caroline's purse (why would she have left it behind?) and a large throw rug missing from the front room.

With foul play now suspected, the investigation begins, and the crime-solution pattern is set in motion. Caroline's answering machine has three messages: one from her father saying hello, one from her ex-boyfriend who wonders why she didn't meet him as planned, and the third from her boss at work wondering where she is. Interviews with all three of these men leave Bubba and the others feeling very suspicious of Caroline's
ex-boyfriend, Taylor Riordan, who comes off as mean and unfriendly as his reputation makes him out to be.

Chief Tibbs is also left with "an uneasy feeling" about Caroline's bosses at Kensidyne, manager Ned Conklin and owner Mr. Donner. Kensidyne is a manufactory of computer chips, boards and related materials. Julie is brought in to the station to listen to Caroline's phone message machine in an attempt to match Riordan's voice with the voice she had heard in Caroline's apartment that night. Riordan's voice, however, turns out not to be the one. Julie's positive. But as she gets up to leave, the message machine, which has been left on, begins to play Ned Conklin's message to Caroline wondering why she was not at work yet that morning. Julie turns suddenly, and positively identifies Conklin's voice as that which she heard in Caroline's apartment the night of her disappearance. The story then quickly turns to the procedural police work, investigation and ingenuity necessary to put the finger on Ned Conklin.

In the meantime, a B-story line has developed around the slowly evolving relationship between Officer Parker, who answered Julie Loften's initial call for help, and Julie herself. Parker, whom we know on a series-level as a friendly and gentle man, is also large, balding and a bit homely, the Hoss Cartwright-type figure of In the Heat of the Night. Parker is falling in love with Julie, whom he finds to be friendly and gentle herself, as well as physically attractive. Julie, who is blind, we recall, seems to be falling for Parker in turn.

The poignant confusion that this budding love affair causes Parker, who is afraid that Julie would not have fallen in love with him were she able to see, is narratively significant on several levels. It plays into and rewards the regular viewer's cumulative relationship with Parker, who has proven on a series-level that he deserves
to know and experience love. It also works off what is perhaps *Heat*'s centralmost theme as a series: racism and the relations between Blacks and Whites in this small Mississippi town. The melodramatic lesson of the story line is that Julie loves Parker for who he is, for himself, and not for his external looks. Hers is a colorblind love, in effect. And, significantly, it is Tibbs, the Black Chief of Detectives, who helps Parker to see this.

It is at the point when the B-story line merges with the A-line that the episode finally introduces, or rather unmasks an environmentalist angle to the story that has been there all along. An off-duty Parker is walking hand-in-hand through a local park with Julie, taking her to some of his favorite spots, which includes a small bridge over a stream. Julie tells Parker that in fact she has been to this spot once before with Caroline, who was there collecting water samples. It is at this moment that Parker suddenly realizes the full story, the solution, the end of the mystery: Caroline, who worked as a safety inspector at Kensidyne, had discovered that the company was dumping its toxic wastes illegally, and so contaminating the area ground water. Knowing that she had the goods on them, and was likely to turn them in for their decidedly criminal actions, Ned Conklin killed Caroline to silence her.

Further investigation shows that in fact Kensidyne had cancelled its contract with a government-recognized toxic waste handler, and that no other EPA-registered dump sites had done business with Kensidyne in the meantime. Fooled by the always crafty Chief Gillespie into thinking they had more of a case than they actually had, Donner, the panicky President of Kensidyne, rushes to the company's warehouse and begins to load a barrel into a truck. He is caught in the act by the Chief, some of his men and the District Attorney. Caroline's body is found in the barrel. Meanwhile, across
town, Parker and Bubba catch Konklin, who has broken into Julie's apartment in order to kill her, the case's only "ear-witness." Bubba hustles Konklin out of the apartment. Julie and Parker embrace.

The murder is solved, justice is served, Sparta's narrative balance is restored, and our ongoing cumulative relationship with Parker and his work-family of cop heroes is furthered through the initiation of a love story. But what of the issue of illegally dumping toxic wastes? As Condit might remind us, this very important environmental issue is at the very least "cited," brought again, or perhaps introduced into the public cultural sphere through primetime television. But how is it framed within this episode of this series? And what does the text seem to intend in framing it in this way?

In this episode of *Heat of the Night*, we are reminded of the somewhat paradoxical nature of the relationship between issue and formulaic narrative structure in cop shows, or in any classically-rendered adventure melodrama. Indeed, it is the paradox we have been dealing with in one shape or another throughout this study. It isn't until the third "act," or approximately 40 minutes into this hour-long episode, that the environmentalist angle becomes apparent to the investigating cop, and so is "raised" to the surface as "an issue" of primetime "discussion." In this sense, we might say that the issue of illegally dumping toxic wastes is incidental to the viewer's engagement with the overall story. It is simply a plot device around which the surface narrative chain seems motivated and compelling. Of course, this might be said of virtually any "issue" that initiates the surface episodic narrative of a series melodrama. It is ultimately the interpersonal activities, the human dramas that occur along that chain of cause-and-effect events, and not the "issue" itself, or its referents in the extra-televisual discourse of
environmentalism, that concern us, entertain us and reward us as regular viewers of series narrative.

On the other hand, we should consider the manner in which this environmental story line serves as the center of this episode's melodramatic subplot, or as the foundation on which the melodrama is built. It functions as the central issue onto which the melodramatic excesses of passion, dedication, greed, paranoia and such can be appended, displayed and explored. Symbiotically, it is through the melodramatic structures and moments that the issue is in turn felt, embodied or entertained in ways that exceed the linear structures of the crime-solution narrative line. But as we have seen, the more overtly melodramatic story line between Parker and Julie doesn't comment much if at all on the issue, and so doesn't enable the felt connection or "embodied environmentalism" that we saw at work in MacGyver.

What brings the Kensidyne bosses down is their corporate greed. The profit motive blinds them to the ecological imperative of the generic community. The formula ties flagrant polluters of this sort to all of the evil-doers of the cop show world; had they only followed the EPA-enforced laws. The place or environment that signifies the mythical Sparta is threatened by the business practices of Kensidyne. But that threat is removed by heroic cops in love. Presumably, then, the recovered narrative balance is equated with, in the instance of this episode, a recovered ecological balance in the community. Kensidyne will, we must believe, resume legal and ecologically conscious business practices.

But this sense of control and community protection, and so of environmental harmony, is undercut by both the cops' and the viewers' knowledge that this cannot end, that the system of which they are a part, and so the narrative structures which
contain and represent that system, is inherently flawed. Crime will continue. Ecological
destruction will continue. Anthropocentric short-sightedness will continue. The cop
show formula does not in the end allow such a story to address systemic change, or to
indict anyone or anything larger than the individual “rule breaker.” Crime will continue
in this imaginative construct called the mystery formula. Crime, in fact, must continue
when this formula is incorporated into the series narrative of primetime. The solution of
this episode's criminal action is but a partial solution; there is no transcendence from
this formulaic world (Newcomb 1974). Likewise, there is no real shift to a more
ecocentric philosophy of self and community. The generic community may well hold
to an ecocentric ambition, and it will have its “agents” of law attempt to enforce such
eccphilosophical “rules,” but the formula undercuts the complete conversion in the
end.

This emphasis on singular instances is furthered by this episode's use of
stereotype to further remove the murderer from the community. Konklin, the dutiful but
middle manager turned murderer, is played in a relatively bland and straightforward
manner. The company president, Mr. Donner, on the other hand, is played in an
effeminate and histrionic manner, a strange combination of Truman Copote, Quentin
Crisp and Floyd the barber from The Andy Griffith Show. This performance creates the
potential to read him as an usually strange character whose behavior is merely aberrant.
As such, it stands to undercut our reading his actions as logical results of capitalist
competition and marketplace environmentalism.

This move is made explicit in the final scene of the episode. Caught "red-
handed" as it were by Chief Gillespie and his men, Mr. Donner histrionically performs
his final soliloquy:
Donner: You think it's easy being in business these days? Let me tell you, the Koreans, when they make circuit boards, they flush the solvents right down the drain. [Cut to reaction shot of Chief Gillespie, in disbelief.]

Donner (cont.): They don't have any EPA bothering them all the time. [Cut to a series of reaction shots from the other cops present.]

Donner (cont.): I mean, down the toilet, gone! It's beautiful. [Donner walks off dramatically. Shot of Chief Gillespie addressing his men.]

Gillespie: Boys, stay with that man. [Freeze frame on "boy is this guy ever a nut" mug shot of Gillespie/O'Connor.]

Carrol O'Connor does his best Archie Bunker screwed up face almost directly into the camera. Beyond the intertextuality of the moment, the ending has the effect of removing the target of this look, Mr. Donner, even further from the field of normalcy, and so even further from being an example of international capitalism's central place in the destruction of the earth's environment and sustainability.

We can say, then, that while Heat of the Night does bring the issue of illegal dumping of toxic wastes and with it the ecophilosophical question of interconnectedness into the public arena of primetime concerns, its franchise and formulaic elements keep the issue in the apologetic realm of crime-solution and inevitability.

* * *

Like In the Heat of the Night, the sampled episode of 21 Jump Street, the teen-oriented undercover cop show to which we now turn, is also constructed around the environmental issue of illegally dumping toxic wastes. Unlike Heat, though, the issue itself is more overtly tied to the immediate crime-solution formula early in the story, and is more firmly embedded in the episode's melodramatic relations between characters as
well. In fact, it is environmental degradation in the form of contaminated ground water that is positioned not simply as a motivating factor but as the actual "murderer" or agent of death in this story.

By the time this episode of 21 Jump Street was broadcast, this early FOX hit had run its course on the struggling new network and was spending what proved to be its last season in first-run syndication. The majority of its original cast of teen cops, whose weekly assignments placed them undercover in troubled Los Angeles area high schools, had left the show, including Johnny Depp, who had left to begin a feature film career. At the point in the season when the episode we are concerned with here aired, the show revolved primarily around one young undercover officer named Anthony "Mac" McCann (Michael Bendetti), a former officer who had moved up to work with a detective named Judy Hoffs (Holly Robinson), and their Captain Adam Fuller, a real by-the-book guy (Brooks & Marsh 925).

The primary crime-solution plotline of this episode is initiated by the mysterious and seemingly sudden death of a football player during a local high school game. Though steroid use is suspected, no traces of drugs turn up in the dead boy's body. Captain Fuller sends McCann undercover into the high school, to solve the mystery. McCann, who assumes the identity of a transfer football player as his cover, befriends one player named Tommy Boylin. Tommy is an active and committed environmentalist, something we, along with McCann, learn early in this episode's first act when Tommy is presented with an award from the county's Toxic Task Force for his work in educating the school and community about the perils of hazardous toxic waste and helping to create a hazardous waste pick up service.
While the "issue" of hazardous waste will function as a central element in the surface narrative, it is also simply an excuse to get us to the melodramatic exploration and critique of Tommy's idealistic and youthfully naive environmentalism. This exploration is established at this point in the episode, during Tommy's acceptance speech at the school. As McCann listens from the back of the room, a man who turns out to be Tommy's proud father steps up next to him to listen as well. The head of the County's Toxic Task Force introduces Tommy: *Americans generate 1.5 million tons of hazardous waste every day. What Tommy Boylan has done is taken that figure and turned it into something we can see.* McCann and Tommy's father begin to chat, and the father provides McCann and us with the backstory concerning Tommy's efforts, "educating" McCann and us in the process.

Father: *It's against the law to put hazardous waste in the regular garbage.*
McCann: *Well, that makes me a major criminal.*
Father: *Hey, we all are. That's the kid's point.*

We cut back to Tommy's speech.

Tommy: *We live in a time of choices. We can choose to take care of our poisons. Or we can choose to die. It's that simple.*

But of course, it isn't that simple; that's the narrative's point.

Pitched at teenagers, and featuring teenage cops, *21 Jump Street* is primed on a series level for what this storyline opens up, particularly issues of commitment vs. "selling out," of idealism vs. the "real world." It is through the complications and contradictions of his father's life that Tommy simultaneously learns of similar complications and contradictions inherent in environmentalist beliefs and actions.

The theme of idealistic vs. realistic levels of commitment to issues or causes is further introduced by having Tommy's father be a self-identified "former sixties radical."
As the father looks on, proudly, he adds that Tommy is "a chip off the old block. For me, it was Vietnam. For him, it's the environment." Historically, such an equation was and continues to be a problematic one, centered on the question of whether or not environmentalism isn't simply a distraction from what really matters politically. Here, of course, there is no attempt at representing the complicated relationship the two "movements" have. Tommy's father simply equates them.

It is not long after this award ceremony that Tommy, with McCann's help, discovers that the trucks picking up the hazardous materials from the school (and presumably from the community at large) are not dumping the waste in a legal dump site designed specifically for such materials, but are simply driving to a secluded area in the woods not far from the school and dumping the toxic material there. Tommy and McCann's search of the dumping grounds leaves little doubt that the toxic materials being dumped there have been seeping into the nearby river.

At this point, the surface narrative comes to a virtual standstill as it shifts into a nearly three-minute montage/portrait of the sludge, the barrels, the dead fish, and the truly tragic sights that each of the young men discover. The soundtrack emphasizes this portrait of this particular environmental issue with a soulful, ironic version of America the Beautiful. It is a narrative suspension of sorts which allows for a meditation on the aesthetics of illegal toxic waste dumps. As such, it stands out as a significant singular moment of environmentalist melodrama. If the sludge and pollution served simply as plot device in the problem-solution structure of *Heat of the Night*, here it claims an emotionally charged, melodramatic centrality to both the A- and B-stories of *21 Jump Street*. 

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Intercut with reaction shots of the two boys, the toxic waste “problem” still remains tied to the sensibilities of the protagonist, and so to the problem-solution story line that propels and informs the episodic structure. This river, with its seasonally large runoff, has soaked the school’s football field. It is the toxic content of this groundwater, most particularly its high level of benzyne, that has been making the players sick. And it is also the probable cause of the one young player’s death. With this known, the narrative then shifts to follow McCann’s more specific task of catching and stopping the illegal dumpers.

This he does, of course, according the problem-solution structure which serves as the story’s spine. The waste removal company doing the illegal dumping is found to be linked to Vincent Bower, a reputed Mafia figure. But a complication arises. When McCann and Tommy follow one of Bower’s trucks, it leads them to an audio tape factory that is owned and run by Tommy’s father. McCann finds that Tommy’s father is being extorted by Bower’s thugs. Tommy, of course, for whom the issue of toxic waste is a simple one, is angered and confused by his father’s seeming willingness to have his toxic wastes illegally disposed of. When Tommy’s father does take a stand against the Bower men not long afterwards, they beat him nearly to the point of death. In the end, Tommy and his father decide to testify against Bower, knowing that such testimony will land them in a witness protection program and end their lives as they have lived them up to then. But as Tommy says, dedicated to the end, “At least we’ll have done this one thing.” As the episode ends, we learn that Bower has been arrested, his waste disposal company has been shut down, and that the DA’s case against them looks good, “thanks to the Boylans.”

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As with all of the series-based melodramas we are considering in this section, this episode of *21 Jump Street* is “about” several things. Most immediate to the cop show formula, it is about McCann’s solving the mystery of the young high school football player’s sad and untimely death. Related to this, it is also about stopping the Mafia-based Bower Family from their illegal dumping practices. As with *Heat of the Night*, however, we find the "cause" for these practices not in the inherent flaws of capitalism, or of a market-driven environmentalism, but in an aberration of an ultimately unquestioned norm. That Tommy’s father was wrapped up in this anthropocentrically-informed business of bypassing environmental legislation helps to add a layer of complication and so implication we found lacking in *Heat of the Night*. But again, the same narrative pattern keeps this difficult environmentalist issue a question of individuality; Tommy’s father was forced into this environmentally-compromising illegal act. He had no real choice.

*   *   *

In *Guns of Paradise* (CBS 1988-1990 under title *Paradise*; CBS 1990-1991 under title *Guns of Paradise*), the only Western included in this study, we again find the environmental issue of toxic industrial byproduct contaminating surface water embedded in an episodic primetime melodrama. Apart from speculating as to why this particular topic is an apparent favorite among the series we are considering, the repeated use of this important environmental issue allows us to consider again the differences that generic formula makes. That is, how does the television Western story formula...
determine the rhetorical shape of this environmental topic differently than the cop story or action-adventure formula?

The production of *Guns of Paradise* followed on the critical and commercial success of the mini-series *Lonesome Dove*, and echoed a similar move in mainstream Hollywood cinema as evidenced in such films as *Silverado* and the *Young Guns* series. As such, *Guns of Paradise* was part of primetime television's move in the early 1990s to revive the television Western, a longtime formal staple which all but disappeared from primetime storytelling at the end of *Gunsmoke*’s 20-year television run in the mid-1970s. Central to primetime’s return to the Western formula was the return to its mythological setting in the American West of the late 1800s, and the many formulaic signifiers and story elements which serve to create this setting and recreate what it makes narratively possible. Indeed, though no less mythological for it, every other series being considered in this study, whether comedy or melodrama, is positioned in a contemporary setting. In the Western, pre-determined elements of place and time combine to create a mythic construct in which problems and issues can be considered *in relation to* the central thematics of the establishment of order and the creation and maintenance of civilization (Newcomb 1974: 62).

Given some of the central tenets of environmentalist discourse and politics concerning the relative costs of industrialized civilization, the Western is a significant narrative context in which to explore specific environmentalist themes and concerns. “The Western’s essential conflict between civilization and savagery,” writes Schatz (1981), “is expressed in a variety of oppositions: East versus West, garden versus desert, America versus Europe, social order versus anarchy, individual versus community, town versus wilderness, cowboy versus Indian, schoolmarm versus dancehall girl, and so on”
(48). *Guns of Paradise*, in fact, which is very much shaped by these specific formulaic demands, lends particular franchise elements which further its particular significance in this way. Here is a brief description the series from Brooks & Marsh (1992), a description which, in a manner particular to the creation and recreation of popular storytelling, simultaneously adheres to the formula while recasting it through the franchise specifics of this series.

Ethan Cord was a grizzled professional gunfighter living in the frontier mining town of Paradise, California, during the 1890s. His outlook on life and responsibility were changed radically when his dying sister, Lucy Cord Carroll, a singer in a musical revue in St. Louis, sent her four children out West to live with their uncle. Although he wasn’t convinced that he could adjust to the role of parent, Ethan rented a farmhouse from Amelia Lawson, owner of the Paradise Bank and eventually his love interest, and moved his new family in. Despite his efforts to become a peaceable rancher, a more suitable living for a man with a family, Ethan was still hired for his skills with a gun and called upon to protect the honest folk of Paradise from criminals. Indian medicine man John Taylor was his close friend, a quiet man who always was around when he was needed, particularly when a gunfight was imminent. (687)

A few additional franchise variations on this formulaic variation occurred in the series’ transition into its third and final season (the season from which the episode from our sample is taken). These included Ethan’s becoming the town’s marshal, and his engagement to Amelia (687).

Beyond the elements of time and place, Newcomb (1974) suggests that it is ultimately the action of characters which distinguishes this formula from others, and which gives the form its televisual specificity: the series melodrama. Like Frank Furillo (*Hill Street Blues*) or Kojak before him, Ethan functions as another television hero father figure, taking care of the specific formulaic demands of law and order and the protection of community on a weekly episodic level, while exploring melodramatic
themes of family cohesion and the very development of community on a cumulative, series-based level.

Three outside forces or elements are introduced in a quick pre-credit sequence at the start of this episode which serve to upset the series-based stability of the narrative universe of *Guns of Paradise*, and so to situate the issues and create the necessary conflicts for this particular episode. In the first scene of this three-scene sequence, we find the Carroll children standing outside of their school. The school continues to be closed due to a sickness that has struck the town and which is keeping most of the schoolchildren at home. The two youngest boys, Ben and George, convince their older siblings, Claire and Joseph, to let them spend the day playing in the nearby stream. This sickness proves to be the central narrative disruption for this episode, and its cause will need to be found before the end of the episode if the requisite reestablishment of narrative equilibrium is to be achieved.

From there, we cut to a second short scene in which a Dr. Winthrop, a fancy, handsome, well-dressed doctor from "the East" arrives by stagecoach into town. Both John Taylor and Amelia have invited the doctor to Paradise, to help them get to the source of the town's mysterious sickness, which has thus far escaped the two of them. If the sickness has upset the series-based or ongoing operating rules and given circumstances of Paradise, Dr. Winthrop's presence will prove to upset the ongoing, cumulative relationship between Ethan and Amelia. Winthrop will fall for Amelia, and Ethan will suffer real jealousy.

Finally, we go to the third and final scene of this opening sequence, which finds an angry and sick older man running along the main street sidewalk, screaming and threatening the life of episodic character Mr. Calloway, the owner of the local
smeltery. Ethan spots the old man rushing Calloway from across the street, and is forced to shoot the old man down before he kills Calloway. We go from a shocked reaction shot of Ethan after shooting the man, into the regular opening credit sequence. Besides providing some immediate generic payoff -- the gunman turned sheriff is forced to do some fancy shooting right off the bat -- the scene underscores the expositional work of the first two scenes; the old man's crazed imbalance represents the imbalance that has befallen this town that only a week ago, we left in stable and predictable condition.

In less than four minutes, then, we are introduced to the principal regular characters of the series -- Ethan, Amelia, and the Carroll children -- along with the two central episodic characters -- Dr. Winthrop and Mr. Calloway. With them, we know more or less what outside influences are going to challenge the stability of this familiar world, and anticipate the ritual of conflict and the reestablishment of that stability.

It is into this simultaneously series-based and episodically-informed exposition that the episode's overt environmentalist issue, and the third contaminating "outside" narrative element is introduced and contextualized. As it turns out, the source of the sickness is arsenic, which is being discharged by Mr. Calloway's smeltery outside of town, and in turn ingested by many of the townspeople downstream who depend on the stream for drinking water. Echoing similar conflicts in MacGyver, In the Heat of the Night and 21 Jump Street, the smeltery is an essential factor in the health of the local economy, and so to the very existence of the town of Paradise. But it also turns out to be the essential cause of sickness and even death among the townspeople.

What is being forced on the town of Paradise, and so narratively examined by this Western melodrama, is a challenge to a blind belief in industry for industry's sake -- employment, tax-base, etc. -- as well as a shift towards a more holistic understanding of
the essential interrelatedness of economy, society and the ecosystem. Indeed, the episode itself is about this most central of ecosophiological shifts, which at its root is a shift in consciousness from an anthropocentric shortsightedness to an ecocentric widening of vision and understanding.

The manner in which this shift is played out dramatically, according to the conventions of the genre and to the rules of the franchise, finds this episode ultimately "arguing" strongly in favor of such a shift. This is the case in part because the impulse toward a more ecocentric worldview is held and delivered by the very narrative center of Guns of Paradise, Sheriff Ethan Cord. It becomes this narrative hero's classically-defined task, that is, to overcome the resistance of the townspeople as well as the overt antagonism of the smeltery owner and his henchmen, for the sake of the successful acceptance of this fundamental tenet of contemporary environmentalism.

The "town meeting" scene proves to be the clearest articulation of this "issue." Ethan tells everyone there of the arsenic levels that Dr. Winthrop has found in Salt Creek, and tries to convince them that changes need to occur for the sake of the community's health. Calloway, the owner of the smeltery, is in attendance as well. He drinks a glass of water he claims is from Salt Creek to reassure them that Ethan is overreacting. Then he pulls out the inevitable reasoning:

Calloway: Now look, We're business people. We're not assassins. Now we've helped bring prosperity to this town. But, if you folks are convinced we're poisoning your stream, then I suggest you get a court order and close us down. We're going to abide by the law. But remember this: if we close, that mine is going to suffer. If that mine suffers, this town suffers. The gravy days are at an end. Isn't that right, Mr. Bass?

Mr. Bass (owner of the mining company who uses Calloway's smeltery):
Yes it is.

Calloway: Mr. Bass here is president of the Pacific Sierra Mining Company.

Mr. Bass: And we didn't open here in Paradise to be closed down by the local marshall. Without that smeltery, we'll have to haul our...
ore over 100 miles for processing. We can't do that and make a profit. Without a profit, we're out of business.

The townspeople are clearly impressed and convinced by the inferences of Calloway and Bass. Ethan walks away, seeing that his cause is defeated for the moment.

This public issue is replayed in the domesticated setting of Ethan's family in the scene immediately following the town meeting.

Youngest Boy George: They should close the smeltery.
Big Sister Claire: They can't. The town needs money.
George: What is money if everybody's poisoned?
Claire: I don't know, George.

In the end, it is the rules of the formula, and not the deep ecological wisdom of the townspeople, that brings the storyline back around to Ethan's side. Ethan must, as the Western hero regularly must, resort to violence to get the social good done, which in this case is equated with "the environmental good." While more deaths and sicknesses occur, Dr. Winthrop, for whom Ethan feels little but resentment and jealousy, is finally beaten to death by Calloway's henchmen. This is the last straw. The doctor's death must be avenged. And it is. Ethan rides into the smeltery, kills Calloway's henchmen who resist his approach, and takes Calloway into custody.

As Ethan closes the smeltery doors, and nails a "Closed" sign on them, Mr. Bass the mine owner speaks:

Mr. Bass: It's a long, dangerous trip across those mountains for that ore.
Ethan: But you're still in business.
Mr. Bass: But for how long?
Ethan: As long as it pays.
Mr. Bass: Well, no matter what, it's going to cost a lot more to ship that ore to the smeltery in Gainesville.
Ethan: It can't cost any more than we've already paid.

This time, the townspeople surrounding them nod in agreement with Ethan, and the scene simply articulates what the narrative line has already decided: there is an
industrial price known as profit, and then there is a social/community price known as health. And this town, under the guidance of their sheriff, has chosen to privilege the latter. Ethan walks off at the episode's end arm-in-arm with Amelia, reinforcing the truths for which he has both stood and acted. From well within the ritualized bounds of Western formula, Ethan has resorted to direct action and sanctioned murder to see his environmentalist agenda carried through. And he is our hero for it.

* * *

All three of these law-and-order narratives take as their eco-problem the illegal or improper disposal of industrial waste. The eco-antagonists in each of these instances of law-and-order environmentalism -- those guilty of "fouling the nest" of their respective generic communities -- are industrialists and businessmen: Mr. Donnner, the CEO of Kensidyne in Heat of the Night, Tommy Bolan's father in 21 Jump Street, and Mr. Calloway, the smeltery owner in Guns of Paradise. But with the exception of Guns of Paradise, we find the ultimate blame falling on the isolated actions of these individual men, and not on the industrial culture in which they live and through which they exercise their values and judgment.

This deflection of responsibility is partially a function of the need for episodic plot line closure. The eco-antagonist of Heat of the Night, Mr. Donner, is intentionally positioned outside of the norm, and thus functions as a rhetorical marker of competition gone awry, though not of competition itself. Tommy Boylan's father in 21 Jump Street is guilty only of not having been able to stand up to the Mafia-type criminals who have been forcing him to comply with the ecological crimes. Like Caesar, Mr. Calloway, the smeltery owner in Guns of Paradise, is guilty of surrounding himself with yes men and supporters whose violent and murderous actions give
physical form to the moral lines he crossed by selfishly denying the eco-problem of contaminated ground water. Calloway is indicted finally and removed from the community. But Mr. Bass, the owner of the mines that provide Calloway's smeltery its ore, remains a part of the discussion at the episode's end, representing the industrial system that is essential to the development of an industrial America.

The eco-protagonists of these environmental tales are directly aligned with state-aligned and community-approved institutions or agencies. They are "cops," working for the community, paid to protect that community's physical and ideological boundaries. But again we find the capacities for these cops to affect significant structural change to be formulaically limited. As with MacGyver and E.A.R.T.H. Force, their job is about taking care of the symptoms, and not offering a cure or identifying a cause. They are only eco-protagonists by episodic happenstance. Re-establishing a narrative balance does not mean re-establishing ecological balance. The really tough questions environmentalists ask of of industrial culture remain unaddressed.

Ethan Cord, sheriff of late 19th-century Paradise, goes much further than his counterparts in late 20th century Sparta or Los Angeles. In the interest of his community's eco-systemic balance, Ethan goes beyond getting rid of the "bad egg" and forces the smeltery to close down. By declaring the "price" to be too high not to do so, he adopts the language of the industrialist and brings it into the realm of the community. Unlike 21 Jump Street or Heat of the Night, this action directly equates community harmony and balance with ecological balance, and so overtly privilege ecological culture over industrial culture in the process.

The Western formula functions in this case as a form that enables a more radical, or certainly more systemic, ecological tale to be told. The sheriff, by the
combined authority vested in him as a sheriff and as a former gunfighter, is able to bring the weight of the law to bear not just on the individual responsible for this eco-problem of ground water contamination, but on the industrial process that causes the actual contamination. The Western formula functions as a mythological lens through which to (re)investigate the originating moments of nation's embrace and development of industrial culture. This episode thus serves as an imaginative time travel device through which to replay one of these originating moments and see where we might or might not have "gone wrong" in embracing industrial culture and practices.
Chapter Nine

Legal Talk and Environmentalism

When environmental issues are included in law shows such as Against the Law (FOX 1990-1991) or Shannon's Deal (NBC 1990-1991), they become part of a narrative universe marked less by action and crime-solving than by rhetoric and talk. If detectives are paid to gather evidence, interpret it and put together a convincing story based on their interpretations, then lawyers are paid to represent their clients by taking and talking about particular positions on important social, legal and moral issues of our time. In this sense, law shows are more overtly rhetorical than the action-adventures, cop shows and Westerns we have considered to this point. The stories of law shows are marked and punctuated with possibilities, questions, arguments and summations. In law shows, then, we find a primetime story form functioning in much more literal terms as a cultural and social forum for argument and debate about some of our culture's most conflicted and ongoing issues and topics of power.

Of course, these lawyers must operate like the sheriffs, cops, action-adventure and other primetime heroes operate, and spin their tales from within an episodic problem-solution story structure. Such are the duties of series narrative. Innocence and guilt must be explored and proven. Clients must be saved. Mysteries must be solved. But there remains a difference. The series discussed to this point have each offered particular variations on what we might call action melodrama. Turning now to two series whose protagonists are male lawyers, Against the Law and Shannon's Deal, we begin to explore what we might call an explicitly discursive melodrama.
Part of this shift in formula and tone is an increased attention to the personal lives and cumulatively-known pasts of the lawyer heroes. Of course we have seen aspects of this sense of the personal in the action melodramas considered in the previous two chapters, though usually through subplots or as melodramatic asides to the problem-solution narratives. In the case of Against the Law and Shannon's Deal, we find the personal lives and past experiences of these lawyers carefully included in the A-story (Against the Law) or woven into the very franchise of the series narrative (Shannon's Deal).

Against the Law's Simon MacHeath ("Mac") for instance, is a cynic and a wise-ass. He is also, Brooks & Marsh (1992) remind us, a good lawyer. By leaving a sucessful career with a prestigious Boston law firm to establish his own practice and represent those who most need representation and often can least afford it, he is attempting to turn the very cynicism that led him to doubt his place in "the firm" into something which allows him to work for "the good." Each episode, then, is a chapter in this larger series-level narrative. In the single episode included in our sample, Mac is drawn into a case, which is to say, into an episodic storyline, by old flame Jessie Hamilton, who heads up a group of ecotage environmentalists by the name of Nature Now!

The episode opens at daybreak with a group of Nature Now! "monkeywrenchers" piling out of a van at a logging site of Sheridan Logging Company. They proceed to sabotage the company's heavy machinery, spike trees and tear out surveyor stakes. Immediately after completing their actions, they call Sherman DeWitt, the owner of Sheridan Logging, and tell him of their actions. DeWitt, who appears to have had previous dealings with Nature Now! reacts with anger and frustration.
The next scene takes place at night. We follow an anonymous Sheridan Logging employee as he lets himself into a small Sheridan office building in which he is apparently working late. Suddenly an explosion occurs, the building goes up in flames and the employee screams out, badly hurt. We cut directly from there to Simon MacHeath on a Boston street, hassling with some guy who is about to tow his car away. His car phone rings. It is Jessie Hamilton calling from jail in the small New Hampshire town of Pallum, home of Sheridan Logging. Jessie tells Mac that she and the others have been arrested in connection with the explosion and charged with attempted murder. We can tell from the manner of their brief conversation that they know each other well. He tells Jessie he will be right there.

Even at this early point, that narrative has taken care of a number of narrative tasks: it has offered initial expository information, such as the principal characters, the setting and the given circumstances of the episodic narrative universe; it has introduced the primary environmental issue to be explored in that universe -- ecotage in response to clear cut logging practices; and it has reactivated Mac's past by establishing an apparent connection between Mac and the episodic protagonist, Jessie MacHeath. The episode plays out from there in the following ways:

Mac comes to New Hampshire to represent Jessie, who has been singled out for trial as the ringleader. A good part of the remainder of the episode then becomes a fairly standard courtroom drama, as Mac defends Jessie against the charges that she and Nature Now! are responsible for planting the bomb. And of course, he does a brilliant job of it, displaying his series-based traits of courtroom histrionics and confrontations with judges along the way. The key moment in the case occurs when one of Jessie's fellow Nature Now! cohorts suddenly turns on Jessie, and implicates her as being
responsible for the bombing after all. Mac responds by exposing this turncoat's criminal record and the deal that he cut with the government to go undercover and help to bring down Nature Now!

Parallel to this requisite courtroom plotline, though, are a number of melodramatic scenes between Mac and Jessie during which they explore their feelings about what went on between them in the past, and consider the possibility of getting together again "after this is all over with." Mac seems to think it possible. Jessie doesn't, thinking that "too much has happened" between them. Increasingly, the two narrative lines merge. Mac's research man Miggsy worries that Mac is too involved to remain an effective lawyer in this case. Mac rejects this as nonsense. But as things turn out, it isn't.

The final turn for both plotlines occurs at the top of the 4th and final act, when Miggsy reveals to Mac through photographs that Jessie and Sherman DeWitt, the owner of the Sheridan Logging Company, are actually tied up in this event together. It seems that Jessie and DeWitt slept together sometime before the explosion. Jessie lifted DeWitt's security key card at that time in order to plant the bomb. DeWitt, of course, has been covering up, since he is a married man with children and would be ruined if word of the affair, not to mention what the affair led to, were to get out.

Mac is hurt and deeply angry at Jessie. He has been used. She lied. But of course he has been a good lawyer in the meantime, and his work in the courtroom has effectively cast doubt on the accusations. Jessie is bound to be found innocent.

When Mac shows up in court the next morning, he arrives without Jessie, who has chosen to jump bail and go underground to continue her work as an environmentalist. Mac reads a written statement she has left behind explaining her actions to the press outside of the courtroom. The episode ends with Mac walking
along a logging site alone, kicking the dirt before him, the words of her statement
ringing in his ears.

The primary environmentalist issue called forth in this episode is obviously that
of "direct action" environmentalism. The words exchanged between Nature Now! and
Sherman DeWitt, the owner of the logging company they have attacked, gives voice to a
number of the issues inevitably tied to discussions of this type of environmentalism.

An unidentified member of Nature Now!: This is your wake up call
from Nature Now! We spiked 200 trees today.
Sherman DeWitt: You know, you people are pushing your luck.
NN: It's not about luck. It's about preserving the environment.
SD: Look, I've tried working with you people, but it's like talking to a
wall.
NN: You and Sheridan Logging are the wall. Stop clear-cutting trees,
and the wall comes down.
SD: Listen, if you spike trees, innocent loggers get hurt. Is that what you
want?
NN: That's why we're warning you. Every spiked tree is marked. If
anyone is hurt, it's your responsibility, not ours.

Central to these issues, particularly as they play out in this particular episode,
are ideas of responsibility and commitment, and of allegiance to cause. For the Nature
Now! folks, clear cutting is an irresponsible act against the environment. It is the
perceived irresponsibility of such an act which justifies their actions and anger. The
threat to the environment is what they are all about. For Sherman DeWitt, the particular
practice of spiking trees is an irresponsible act against the safety of his workers. It is the
perceived irresponsibility of such an act which in turn justifies his actions and anger.
The threat to the economy, to the livelihood of the men and women who work for
Sheridan Logging, is what he is all about.

This "discussion" of ethics and responsibility to community proves to be central
to the melodramatic elements of this episode as well. When Mac and Jessie meet early
in the episode, their dialogue blends the public and private nature of these issues well.
After establishing the circumstances of her arrest, they begin to catch up on "a past" they once had together. Last Mac knew, Jessie was doing work for the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

Jessie: Yeah, I was out there trying to save the world. The dream come true, you know?
Mac: That sounds like a woman I loved in another life.
Jessie: Well, the dream went sour. Reaganomics sliced up the budget, and our regulatory clout went with it.
Mac: Politics has a way of blunting swords.
Jessie: I felt I could be more effective outside of government.
Mac: So you dusted off the Birkenstocks and joined Nature Now!
Jessie: The government has been braindead on this issue for ten years, Mac. I think it's time we move the war back to grassroots.

This conversation virtually spells out what we described in the second chapter as an element of Third Wave environmentalism: the exodus of a good many people from a top-down, bureaucratic legal environmentalism to a bottom-up grassroots environmentalism. But it also performs that key melodramatic move of blending the idealism and commitments of public politics with those of interpersonal relationships and love. Mac remembers the night Jessie told him to take a hike. Jessie remembers thinking that she could never have gotten a commitment from Mac. Mac nods his head, remembering, agreeing that that is how it was.

The narrative continues throughout the episode to move back and forth in this way between the public issue of commitment to cause and the private issue of commitment to relationship, performing its pedagogical function concerning environmental information along the way as well. A good instance of this is the moment when Mac and Jessie finally let their feelings for one another loose again. They are walking together in a stand of trees.

Jessica: These trees are centuries old. They've seen the revolution, the Civil War... They're national treasures.
Mac: But to Sheridan logging they're just potential toothpicks?
Jessica: See that one there? That’s my buddy. Last year they wanted to cut it down. So I took a week’s worth of supplies, went up to the top. Loggers threatened to cut it down. But I outlasted them.

Mac: I couldn’t have done that.

Jessica: Yes you could have. Trouble is, they just moved to another area and levelled it.

Jessica goes on, remembering when she used to bring her blind mother here. She then has Mac close his eyes, and “listen to the trees,” to the songs in the wind. She kisses his neck as he listens. The music fades in. They embrace.

Other related issues are of course raised along the way as well. Here, for instance, is the dialogue from Mac and DeWitt’s first meeting, during which the narrative performs its pedagogical informational function while voicing an antagonistic version of the classical American discourse of City vs. Country. MacHeath is looking through the rubble left from the explosion. DeWitt walks up and asks who he is.

Mac: I’m Simon MacHeath, representing Jessica Hamilton.
DeWitt: Lawyer.
Mac: Yeah.
DeWitt: Well, I’m the boss.
Mac: Hi, boss. How’s it goin?
DeWitt: Your client has gone too far, now, MacHeath.
Mac: Well, in Boston, we’re innocent until you’re proven guilty.
DeWitt: Well, this ain’t Boston. And Nature Now! has made things pretty rough on some of the people around here.
Mac: Monkeywrenching tends to do that. But this isn’t the work of Nature Now!
DeWitt: Yeah, well, the end result is, we have to shut down. In the meantime, there’s no work.
Mac: When your work eliminates 98% of the forests around you, some people want to know what your career goals are.
DeWitt: Yeah, well, I’m not saying there’s not blame on both sides. But you try telling that to the men who have mouths to feed, who know only one trade.
Mac: Humanitarian, huh? Concerned for your loggers or just your company’s profits?
DeWitt: Both. Let me give a little bit of advice. People around here are decent. They work hard and they work honest. But they don’t always like outsiders coming up here trying to tell them how to run their lives.
Mac: Jessica Hamilton is no dictator. She’s just one voice crying out in the wilderness.
DeWitt: Yeah, well, you try proving that to people here in Pallum, MacHeath.

This conflict between outsiders and insiders, between City and Country, is echoed again some time later in the episode, during the initial stages of the trial. MacHeath requests that the trial be moved to another location because of the likely partiality of the townspeople against his client, something that DeWitt's words have certainly suggested to be possibility. The Judge appears to be offended, and launches into a Capraesque monologue on smalltown democracy:

Judge: Counselor, this is New England, the birthplace and the cradle of democracy. People here have the right to demonstrate what they feel, whether it agrees with the opinions of others or not. (The camera cuts from a medium shot of the judge and begins a slow pan across the intent faces of the townspeople/Americans attending the trial.) Now, during the course of this trial, you will find that despite attacks by the group you represent, that this is an imminently fair-minded community. I dare say you will find not only twelve impartial people, but many more than that. (Here, the pan ends on the face of Sherman DeWitt.) Because whatever these people may believe personally, they hold to a higher commitment: justice.

MacHeath (responding after a beat or two with characteristic City-inspired sarcasm): So... motion denied?

Judge: Yes. And you are close to contempt. Abandon the histrionics, sir.
Mac (under his breath): And the witch trials are on the afternoon docket?

By the end it is Mac's cynicism that rings truer than the judge's apparently heartfelt populism. This is underscored by the shot of DeWitt's face, who in hindsight is remaining incredibly partial and compromised in his silence. But it is also the voice of the narrative's protagonist, after all, a voice marked by a culturally familiar thirtysomething tone of self-doubt, political frustration and burn out. But like most cynics, he is an idealist at heart. This we know from his having left the prestige of the Boston law firm. And it is this cynic/idealist identity trait that is put to test each week.

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Some time after the judge's lecture, there is a small but significant moment in which Mac's cynical shell is penetrated by a far subtler enactment of melodrama. As he walks through a crowd of townspeople outside of the courthouse, Mac happens to glance down at a little girl who is holding a sign that reads "Save my Daddy's job." The shot of her from Mac's point-of-view, looking up at him, hangs a beat or two. The reaction shot of Mac's thoughtful and moved face also remains a moment or two longer than normal action would dictate. It is another of those moments, terribly obvious in its melodramatic appeal, that makes affectively available what we have already established as a central and conflicted issue.

It is a conflicted moment, in fact, which anticipates the highly conflicted and confusing results of his work both as a lawyer and as a lover in this episode. The episodic surface story is resolved. We find out both the who and the why. The lawyer's work is done for another episodic day. But the "success" of this case is filled with conflicts for Mac. These conflicted feelings force to the text's surface a related set of conflicted questions concerning the environmental issues that have propelled the overall narrative.

Jessie's final note that Mac reads to the court is an explicit statement in support of direct action, and of the ecocentric philosophy beneath it. I include it here in full to indicate just how much "airtime" was given to this "political statement:"

Jessie: A long time ago, I made a choice to protect the earth without compromise. A choice made much more difficult by the inadvertent injuries suffered by Tom Norton as a result of the explosion at Sheridan Logging, for which I take complete responsibility. (Music begins.) I never intended to hurt Tim Norton, or anyone else. But I did. And I apologize for that. My actions may seem criminal to you. But the real crimes are being committed by men and women who believe that they have a mandate from consumers for an endless stream of tissue, toilet paper and even the paper on which I write. We are in a war. The war of industrial
civilization against the natural world. (Mac's voiceover begins to fade here, and is replaced by Jessie's voice.) We don't have much time. (Cut to medium shot of Mac standing at a logging site, the fields clear-cut around him, a bulldozer prominent in the background.) We are losing our ancient forests, and the fresh air they give us. If we continue as we have, in the next forty years, one-third of all the species in the world will have been made extinct. (Mac begins to walk away from the camera.) To my friends who have fought with me, I say "Nature Now!" To those who I have betrayed, I hope for reconciliation. (Camera cranes back, leaving Mac a smaller and smaller image among the damage and the machinery.) And so I have decided to go underground, in order to do whatever is necessary to stop this holocaust. (Mac kicks the dirt. The long shot fades to black. The episode ends.)

Embodied within this episode of Against the Law, then, is a rhetorical argument for direct action environmentalism, for the actions themselves and the beliefs which drive those actions. Jessie's faith and commitment to the cause is strong throughout the episode. And yet the narrative structure leaves some doubt as well. The price seems confusing, certainly to Mac. The morality seems questionable, up for grabs.

Mac's cumulative struggle will carry on, if only for a single season. The political and emotional issues remain entwined right to the end. As a result, we have experienced and felt, as well as considered and thought about, the moral and ethical complexity of this environmental issue. The radical shift ultimately envisioned by environmentalists, particularly those who chose actions over words to express this vision, is an ethically, socically, economically, politically and emotionally complex issue, to be sure. As far as Theodore Roszack is concerned, it is important we both know and feel that. Through engagement with melodramatic texts such as this episode of Against the Law, the viewer is offered a chance to do just that.

*   *   *

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While Simon MacHeath's past meets up with him in this episode, lawyer Jack Shannon's narrative world in the sadly short-lived Shannon's Deal is virtually drenched in a past that threatens constantly to overwhelm the intentions of the present. In that sense, Shannon's Deal is as much a hard-boiled detective story as it is a law show.

As with his other early-90s, post-Reagan fictional lawyer comrades, such as Against the Law's Simon MacHeath, or Rosie O'Neil from The Trials of Rosie O'Neil, Jack Shannon is another cynical, white, divorced, burned-out, formerly well-positioned lawyer who now spends his days trying to do "something better" with his life and his career. For Simon MacHeath, this conceit primarily served to contextualize the comedic cynicism, histrionic sarcasm and altogether unconventional behavior of his character. Where else could this "short-tempered maverick with strong principles" be effective except in his own practice, helping such disadvantaged clients as "a victim of hospital negligence, a woman who had been date raped, a comedian arrested for using obscene language, [or] an illiterate college basketball star who was about to lose his scholarship because of a knee injury" (Brooks and Marsh 1992: 21)?

For Jack Shannon, who had to hit rock bottom before finding "the truer path," the shift to downtown digs was less a career choice than an act of survival. Jack is out to make good on what's left of his career and his life, and to do some social good in the process. This theme does not simply inform the central character's traits, that is, but deeply imbues the general atmosphere and mise-en-scene of Shannon's Deal. Again, the effect is that of an updated hard-boiled detective story.

The opening credit sequence helps to set this hard-boiled mood each week, with its collage of dissolves between both black and white and colored letter-boxed
shots of impressionistic urban street scenes, mixed with shots of the primary series actors/characters. On the soundtrack there plays a classy jazz theme by trumpeter Wynton Marsalis, accompanied by this Chandleresque voiceover of Jack's:

I thought I was a big shot. Big money, big house, big car. I thought I held all the cards. I thought I could pick the winner everytime. I thought I could smell it. But the whole thing was built on garbage. I treated my wife badly, and I knew it, and I didn't stop and one day she walked. She took my daughter with her. I started gambling big time, crazy stuff, longshot stuff. I turned into the kind of man I'd grown up hating, and taking the big bucks and being made a partner wasn't enough to buy that off.

I'm just kind of starting from scratch again. Keep things low pressure.

Of course, this weekly voiceover provides a significant amount of condensed backstory which allows new and unfamiliar viewers to get a sense for some of the given circumstances, operating rules and the character traits that previous and repeated viewings would have otherwise afforded them. But in so doing, this voiceover tells all of us how much this series is about the burden of the past, and the difficulties inherent in this character's attempt to both live with it and get beyond it. The "deal" that is Shannon's present is one that is played out episodically in the shadow of a past Faustian deal he made with a decade of corporate, legal and personal greed.

In this way, Shannon's Deal really pushes the cumulative narrational construct. Still an episodic law show, distinct from the narrative model of L.A. Law, each weekly installment works in an episodic format, bringing the immediate problem to some sense of resolution. And yet Jack Shannon's relationship with his daughter, his secretary and, of course, his past continue to develop if not in an explicitly serialized manner -- what immediately concerns Jack in one episode may not directly concern him in the next --
then in a cumulative way, to haunt and inform the ambience of the particular and
discreet narrative occurrences of each specific episode.

This narrative context is a particularly significant one in which to drop and
melodramatically explore environmentalist issues. As was implied in the episode of
Against the Law just analyzed, an awareness and reconsideration of our past actions in
relation to an ecocentrically-informed base of reconception is central in many ways to
an engagement with contemporary environmentalism. Environmentalist rhetoric asks us
to consider a shift in the perceived meanings and connections between our past/present
actions and our present/future needs. An alignment with a character for whom this is
both literally and figuratively the case is a means for the viewer, through the formal
conventions of melodramatic series narrative, to experience from within the safe and
imaginative confines of ritual engagement with story structure, the emotional difficulties
and deep contradictions in facing our past practices and attempting to rework them. To
"kind of start from scratch again," as Jack Shannon puts it.

What results is a richly detailed and multi-layered episode, one which demands
equal attention and care in both the retelling and the analysis. I begin therefore, by
describing the episode's opening act in some detail.

The episode opens with a happy, pastoral scene of Jack Shannon's daughter
Neala riding a tractor in an open field with her boyfriend Luther Yates. Luther is telling
Neala that he won't be returning this fall to the private high school they both attend.
The family can no longer afford the tuition, it seems, and they need his help running
the farm.

A bit late as always, Jack Shannon arrives in his used car to pick Neala up.
Seeing her father, Neala kisses Luther goodbye, jumps down from the tractor, and runs
happily across the field to her father's car. As Luther starts up his tractor again, he runs over what appears to be a barrel lid. Suddenly, there is a terrible explosion. Luther falls to the ground, his clothing in flames. Jack runs to him and extinguishes the flames.

Later, still at the scene of the accident, Jack speaks to a Ms. Dunn from the Environmental Protection Agency. She has been called in to investigate the accident. Preliminary indications suggest that the drum Luther's tractor struck contained an illegally dumped and highly flammable toxic waste. As Ms. Dunn is telling Jack this, she recognizes him as a lawyer from Coleman and Wise, the corporate firm that Jack once worked for. It seems that Coleman and Wise shielded many a corporate industrial client against the laws and regulations of the Environmental Protection Agency. She recognizes Jack from a large case that he won and the EPA lost, and assumes he is here at the site of the explosion in that capacity.

Ms. Dunn (repulsed): God, you creeps work fast.
Jack (annoyed): I don't work there anymore. My daughter was on the tractor.
Ms. Dunn (sincerely): Sorry....
Jack (defensively): I haven't defended a chemical company in years.
Ms. Dunn (her toughness returning): So what, you think you deserve a medal for that?
Jack (angrily): I found other work!

Jack pauses, regains composure, and continues.

Jack: Look, you think you're going to be able to trace whoever buried this stuff?
Ms. Dunn (all business): My chances are about the same as winning the lottery. Slim to none. The chemicals are common enough and... as you well know, there's no shortage of polluters. If you'll excuse me, I do have work to do. (She walks past and away from Jack.)
Jack (sarcastically): Pleasure.....

Later, in the hospital where Luther is being treated, Jack explains to Luther's upset and disbelieving parents the practices of companies who have their wastes...
dumped illegally in order to avoid paying the higher costs of proper and legal disposal. As it turns out, however, the land on which Neala and Luther were driving that day was not owned by the Yates. Finding the source of the waste will take some work. Jack offers his services to investigate the matter and to represent the Yates family, who have little money and no insurance. In spite of what the investigator reminded him at the accident site, and in spite of what he knows only too well from his "former life" as a corporate attorney, Jack wants to nail those responsible. It is a duty he shares with Ethan Cord, MacGyver, Officer Parker, the E.A.R.T.H. Force team, Simon MacHeath and others in the world of primetime episodic protagonist heroes: to solve the problem, to redress wrong, to rebalance the world. But it is also something his formula, his franchise and his specific "deal" with redemption insists Jack do as well. The Yates agree.

The trail of the investigation leads first to the landowners, a scared couple who have taken money from an outfit called Cotswald Trucking company in exchange for letting Cotswald dump on their property. "They told us the stuff was harmless," the wife tells Jack. "You gotta understand. Times are tough." The trail to the Cotswald mansion leads in turn to Anthony "Tough Tony" DiFalci, who bought the Cotswald Trucking Company upon Mr. Cotswald's death. Jack's attempt at muscling DiFalci into telling him who they dumped the chemicals for goes nowhere. A meeting with Ms. Dunn from the EPA complicates things further. She sees her interests, which involve getting the guilty party into court, as counter to Jack's interests, which involve getting the guilty party to settle out of court so that the Yates can afford the costs of Luther's hospital stay and recovery. Of course, Jack knows that a good team of lawyer's could tie up the EPA's suit for twelve years if they wanted, and he explains this to the Yates. Even still, he
agrees tentatively to let Luther testify for the EPA case if, in turn, the EPA tells him everything they know about DiFalci. "Trust me," Jack tells Ms. Dunn. She only laughs.

But when Jack goes through a list the District Attorney provides him of the companies they suspect, he comes upon one name that sends him reeling: ProtoChem. While at Coleman and Wise, it was Jack who helped ProtoChem, a Coleman and Wise client, to set up the legal labyrinth that in effect allows them to dump illegally, and so more cheaply. "I finally found out who's responsible," Jack tells his secretary. "Me. It's me." Not only must he confront the arguments and legal ramifications surrounding this environmental issue, but he must do so by confronting himself.

This turn in the surface plot engages, in turn, the cumulative, melodramatic narrative line between Jack and his daughter, Neala, who, like Tommy Boylan in 21 Jump Street, is deeply hurt and confused by her father's apparent complicity in a wrong which has landed her boyfriend badly burned in a hospital bed he cannot afford. "The gambling just hurt Mother and I. (sic) But this.... I don't understand. Hurting people you don't even know for money?"

Eventually, Neala comes around. "Fight 'em, daddy. Just fight 'em." And so Jack is motivated both by his formulaic status as a lawyer hero and by the melodramatic drive to prove himself worthy in his daughter's eyes, worthy of her forgiveness. In the end, Jack winds up using his past in order to force a settlement. ProtoChem rejects his $1 million out-of-court settlement request, which they can do without worry because of Jack's past work in their behalf. So Jack goes to Coleman and Wise, and threatens to testify against himself and the work he did with the firm in order to bring the company into the EPA suit. The legal claim he is making is that he, and so Coleman and Wise, willfully helped clients whom they knew were breaking the law. Of course, a successful
case for Jack means being disbarred from practicing law for life. But the folks at Coleman and Wise know Jack. They know he will go through it. After all, he has already bottomed out once. They cut a deal.

In the end, the cumulative narrative format, in which Jack Shannon is haunted at virtually every turn, and in virtually every episode by his past, provides a rich and powerful narrational context in which to explore the complexities, the difficulties, the frustrations and the seeming impossibilities of legal environmentalism. Simon MacHeath’s connection with things environmental comes somewhat indirectly through his past relationship with Jessie Hamilton and his role (as a lawyer, as a character in a legal drama) in defending the accusations against her as a monkeywrencher. Jack Shannon’s connection with things environmental, on the other hand, comes directly out of his own past and his own actions. The episodic issue of hazardous wastes which nearly kill his daughter and her boyfriend quite literally meets up with the serial or cumulative concerns of Jack’s past.

* * *

Shannon’s Law revisits the question explored by all three of the law-and-order stories discussed in the previous chapter concerning industrial waste and the tough issues of its proper disposal. Against the Law introduces and explores the problem of deforestation. In both cases, these eco-problems are positioned again as extending from the actions and practices of industrial culture.

Shannon’s Law’s story line is structured around the accident that nearly kills Jack Shannon’s daughter Neala and badly injures her boyfriend, and accident caused by the illegal dumping of dangerous and clearly explosive industrial waste. Against the Law’s story line emerges from the bombing of a Sheridan Logging Company building.
and the serious injury of an innocent Sheridan employee, an action “caused” by the practices of clear cutting.

But unlike the action-melodramas of the previous two chapters, the legal heroes of these discursive melodramas are positioned by both genre and franchise to explore the implications of these claims of cause and effect. In the process, they explore elements of the very opposition between industrial and ecological culture. This difference is the essence of distinguishing these discursive melodramas from the earlier action melodramas. When shaped in particular ways into law shows, law shows of this type are inherently and unavoidable about the complexity of assigning responsibility and blame.

This in turn informs what these eco-protagonist lawyers are able to do about these eco-problems. Unlike their counterparts in cop shows, Westerns and action-adventures, it is more difficult for Jack Shannon or Simon MacHeath to root out the “bad eggs” from an otherwise benevolent industrial system. Indeed, their primary narrative task to define who exactly the “bad eggs” are in these stories in the first place.

Were these action-adventures or cop shows, the eco-antagonists could be fairly easily identified: Sheridan Logging and their clear cutting practices in Against the Law. Cotswald Trucking and their illegal dumping practices in Shannon’s Law. In Against the Law, however, it is ultimately Jessie’s actions as a direct action environmentalist “warrior” against the industrial culture that are on trial. Her actions nearly killed a night watchman, after all. In the end, there is no place for her in industrial culture. Her codes and ethics are ultimately incompatable with those of the mainstream culture that Simon MacHeath discursively explores through that culture’s legal system. The episode’s
ending, marked by Jessie’s letter explaining her move to go underground, finds an uneasy resolution at best.

We find the trail of responsibility in Shannon’s Law to be even more layered and complicated. The explosion that threatened Neala and Luther’s lives is caused by the illegal dumping practices of Cotswald Trucking, Mafia-run outfit who is ultimately working for ProtoChem, whose overtly immoral and illegal and deeply anthropocentric actions are ultimately protected by the pro-industrialist work that Jack performed as a partner in ProtoChem’s protectorate law firm, Coleman and Wise. It is, in the end, Jack Shannon himself who carries a share of the responsibility for the episode’s central plot device.

The result in both cases, but particularly in the case of Shannon’s Law, is an indictment of the capitalist industrial system of which each of these “causes” are essential nodes. There are no individuals to pin the blame on, ultimately, which is the criminal and legal “beauty” of the system. Given this more layered, and so ultimately more accurate portrayal of the deep complexities of environmentalist positions, our eco-protagonists are ultimately able to do even less than their heroic action-adventure, cop show and Western counterparts.

By implication, then, what conclusions do these stories leave us with concerning the ability of legal or social institutions and institutional representatives to solve the eco-problems specific to the systemic structures of industrial culture? The very premise of the Against the Law episode explores the possibility that nobody within the current social structure is able to address the eco-problem as it needs to be addressed. This is the very reason for direct action groups such as those that the fictional Nature Now! group represents. Simon MacHeath, who works on the fringes of “the system,” is
unable to do much to defend their actions beyond a rhetorical assault in court on the practices of Sheridan Logging.

In Shannon’s Law, the very legal institution that is presumably in place to make a difference proves to be a deeply embedded part of the problem. The Environmental Protection Agency remains relatively impotent in the face of Coleman and Wise’s legal brilliance. The narrative brings it down to an act of individual bravery and caring on Jack’s part to get a compensatory out-of-court settlement for Luther’s family. This is the extent of environmental justice being served in this narrative world.

The ending of Shannon’s Law is satisfying in both episodic and heroic terms. Jack’s personal actions heroicize and vindicate him in part for his past anthropocentric sins. But where the cop shows and action-adventures attempted to equate narrative balance with ecological balance, here such a balance is shown to be virtually nonexistent.

As we have moved from action-adventures to cop shows to Westerns and now to lawyer shows, we have gotten increasingly into the layers and complications of the environmentalist issues each episode incorporates into it generic and franchise driven narrative world. We end this progression toward increasingly progressive primetime environmentalism with a look at the two remaining environmental melodramas in our sample, thirtysomething and Northern Exposure. Again we look for ways in which the aesthetic features of increased seriality and larger, ensemble casts might either limit or enable further primetime environmentalism.
Chapter Ten
Serial-Ensemble Environmentalism

The series we have considered in the previous three chapters have functioned primarily as episodic narratives marked by smaller casts of regular characters, single or central storylines and inevitable closure. But there has been a progression away from an action-based formula toward a more discursive and interpersonal formula. This difference is marked by an increase in what we know (from within that process of accumulation) or are told of the central characters’ personal lives, and a more overt use of that information both in the problem-solution structure as well as the more extranarrational and excessive melodramatic concerns of each installment. What this has meant for our interests in primetime environmentalism is an increased sense of complexity and layering in terms of the narratives’ exploration of environmental complicity, cause and responsibility.

MacGyver and E.A.R.T.H. Force seem to rely the least of any of the sampled series on our knowing the lives these heroes lead outside of their capacity as action-adventure heroes. These are men and women with missions to accomplish within an allotted amount of time. As we have seen, they get their work done. Of course, what MacGyver learns and experiences while “doing his work” is significant to both the episodic storyline and overall or cumulative aspects of the series, as we have discussed above. But neither he nor the five person E.A.R.T.H. Force team are dropped into their episodic narrative universes in order to explore their interpersonal relationships and experiences. They are there to save the world from isolated cases of eco-crime and move on. And we as regular viewers engage with these series for the same reasons.
The narratives of *21 Jump Street* and *In the Heat of the Night* do seem to rely more on interpersonal relationships to supplement the problem-solution structure of the episodic surface narrative. In contrast to the *E.A.R.T.H. Force* family, the work-family *Heat of the Night* is more pronounced in its inclusion of long-term or serial "family issues" among the cops. The personal lives and needs of the officers, both inside and outside of the context of their work, is more overtly incorporated into the narrative. Parker's love of Julie Loften, for instance, serves to push the surface narrative along, to reference the franchised theme of colorblind judgment and to play off of Parker's line in the overall cumulative narrative (between fellow characters and Parker, between viewers and Parker) of the series.

Though deeply formulaic in many ways, we also find the narrative trajectory of *Guns of Paradise* to include the domestic, personal lives of its central characters. Ethan's personal identity conflict between gunman and lawman, between violent retribution and legal recourse, is directly tied to the larger cultural issues which inform the Western formula and the particular franchise elements of the series. For all its episodic closure, the series narrative of *Paradise* functions cumulatively through, for instance, the love, engagement and marriage of Ethan and Amelia, or his professional and ideological progression from local gunman to rancher to town sheriff.

And the ongoing personal lives and concerns of the lawyers of *Against the Law* and *Shannon's Deal* are deeply entwined in their more immediate episodic problem-solution needs. Simon MacHeath's past both informs and impedes his judgment and ability as a counselor hero. Jack Shannon's every move in the present is made in direct reference to and in penance for his regrettable past. Of course, even in the case of these last two series, there is a real limit to the character development allowed within
the series overall. The franchise premise of the Shannon’s Deal, for instance, insists that Jack not get out from under the weight of his past too much.

We complete this section’s review of melodramatic environmentalism with a chapter reflecting the furthest move yet toward the melodramatic interpersonal and away from an action-based, problem-solution story form. Here we consider two ensemble melodramas, thirtysomething (ABC 1987-1991) and Northern Exposure (CBS 1990-present) and the environmentalist issues each of them include and explore. The broader formal elements of the ensemble drama include a much larger cast of regular characters, multiple storylines (which may or may not include problem-solution formulas), a more open-ended and even serialized narrative format, and a significant shift into interpersonal relationships at the narrative’s center. The stories of thirtysomething or Northern Exposure are not usefully approached as tales of heroes and heroic actions. The characters do things, of course; they accomplish things. They bring matters to what must be recognized as episodic closure. But their activities rarely if ever set right the imbalances of the narrative worlds in which they reside. Problems don’t end simply because the episodes do. This is central to the serial narrative format, of course, a format used more by thirtysomething than by Northern Exposure. But both series establish their own post-Hill Street balances between episodic storylines, cumulative narrative and serialized open-endedness.

thirtysomething usually finds its balance by concentrating on one or two of the primary characters, allowing organic, melodramatic occurrences in their lives to “lead us” to them for an episode. For instance, Michael and Hope try to take their first weekend away from work and children in what feels like years, or the female friends all go off for a camping weekend together. Such storylines are more often than not
episodically contained. But they function in a significant way as part of the cumulative knowledge of regular series viewers. The cumulative effects of other such episodically-contained storylines may in fact linger a bit more overtly. For instance, when ex-lovers and longtime friends Gary and Melissa make the mistake of sleeping together again one night, it proves to be a mistake which colors their relationship for episodes to follow, if not for the rest of the series’ run. Still other story lines, such as Nancy’s fight with cancer and chemotherapy, Eliot and Nancy’s breakup, or Gary’s death arc over the course of several episodes. Thus the balance is found by pursuing absolutely demanding melodramatic storylines in an arced, serialized manner when necessary, but more often containing or identifying individual episodes by focussing on particular principal characters, and allowing a cumulative narrative effect to inform the overall series.

As with thirtysomething, the episodic storylines of Northern Exposure must work their way into a rich and multi-layered narrative context. It has also found a balance similar to that introduced by L.A. Law between the industrially-defined need for episodic containment and the significant narrational qualities of serialized, ongoing narrative. But beyond these similarities, Northern Exposure has also established a narrative balance that has left it perhaps the most episodically contained, with the least organic characters of any narrative of its type. Like thirtysomething, each episode will typically center on one or two of the principal characters. The primary characters in the Northern Exposure universe function as particular variations on the larger narrational world in which they function or exist. When a storyline is assigned to Joel or to Maggie, for instance, as is the case with the episode that concerns us here, their existence as series-based characters means that they come with a previously established set of traits, habits, tendencies, or an expected set or sphere of meaning against which a given
storyline is placed and given narrative significance. But unlike the characters in *thirtysomething* or *L.A. Law*, and certainly unlike the characters who populated the progenitors of the ensemble form itself, *Hill Street Blues* and *St. Elsewhere*, the recurring principal characters of *Northern Exposure* seem not to grow within the series much at all. Though they often learn significant lessons about themselves over the course of a particular episode, they seem not to have grown at all when they appear a week or two later.

In a way, the regular characters of *Northern Exposure* more closely resemble the more static sitcom characters we considered in the comedies in Section II. For those characters, as we saw, their apparent inability to develop a series-based historical consciousness enables the narrative world they inhabit to then concentrate in a particular manner on the physical problem or situation of that week. Their stasis functions as a predictable foil against which the situation or disruption can bounce, and off of which the comedy can develop. In the case of *Northern Exposure*, the same relatively static nature of the primary characters allows for the series's primary dramatic purpose: the exploration of ideas. More than in any of the series we have considered thus far, each character of *Northern Exposure* functions as an overt rhetorical marker in this exploration. Or, as Williams (1994) prefers to put it, “each character of this remarkably complex ensemble represents a different discursive strategy.”

The ensemble, which makes up what [producers] Falsey and Brand call a “nonjudgemental universe of unconventional characters in a clash of cultures,” consists of Native Americans, a (closet) descendant of Louis XIV, an ex-astronaut, a former Miss Northwest Passage, a Grosse Point socialite turned bush pilot, a West Virginian disc jockey/priest/Jungian/ex-con, and an Upper West Side yuppie physician. (149).
In short, the ensemble drama presents a narrative context in which environmentalism or any topic might be situated in any number of ways: as an ongoing concern within arced or multiple episodes, as a specifically episodic concern, assigned to or aligned with one character or set of characters within the ensemble constellation over others. But however an issue is aligned in terms of storyline or format, it is certain to be embedded in and experienced through the interpersonal relations of the ensemble cast of characters to a much larger degree than we found in the two other discursive melodramas included in our sample, Shannon's Deal and Against the Law. As we turn now to detailed analyses of these serial-ensemble variations on discursive melodrama, we remain interested in what effect this set of aesthetic or formal differences has on the creation of effective primetime environmentalism.

* * *

The episode of thirtysomething submitted by its producers to the Environmental Media Association opens in a place familiar to regular viewers of the series: the bedroom of principal characters Michael and Hope. Michael, a compulsive worker, sits on top of the couple's bed going over some paperwork he's brought home with him from his job at a major Philadelphia advertising firm. Framed in the wide, deep-focused composition typical of the often self-consciously cinemetic style of the series, Hope, who is pregnant with their second child, is seen in the bathroom struggling to shave her legs over her quite large stomach.

Hope is nervously anticipating the next day's hearing before the Philadelphia City Council concerning the approval of the proposed Fairfield Creek waste incinerator.

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This issue echoes the rise in the early 1990s of grassroots, localized, issue-based environmentalism in response to an encroaching industrialized landscape and on their rural, suburban and urban homes and communities. In a number of episodes previous to this one, we have been introduced to Hope's "adoption" of this issue, followed her gradual involvement in this grassroots movement against the Fairfield incinerator, watched her slowly evolving friendship with John Dunn, an environmentalist organizer from Washington who has joined Hope's group, and witnessed her impassioned testimony to the Philadelphia City Council concerning evidence which suggests that much of the airborne particles from such incinerators tend to show up in women's breast milk. In the specific episode being considered here, the fate of the plant, and so the fate of Hope's work as an environmentalist and her group's grassroots efforts, is finally to be brought to a vote by the City Council.

Hope: So the test burn was a big success, except they didn't do the test burn on the Fairfield Creek incinerator, they did it on a similar facility in South Carolina.

Michael: Cheating.

Hope: Yeah, well, John's going to bring it up at the hearing tomorrow. That and failure rates, and leaks and spills, and spot checks on working facilities that have failed EPA emissions tests, you know, that sort of thing.

Michael: Yeah... What's he say about your chances?

Hope: Well, he thinks it'll be close. But I'm more optimistic than that. Are you sure you can't come tomorrow?

Michael: Oh, I wish I could, honey.

In the meantime, Michael is nervously anticipating a meeting with his boss at the advertising firm at which he is going to request a pay raise to accompany his recent promotion. Beyond simple nervousness -- regular viewers know that Michael's boss is less than predictable, to say the least -- Michael's worries actually stem from his close friendship with Eliot. Once they co-owned their own advertising firm. Now, after losing their business, both are working for this large firm. But it is Michael who ascending
through the ranks much faster than Eliot. Michael is worried what this latest step will do to their already strained relationship.

These are the two storylines that will work off one another and intertwine throughout this particular episode. But though they are episodically identified and played out according the narrational rules of primetime ensemble dramas, as well as to the particular balance that *thirtysomething* has found, both of these storylines are also extensions of a deeply layered and complex melodramatic narrative world. Serialized, ongoing storylines allow the potential to explore in a more extended and extensive manner, and so in a potentially richer and more varied way, the issues that are touched upon by those storylines. Of course, as we have seen in each of the more episodically-structured melodramas discussed to this point, narrative “exploration” in the context of dramatic primetime series refers both to its pedagogical or informational function -- the introduction of basic concepts and features of a given issue or topic -- as well as to the ways in which that information plays cumulatively into the emotional lives and interpersonal relationships of the series’ primary characters.

It is interesting to speculate as to why the producers submitted this particular episode to the EMA for consideration. Why not the earlier episode in which Hope delivers her speech to the council on breast milk, for instance? It was certainly the episode with the strongest, most overt pedagogical function in place. In fact, the City Council vote occurs not five minutes into this hour-long narrative. The Council votes in favor of opening the incinerator. Hope’s group loses.

This narrative move closes off this serialized environmentalist storyline, and so ends *thirtysomething*’s ongoing pedagogical “discussion” of this issue per se. But it also shifts the focus more directly onto the melodramatic aspects of the storyline that have
always and inevitably accompanied it on its journey through the narrative universe of *thirtysomething*. Indeed, this storyline has been in large part one of Hope's new traditionalist explorations of career and motherhood, of the bonds of marriage and commitment, of self-identity.

In one sense, then, we find perhaps the clearest example yet seen in this study of an issue being incorporated into a narrative and domesticated by its melodramatic trappings. Again, the serialized, multiple plot line structure of *thirtysomething* features this process by slowing it down, allowing it to build and develop over the course of several episodes, and so putting it into visible relief. But as has been my argument throughout this section, this melodramatic text also makes available a deepening of the emotional aspects of such grassroots work. An alignment with the character Hope offers up an embodied experience of the commitment, of the seemingly futile efforts and of the inevitable personal and interpersonal fallout that may well accompany this type of environmentalism which is, after all, based on the ideological notion of personal involvement and individual effort making a difference. This episode serves, then, as the melodramatic pay-off for the regular viewer who has followed most or all of the previous installments in previous episodes. If the City Council vote ends the debate on the eco-problem posed by incinerators of this sort, the remaining 45 minutes of the episode explores the ramifications of this “ending” on the accompanying personal and interpersonal issues that inform Hope and Michael's lives.

John Dunn, the long-time environmentalist organizer who has come up from Washington, D.C. to help Hope's group prepare for this particular environmental battle, functions in this serial-ensemble melodramatic narrative trajectory as the “problem” that replaces the defeated and so removed eco-problem. John is written and played as a
likeable, committed, low-key man of integrity. He is also an attractive, single man to whom Hope appears to be physically drawn, in spite of (or because of?) her advanced state of pregnancy. Shortly after Michael and Hope's opening conversation in their bedroom, John telephones Hope. As Hope talks openly and freely with John about the following day, including a concerned question or two about his apparently ulcerous stomach, we cut to reaction several shots of Michael, who appears to be slightly bothered by the conversation, perhaps by Hope's familiar tone with this man.

Thus, this opening scene situates the specific issue to be explored via Hope's character in this episode, while simultaneously reestablishing the unresolved conflicts -- marital strain, family commitment, confused personal "identity" -- lingering from previous episodes and sets up this episode for what is to follow between Hope and John. In less than two minutes of brief transition scenes which take us from Michael and Hope's home to the hearing itself, we find that the Council has voted unanimously in favor of the incinerator. Hope bursts angrily out of the Council chambers. John catches up to her. They stop and talk.

John: You can't win every time.
Hope: They didn't even respond to our petition, damn it. (pause) So what happens now?
Hope: Right away?
John: Stay a couple of days. Clean up stuff, think about what went wrong. Maybe they'll screw up along the way, and we can close 'em down. You did good work here. You can't blame yourself for this. The incinerator people had a lot of factors going for them. They had more money. They had more people. They had a year's jump on us to get organized.
Hope: Yeah, and they weren't a bunch of housewives.
John: Hey, it was "a bunch of housewives" that took on Love Canal. You didn't just sit around and bitch. You got out there. You tried. Take a deep breath, Hope. You've got your life back now.
Here are more pedagogic lessons to be taught: the “reality” of grassroots work when going up against well organized industries, the difficulty of personal commitment in the face of repeated defeat.

Of course, in terms of the ongoing series narrative, “getting your life back” only signals for Hope and for regular viewers a return to the melodramatic difficulties and tensions which were instrumental in her wanting to return to professional activities in the social sphere outside of her gendered domestic space in the first place. It is a line, then, which quickly underscores and (re)introduces to the narrative the dynamics of the personal and the political, the split between domestic and social spheres as experienced by professional-class white women, and the idea of political activism functioning merely as escape or diversion.

That night, back at home, Hope and Michael’s interactions are wrought with this tension. The incinerator defeat has served to heighten the basic dissatisfactions in Hope’s life, in Hope’s and Michael’s marriage, and so forth. Michael tries to be sad about Hope’s defeat that day, but the feeling just isn’t there. Hope tries to be happy for Michael’s victory in having received his pay raise, but the feeling isn’t there for her, either.

Images of Hope beginning to box up the paperwork leftover from her campaign against the incinerator give way to images of her cleaning house and doing laundry. Then, as if she had been thinking about it all along, Hope picks up the telephone and calls John Dunn.

Hope: Hello, John? Hi, it’s Hope. No, I’m fine. Listen, I was just wondering if maybe there wasn’t something we overlooked. (pause) I know, but I’m not going to go down without a fight. I was just wondering if maybe we hadn’t explored all of our options. I mean, I have some ideas. (pause) Well, I thought...
Well, maybe if you weren’t leaving for a few
days we could have lunch. (pause) Okay. I’ll see you then.

She hangs up and looks off camera, deep in thought. We fade to black, and to the first
commercial break.

It is a call, of course, in which environmentalist rhetoric is merged with the
increasingly less thinly-veiled rhetoric of illicit affairs. Embedded in the double
meanings of phrases like “not going down without a fight” and “explored all our
options,” the environmentalist storyline becomes fully incorporated into the ongoing
melodramatic interpersonal relations of the series. And in the remaining three acts, this
is precisely the course that Hope explores, and that we explore with her.

Except in the sense that John Dunn is an environmentalist, or that it was an
environmentalist cause that brought the two of them together, the specific eco-problem
of incinerators and wasted disposal ceases being a topic of consideration and
exploration in this episode from this point forward. When environmentalist issues are
spoken of at all, they remain very much secondary to the interpersonal issues that drive
the primary concerns of this serial-ensemble melodrama. For instance, when John and
Hope do meet for lunch, John suggests that Hope could continue to monitor the plant,
and report their goings-on to him in Washington.

Hope: Yeah, right. I mean, what else do I have to do?
John (after long pause): Do you have any plans?
Hope: I was thinking I’d write an article about this. The growth of
grassroots movement, you know...
John: Then?
Hope: Then I’d try to sell it.
John: Hope…..
Hope: I know... it’s over. But it’s a let down.
John: I know how that feels.
Hope: You do?
John (nodding): You didn’t think you were the only one, did you?
Hope: No. I mean..... Everybody assumes, well, I'm going to have this baby, that's what Hope's going to be doing, and.... Not that that's bad, the new baby..... It's just....

John: I know.....

Hope: Everybody thinks they know me, they know everything I need or want. But they don't know me. (long pause and look at John) Why am I telling you this?

The Hope-John Dunn plot line then takes us from that lunch, to John offering Hope a full-time position with his environmentalist outfit in Washington, to Hope's interview in Washington, to Hope's and John's night dining and dancing on the town, to their winding up together in Hope's hotel room. They kiss. But Hope stops the story line there, and returns to Michael, Janey and their home in Philadelphia. This is no solution to her problems, nor is it presented as one. Future installments will pick up this story line, though without the implications of enviromentalist conflict or undertones of critique of industrial culture.

Not unlike the inclusion environmentalist topics in the episodic comedies discussed in the chapters of Section Two, the aesthetics of this type of televiual narrative limits the inclusion of topical concerns such as environmentalism to function as little more than symptoms of Hope's deep unhappiness. Just as our ultimate interests in engaging with such comic series as Murphy Brown, Night Court or even The Simpsons lie in seeing the cast of regulars react to the eco-problems they are confronted with, our real interests in Hope's becoming an environmentalist lie in her explorations of commitment to cause and the price that such commitment exacts on an interpersonal level. While there is plenty to be learned and experienced about the emotional fallout of grassroots work through such a narrative context, making the personal political always runs the risk of depoliticizing the political in the process. In thirtysomething, this remains more than a risk. It is a franchised guarantee.
The same could be said to be true on some level of the formulaic demands made on *Northern Exposure*, in which topical concerns are inevitably entertained through the interpersonal concerns of its ensemble of central characters. But the franchise of this quirky hour-long ensemble series ultimately enables a different “discussion” of environmentalism than is afforded by *thirtysomething*. In fact, *Northern Exposure* provides a comparatively dense and complex narrative container in which to explore the relative complexities of environmentalism. Certain environmental issues and questions are aggressively built into the series franchise itself, and so stand to resonate more roundly from within the specifics dictated by a particular episode. In the episode that concerns us here, for instance, we quickly realize that the episodically-introduced environmental issues of conservation and wildlife preserves are simultaneously tied to *Northern Exposure*’s deeply embedded, series-level themes of place, land, frontier, industrialism and ecological balance.

As this episode proves, and as the following story synopsis is intended to reflect, *Northern Exposure* typically features multiply-layered narrational strategies:

Soapy Sanderson is an old, frail yet still feisty man who lives well away from the "urban sprawl" of Cicely (pop. 813), in the Alaskan wilderness. As the episode opens, we find pilot Maggie flying in to pick Soapy up and take him into Dr. Fleishman’s (Joel’s) office for a check-up. Soapy is recovering from a recent fall from a tree, an activity Maggie strongly suggests he consider giving up at his age. After some
approbation from Joel for not following the suggested steps for recovery, Soapy agrees to "think about his future," and leaves.

Soon afterwards, after receiving a note from him requesting that they do so, Maggie and Joel fly together back out to Soapy's place. They find Soapy clean, nicely dressed and dead in his bed. He has committed suicide. Back at the local tavern, The Brick, tavern owner Holling reads Soapy's will to all gathered. Besides his collection of country and bluegrass albums, which he leaves to D.J. Chris, Soapy leaves everything else to Maggie and Joel, including 100 acres of pristine Alaskan wilderness and a team of Huskies.

This all takes place within the first twelve minutes of episode. The remainder of the episode centers primarily around the flabergasted Joel ("I don't get this. Why would he leave anything to me? The guy never even paid his bill!") and Maggie, as they work out what to do with the 100 acres left to them. At first, Joel goes along with Maggie's idea of turning the land into an animal preserve, though not without his characteristic cynicism ("An animal preserve...? What, so all the Alaskans can have someplace to get back to nature?!"). His willingness is challenged and ultimately won over, however, by the Chief of the area Native American tribe, along with "his friend Fred" and the tribe's accountant, who appear in Joel's office one day and offer to buy Soapy's land. It seems they want to drill for oil and natural gas knowing they won't find any. They can then use their failed efforts as a tax write-off, helping them to offset losses they've suffered recently from bad junk bond investments made with their pipeline money.

Their offer of $50,000, which Joel thinks he can use to buy his way out of his service contract with the town of Cicely, proves to be irresistible. Joel then finds Maggie and tells her he simply wants to give the land "back to the Indians," the land's "original
Maggie is impressed with Joel’s apparent conservationist sentiment, and agrees. Maggie is so impressed, in fact, that one night she suspends her feelings of repulsion for Joel, and explores her attraction to him over dinner and wine. But these feelings are soon dashed when, while walking through Soapy’s land one day with Holling, Maggie spots surveyors preparing the well and digging sites. Maggie storms immediately back to Joel and lays into him and his incredible selfishness. Her words of anger connect with Joel. He recognizes in them his selfishness and narrowness. By the end of the episode, Joel goes to Maggie and tells her that he has refused the Chief’s offer, that he would like the land to become an animal preserve as planned, and that her angry critique of him was basically correct.

Their last scene together finds them up in Maggie’s airplaine, much to Joel’s chagrin, fulfilling Soapy’s request that his ashes be spread over the Alaskan land and mountains he loved. Joel opens the window to pour the ashes, but the winds get the best of him, and the ashes blow back into Joel’s face.

It is easy to detect from even this cursory description the narrative process of incorporating public concerns into the private or interpersonal relations of these characters, a process that is typical of serial-ensemble dramas. That is, the issues of land use, the politics of industrial tax shelters, the interplay of short-sighted anthropocentrism and a wider-viewed ecocentrism that are called up in this episode, all get caught up in the ongoing, serial-based concerns of Maggie’s and Joel’s will-they or won’t-they, on-again, off-again sexual antagonism.

But as was argued in the case of thirtysomething, a simple declaration that this is some way "domesticates" the issue operating at the heart of that storyline, leaves us
with little insight into the workings of melodramatic narrative. Instead, we recognize that the decision to imbed this episodic concern into the serialized relations between Maggie and Joel gives it a particular inflection which enriches and broadens the issues and concerns inherent in the topics themselves. Who better among the constellation of characters in this ensemble drama to leave the land to than the consistently self-interested doctor, and the Maggie, the equally consistent right-thinking and caring bush pilot. Joel's reactions to Maggie's idea to turn their inherited land into a wilderness preserve are as indicative of a certain voice or attitude present in the larger environmental discussion as it is perfectly in keeping with what we know on a series-based level of Joel's character. As we laugh at his cynicism, or snort at his stubbornness, or simply take note of his character's consistency on this (and every) issue, we recognize in Joel's thoughts and actions a particularized, contextualized narrative expression of a publically-circulated anti-environmentalist attitude

Did Soapy recognize this in Joel? How could he not have? At the good doctor's suggestion, Soapy agrees to "think about his future," by which Joel means to take care of his health and be more cognizant of his needs for recovery. But then he throws the sentiment back to Joel:

Soapy: You're right. I'm going to go home, and I'm going to figure it out. It's time to think about the future. But only if you promise to do the same thing.
Joel: Well, the only future I want to think about is so far away, I think I'd need a telescope.

Soapy's actions soon after this somewhat obscure response to Joel -- suicide and leaving his land to Fleishman and Maggie -- suggest that the "future" that he was asking Joel to think about concerned one of responsible use and stewardship of the land, one of future-oriented ecocentrism, one of connection to place. As was suggested above,
these "thoughts" are in many ways inherent to the overall narrative world Northern Exposure. Its setting, for instance, forces a contextual concern with issues of place and boundaries. A mythic outpost in an equally mythic American setting, "Alaska" functions here as a narrative construct through which to explore and rework the ideas of community, friendship, cultural relations against "our" relationship to place, be it literal -- land -- or figurative -- landscape.

So Soapy's character gives voice to this essential element of the Northern Exposure narrative universe, and places it before the anti-environmentalist voice of Joel Fleishman. *I don't get it*, Joel yells out during the reading of the will. *Why would he leave anything to me? The guy never even paid his bill!* Why, indeed? The question, or more precisely the narrative which gives rise to the question, simultaneously begs character development and thematic exploration. Joel is the series' rhetorical marker of doubt and rejection. He stands for very little that the generic community of Cicely seems to stand for. His character is the perfect narrative context in which to give voice to the conflicts and confusions that accompany the oppositions inherent in the clash of industrial growth and conservationist protection.

This episode's "discussion" of the environmental issues of land use and wilderness preservation is broadened and complicated by the other plotlines and actions which, characteristic of ensemble dramas, are woven into this episode. One involves two students from Kenyon College where, it turns out, Soapy was once a professor of religion and mythology. The students have come to Cicely to shoot a video documentary which intends to capture the landscape -- the constructed "idea" of place -- that their Professor Sanderson must have himself recognized as "existing" in this town of Cicely.
With their preponderance of "cools," and their sophomoric conceptions of place -- the "realness" of Cicely, for instance, is evidenced for them by the town's dirt, which is "real dirt" -- the Kenyon students ultimately function as episodic comic characters. Their naive romanticizing serves as comic foil to Joel's selfish cynicism. It also functions as a mechanism for drawing out other members of the ensemble and getting their series-determined attitudes included in "the mix" of ideological positions and approaches. At one point, for instance, the crew asks Holling, the amiable local tavern owner, to tell them about "the real Alaska." Shot as if through the black and white viewfinder of the crew's camera, the interview goes as follows:

Holling: Uhmm... I'm not sure what you mean.
Ed (a regular character who has become the crew's cameraman): Can you turn your hand over so that we can see the callouses.
Crew Member: Good eye, Ed.
Other Crew member (to Holling): Can you think of some incident that illustrates what Soapy loved about Alaska?
Holling (thinks for a moment): Well, there was the dog race.
Crew Member: Did Soapy see the dog race as a metaphor for the hero's journey, into the wilderness to face himself?
Holling: Umh..... he thought it was fun.

It is at this point that Maurice, the ex-astronaut who has come to Cicely in order to exploit its natural resources, can take no more. He interrupts with an impassioned monologue in favor not of wilderness or the more "authentic" life, but of "civilization" and principles of land development. People don't want rugged! Maurice finishes up.

People want clean towels! This richly comic scene, which functions in part through the careful utilization of previously established series-based character traits of Holling, Maurice and Ed, gives rise to the same sort of issues suggested by the Soapy, Joel and Maggie storyline.

These questions of romanticizing nature, of developing a sense of place, of "proper" land use and ownership are further voiced and complicated by the inclusion of
"the Chief, his friend Fred and their accountant," who come to Joel and make him the irresistible offer on the land. As with virtually all the other characters in this series, these three Native American episodic characters are serio-comic in their presentation and performance. And through a comic irony that suggests that they are aware of their own role as such, they efficiently call up essential discursive threads of contemporary discussion of land use and ecological processes.

After explaining to Joel their intentions in buying Soapy's land from Joel -- for a tribal tax shelter -- Joel replies as only Joel can: *Well, I've got a partner, and she's got her mind set on turning it into some granola bar nature path.* The Chief, wearing a T-shirt bearing the logo for Spike Lee's popular film of the time, *Do the Right Thing*, responds:

Chief: *Dr. Fleishman, may I ask you, who would know better how to govern this land? You and your partner? Or the people who have live here and died here for thousands of years?*

Joel: *True, but....*

Chief: *It's a question of justice, don't you think?*

Accountant: *Well, justice.... and $50,000.*

We could say that this entire episode asks the question: what is the right thing to do? What preconceptions do we carry into such a question? What is at stake in its asking? What are the special interests involved in answering it?

Instead of the ecophilosophic questions contextualizing and furthering interpersonal relations, as in *thirtysomething*, *Northern Exposure* uses the interrelated constellation of characters and their well-defined character traits and ideological positions to contextualize and further ecophilosophical questions.

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With *thirtysomething* and *Northern Exposure*, we move even further into the type of narrative we are calling discursive melodrama. Indeed, the eco-problems at the episodic center of these stories are simply proposed ideas. Nothing has happened. No one has been hurt or killed. These narratives are about character's reactions to these ideas.

In *thirtysomething*, we return once more to explore the conflict of industrial culture and ecological culture through the idea of “fouling our own nest” that we found to be informing the storylines of *In the Heat of the Night*, *21 Jump Street* and *Guns of Paradise*. This time around, the fouling comes in the form of airborne fallout of industrial culture rather than water borne. Indeed, it is a deep ecological image that this episode offers up: from waste, to air, to a mother’s lungs, to a mother’s breast milk, to a baby’s bloodstream, and on the interdependencies go. In *Northern Exposure*, we explore ecological culture’s needs for the conservation and preservation of land versus industrial culture’s needs for those lands for exploitation, profit and personal gain.

As in the law shows, the eco-antagonists in these serial-ensemble narratives are not easy to pin down. Likewise, cause, responsibility and blame are difficult to locate or assign. In terms of the surface requirements of the episodic plot line of *thirtysomething*, we find eco-antagonists in the faceless company that wants to build and profit from the waste incinerator that Hope and her fellow activists are so opposed to. But we also find that this assignment of guilt, while addressed and important to the plot line in a practical sense, is of secondary importance to the overall narrative trajectory of *thirtysomething*. What is much more important is the effect this eco-problem has had, and will continue to have, on the regular character Hope. If the eco-problem is specific to this episode (and to several episode’s preceding this one), Hope’s lingering
responses to and investment in it as the “cause” in which she failed as an eco-protagonist will carry on for several episodes beyond this one. In the process, however, issues of blame and responsibility will whither and recede with the cumulative memory of Hope’s almost-affair.

In *Northern Exposure*, regular ensemble character Joel Fleishman serves as the plot line’s eco-antagonist by adopting selfish and anthropocentric position vis a vis the land preserve left to Maggie and him. Of course, his anti-environmentalist attitudes are no surprise to the regular viewer. As with the workplace ensemble comedies we discussed in an earlier chapter, this is in keeping with Joel’s function as a predictable and relatively static character. In one sense, the environmentalist angle of this episode is simply fodder for furthering the sexually-charged antagonism between Joel and Maggie. But we also recognize that his reactions give prominent voice to a key ideological position often taken in discussions of conservation and land preservation. This ideological position is then mixed with several others, including those of regulars Maggie, Ed, Holling and Maurice, and a few episodic characters as well. The question becomes not one of assigning blame for the environmentally damaging actions of industrialists, but of assuming responsibility for ecological culture.

In all four chapters of this section, we have approached primetime melodramas as vehicles for something more than simply the transmission of environmental topics and information. Mainstream television, particularly primetime, brings into the center whatever it mentions, if only for the moment. It gatekeeps and so activates what we talk about, what concerns us, what seems to matter. But my analysis has been directed at understanding these series more importantly as vehicles for an *experienced environmentalism*. It is an experience having far more to do with the ritual of
engagement than with the transportation of solidified information, an experience based on imaginative and emotional engagement with constellation of characters occupying a fictional world. A personalized, domesticated experience, to be sure.

We have seen ways in which this formal and aesthetic experience could well have the effect of depoliticizing or taming an environmental issue. This may be the case if we understand this process of depoliticization as one in which the text's referential endpoint is turned inward, into the melodramatic concerns of individual characters and their lives, rather than outward, beyond the signifying system of primetime melodrama and television itself to a set of specific historically, socially and culturally located referents. This critical approach would cast MacGyver as a failed and regressive vehicle for a potentially progressive environmentalism. Its need for episodic resolution belies the struggles that real farmworkers continue to have in maintaining safe working conditions. Or its use of the melodramatic father-son motif as a narrational means contextualization only softens what could well be a critical image of the the corporate, competitive greed that breeds such thoughtless and inhuman treatment of people for the sake of profit.

But our task has also to explore the edges of this hegemonic process, and to suggest what else might be going on, what other potentials might in fact be "opened up" or enabled through this deeply interiorized, imaginative experience. Our interests in melodramatic excess in this sense have not been in what it breaks away from, or what might happen self-reflexively from without, but rather how it feels from within.

To that end, we have empathized with lawyer Jack Shannon's deep complicity in the very system that stands to destroy us, and so perhaps connected to our own complicity in that same system. We have seen re-presented the very real difficulties of
taking personal action from within that place, that merged place of both Jack's and our own. We have felt in the cumulative relationship between Joel Fleishman and Maggie O'Connell the manner in which personal motivations and the complexities of love and relationships may well wind up determining environmentalist gesture and action. The layers are multiple, the signifying systems as complex as they are naturalized and common sensical.

By locating and emphasizing the rhetorical limits and likely directions that formula, format and franchise elements take the content of melodramatic narrative, I have tried in the end to argue for textual intention. An embodied environmentalism is distinct -- shaped and told in formally distinct ways, received and interpreted in affective manners. In the end, it is the effectivity of affect that we are exploring.
Section IV
Conclusions

Chapter Eleven
Sizing Up a Perfect Fit

We initiated this study of primetime environmentalism with two conversely related questions. One, how appropriate is the topic of environmentalism for the purposes of primetime network storytelling? And two, how appropriate are the story formulas and narrative conventions of primetime network storytelling for the purposes of environmentalism? As the wording of these questions suggests, there are any number of intentions, motivations or “purposes” behind the creation of both primetime television and environmentalist rhetoric and action. But the textual analysis conducted in the previous two sections has shown us that in the particular terms of primetime’s aesthetic “purposes,” the topic of environmentalism is very appropriate indeed.

From the largest of philosophical questions exploring tensions between anthropocentric and ecocentric epistemologies, to the more immediate political and social expressions of those tensions in relation to industrial civilization, environmentalism is essentially a rhetoric of ideological conflict and debate, driven by questions of agency and responsibility. As such, it fits nicely the needs of a narrative system designed to negotiate ideological and cultural conflicts through the actions and words of human characters. In the seven comedies and nine dramas directly considered in this study, we found characters taking sides in environmentalist debates, committing to environmentalist actions, challenging environmentalist beliefs, violating
environmentally-based laws, defending environmentalist ground. We found, that is, that
the storytelling system's needs and structural conventions were well served in
appropriating environmentalist rhetoric.

But while this particular articulation of content and form results in effective
series television -- in stories full of conflict, complication and satisfying resolution --
does it also result in effective environmentalism? Again, the question presupposes a set
of designs behind the creation and circulation of contemporary environmentalism
which designate some vehicles of mediation and communication as more suitable than
others. Do we find in primetime television discursive contexts in which the interests of
environmentalism are best served? In order to draw some final conclusions based on
this general question, let us ask more pointed questions of the texts I have examined.
Let us perform an inventory of sorts that explores the possible conclusions we can draw.

*How effective is primetime television at simply conveying information that is pertinent
to the interests of environmentalism?*

Very effective. Indeed, television's constant stream of information and
references specific to the widespread social, cultural, political concerns of the
contemporary moment is in many ways its primary function as a conveyor of public
discourse. Whether we theorize this function as one inherent to television's role as a
cultural forum or arena or as a necessary component to television's role as a
manufacturer of cultural hegemony and political consent, it remains a fundamental task
of commercial television to gather and display its information as widely and as
inclusively as possible.
We found an extensive range of environmentalist topics and concerns referenced in even the limited sample of series gathered for this study, including the illegal dumping of chemical waste, the recycling of domestic waste products, the use of pesticides and growth enhancers in food production, the ecosystemic function of wetlands, the threats of polluted groundwater, the logging practice known as clear cutting and the environmental risks of biogenetic engineering. Apart from anything else, the sheer presence of this information on the representational landscape of commercial television, regardless of context, moves environmental concerns into the "cultural vocabularies of everyday life" (Condit 1990:123). But of course no list of themes, topics or references alone can tell us enough about the shape and significance of this "vocabulary." Narrative context is central and cannot be disregarded. Thus, it is important to ask further questions about the place of environmental information in primetime narrative.

*How is environmental information situated narratively in primetime television? What narrative weight does environmentalism actually receive in primetime television?*

Considering the narrative weight given to these instances of environmental exposition, we have found that comedy does the least to present these heavy topics in an equally heavy or weighted manner. Comedy's function, as we have seen, is inherently deconstructive. The discursive elements of previously naturalized cultural constructs are brought into conflict and made not to fit. This is the case on both the micro-level of the individual joke and on the level of the entire episode. This is what we have described and analyzed above as the comic process of lightening up.
Also, comedy series, wherever they fall on a scale of episodic closure vs. openness, are not about informational exposition, or the traditional Act I of the freestanding classical narrative. They are more about the development of complications (Act II) that something from “out there” brings to the already established narrative world “in here” and the resolutions (Act III) that are worked out by the episode’s end. Information is thus incorporated as a means to temporarily upset the narrative balance, not an end to be explored or confronted on its own merit. This is best illustrated by the episode of Night Court. The scientist arrives with information concerning the possible negative effects of bioengineering on the environment. Once he has delivered this information, he is systematically ridiculed as much for his beliefs as for his nerdish appearance, and thrown back out into the New York City night. As an episodic character with very limited narrative agency, the scientist and his information serve primarily as a topical backdrop against which to exhibit and laugh at the familiar character traits of the regular cast members. The regular presence of Harry in Harry and the Hendersons, and the permanent relationship with the nuclear powerplant in The Simpson’s may alter this pattern of ‘throw away’ environmentalists. However, the narrative weight here inevitably winds up more in support of the episodic family unit than with prolonged environmentalist concerns. Environmentalism is ultimately not that important to the “story” of comedic episodes.

Melodramatic televisual narratives function in the opposite manner. Where comedies deconstruct previously naturalized relations, melodramas intend for the viewer to reconstruct these relations. Thus, rather than lighten things up, melodramatic environmentalism may be said to bring to bear the weight of the inherent conflicts and dramas of environmentalist questions and concerns. In melodramas, pollution kills,
pesticides cause birth defects, toxins poison water supplies. There are important narrative consequences to environmental degradation. Environmentalism remains much more central to the “story” of melodramatic episodes.

Another measure of this narrative weight comes from examining the relevance of environmental themes to the primary characters of each narrative.

Are the characters we identify with most involved in environmental conflicts? How are these conflicts played out?

With the exception of Harry and the Hendersons and The Simpsons, who have the environmental conflict built into the series-level narrative, most of the comedies considered here are only episodically concerned with environmentalist issues. Outside or incidental characters bring environmentalism in and the narrative concern leaves with them. Similarly, none of the regular or recurring characters in the melodramas here considered, with the exception of Hope in thirtysomething, are committed environmentalists bringing their concerns to each week’s episode. However, in order to perform their narrative function and return balance to their narrative worlds, melodramatic heroes must take seriously the environmental problems that are causing the imbalances in the first place. Additionally, MacGyver learning to care about an environmental issue carries much more narrative weight than, say, Murphy Brown deciding to care about a similar issue. Murphy may honestly care and say so, as we saw, but so what? Her ultimate narrative function is deconstructive doubt and comic ridicule not unquestioned alignment with ideological positions. MacGyver, on the other hand, is there to care. It is caring, in fact, that draws him into the action and drama of the narrative.
But beyond caring within a narrative context, what about the real politics of environmentalism? Who is indicted or held responsible for environmental destruction exhibited in these episodes? How is this responsibility constructed or determined narratively? Ultimately, how politically engaged or engaging is primetime environmentalism?

What comic and melodramatic environmentalist narratives hold in common is the central conflicts between industrial civilization and an ecologically informed reworking of that civilization. The central conflicts of each of the programs are inevitably drawn, likewise, between the maintenance of status quo and the promise of disruption or change; the very conflict which enables and drives environmentalist rhetoric, ideas and action itself. However, once these central conflicts are given particular form, shaped by format and inflected by franchise, can we say that the larger system of industrial capitalism is ever challenged by these narratives? That is (to bring in the central conflict or generative question of contemporary environmentalism) are ecocentric philosophical implications ever preferred and championed by these narratives? For the most part, the answer is no.

More particular to the stories at hand, the same questions might be recast in terms of corporate vs. individual responsibility. Managers and CEO’s of industrial capitalism function repeatedly in these stories as the heavies whose usually illegal activities are responsible for pollution and degradation. And yet, the narrative trajectories in which they are caught up as antagonists do little to indict the very system of industrial capitalism through which they find both profit and meaning. Their
individual actions are “bad,” while the system of meaning out of which they are spun remains relatively unreferenced and ultimately uncondemned.

The patriarch landowner in *MacGyver* ultimately is guilty only of indulging a wayward son. The well-meaning but polluting father in *21 Jump Street* turns out to be a victim himself, blackmailed by organized crime. In *Heat of the Night*, the corporate heavy is a flawed personality, and is removed from systemic inclusion by his overzealous, even murderous, sense of competition. It is not the system based on competition that is indicted, in other words, but rather an individual competitor who has strayed from the proper path. What can our protagonists do about these bad apples but root them out and re-establish order in the neighborhood. But by simply rooting out the freaks and criminals among corporate figures, their work ultimately serves to equate narrative balance with a recovered balance between industrial practices and ecological consciousness. The discussion or issue embodied by the corporate antagonist is removed as efficiently as he is from this episodic narrative world. It is difficult to call this satisfactory to the purposes of environmentalist politics.

An additional problematic of melodrama for political expediency, as explored above, is its formal requirement to reduce the political to the personal. In *thirtysomething*, our character Hope is left personally devastated by the city council’s vote in favor of the waste incinerator project and so against the environmentalists who opposed it. The narrative ties her political defeat to her marital dissatisfaction and takes her to the brink of a love affair with the head of her activist organization. Although the larger system is referenced and condemned by Hope and her fellow environmentalists, we are more interested and engaged with the personal concerns of the individual whose interests in this conflict brings on the narrative consequences.
Do any of the primetime narratives included in this study actually perform a comprehensive critique of industrial capitalism?

In Northern Exposure we recall a storyline in which simple expectations of responsibility and blame are cleverly violated. Lands are left to well-meaning yuppies to be preserved, then bought by indigenous capitalists for destruction and tax shelter benefits. Arguably, this episodic storyline, in violating our expectations, critiques simple readings of the industrial system and its players. In Shannon's Deal, we may see a more promising critique. A lawyer must take on his own past as a legal protector of corporate degradation and so argue against the very legal system which serves to enable industrial capitalism's willing destruction of the environment.

Are these two shows exceptional as melodramas? Emmy awards suggest that they are, at the very least, better written, conceived and executed than most primetime fare. But more important to this study, they are examples of what I have called discursive melodramas, as distinct from the more action-based melodramas of cops and super-heroes. Discursive melodramas are not simply about ideological conflicts requiring action. They are more about ideological conflicts requiring discussion. It is inherent to the aesthetics of discursive melodrama for critical discussion to occur, to be fundamental to the development of plot lines and character interactions. Thus, the possibility of a fundamental systemic critique is most feasible in this melodramatic narrative format.

Yet, while a systemic critique may be embedded in the storyline of discursive melodrama, systemic critique is ultimately the formal essence of good satirical comedy. This may account for the EMA's decision to award The Simpsons the best
environmental comedy of that season. *The Simpsons* is a super-heightened version of what all comedies are. Every category is up for grabs, every relationship is challengable, every system is suspect. In this half hour, for example, the nuclear power industry is skewered, the gubernatorial elections can be bought, the news media appears to be willing participants through horse-race journalism and the politics of polls. Everything is broadly, comically, yet critically indicted, except for the Simpson family itself, the stable center required of episodic series television.

Thus, while comedy fails to provide the narrative weight for environmentalist concerns and conflicts, it offers the greatest formal potential for environmental critique, that is, an actual challenge to the industrial practices and systems responsible for environmental destruction.

*Ideally, what primetime narrative programming would address environmental politics in the most progressive and satisfactory manner? If approached by an environmentalist organization interested in producing narrative television that promoted the politics of their group, what format, formula or franchise would best serve their needs?*

Of course it is difficult to say that any single format or variation is ideal. And indeed, doing so would cut against the grain of understanding television supertextually, or as a site of multiple and conflicting discourses. However, in this study we have seen illustrations of certain narrative limitations and possibilities as shown above. Discursive melodrama and satiric comedy appear to be the most promising narrative formats for comprehensive political critique. Further, they offer the most engaging forms of ideological affect. If we had our ideal variation, however, our study indicates that we

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might conceive of the following Frankenstein monster of progressive environmental programming: There is a primary character in an ensemble cast who sympathizes with but continues to doubt environmental politics. He/She continues to need education, inspiration, motivation to maintain the central narrative commitment to environmentalism. This may involve becoming a MacGyver-like hero who drops in on destructive scenarios to experience and learn from the pain of environmental degradation. Or it might include dealing with one's own complicity in the larger system. Other ensemble members may be doubters, or even opponents to environmentalism. Conversation and regular ideological debate between ensemble members would be a central feature of the narrative. Intrusions of satire provided perhaps by one comedic character would provide an important voice of critique in the narrative. Corporate heavies would remain heavies, by virtue of their membership in the industry and their participation in a fully legal and mainstream set of economic practices. Though formally serialized through multiple plotlines, each episode would close off enough to satisfy the needs of distribution and syndication. But the political conflicts arising from environmentalist concerns would remain ongoing and difficult to resolve. Altogether, this program would combine pedagogically intended information which is accurate and current, environmental concerns in central and substantive narrative positions, engaged environmentalist characters who play primary roles in viewer identification, and comprehensive critiques of systems made relevant through both intellectual discursion and emotional affect.

Again, what we are creating here is what primetime television is writ large. Though we've concentrated on the specifics of seven comedies and nine dramas, it is important to realize the degree to which television is experienced in the above way, as a
"cut and mix" collage not of narrative lines, but narrative fragments. If a given night's programming were these seven comedies and nine dramas, we might well have created this very narrative with our remote control.

In the end, this study has explored what we might think of as an affective environmental education made available through commercial television's primetime series narratives. This exploration has proceeded by focusing on what might occur -- discursively, culturally, psychologically -- in the creation of an imaginative, fictive "space" between television viewers and television texts, with particular interest in when such texts have overtly included environmentalist topics and discourses.

We have theorized the "television text" in a manner of D'Acci (1994) as "a site of social discourses that are mediated by the institution of television -- affected and shaped by prime time's economic imperative to produce consumers and audiences, as well as by its aesthetic and formal norms and conventions involving genre, narrative, mise-en-scene, camerawork, sound, and editing" (214). The text is a container of sorts which reorganizes, reinforces and reconsiders existing social meanings (Newcomb 1994). We have further theorized television watching as an active, pleasurable and even intentional process of discursively negotiating the "textual intentions" of the chosen program. It is a process of recognizing and responding to the "spectator positions" being "offered" by the television text, of "feeling one's way around" these textual constructs or experiential "positions from which the narrative makes sense and from which the viewer may identify with on-screen characters" (249). In the particular case of series narrative, we have taken this process of negotiation to be as much about the experience of ritual (participation, groove and emotion) as about the transmission of information (observation, understanding and cognition). And we have theorized
environmentalism as a set of particularly marked ideas and responses that have arisen from a broad range of socio-political and historically-specific contexts, and which circulate in the public, cultural, commercial realms of discourse and story.

Each example of programming we have considered above has been critically approached as moments, indicators, sites of negotiation in which the languages of the commercial primetime series, the languages of contemporary environmentalism and the languages of the culturally-positioned reader converge in ways both predictable and unpredictable.

This study has also claimed, and has attempted to prove by example, that close textual readings of television programs remains not merely a viable but an essential element in the cultural and critical study of popular television. The close reading of televisual fiction yields an informed view of the complexities of popular televisual texts both as formal constructs and as conveyors of public meaning. Of course, this aesthetic analysis is based on the presumed existence of what Marc (1989) has identified as “Aristotelian television,” a dramatic form which, if it ever existed, may well have been left behind in the shifting narrational landscape of post-network era television (Auletta 1991, Heath 1990). The attention one pays to the text at hand, assuming it was ever as intentional and nuanced and detailed as the above analyses suggest, may be shifting as well, moving from what was already more of a glance (Ellis 1982) to a post-modern nod. “Considering the innovative intensifications of commercialism offered by cable,” writes Marc (1989), “even the stodgiest of English teachers may remember the Network Era -- those years during which virtually the whole population was watching one of three narrative images -- with some fondness.

At least people viewed whole *shows* in those days; at least Aristotle's prescription for "a beginning, a middle, and an end" was respected,
even if ineptly. The ancient TV shows, media historians are likely to remind us, actually made use of such time-honored devices as setting, characterization, conflict, and climax, even if execution, when judged against the literary canon, was relatively clumsy. But the doom of Aristotelian television is already assured. The eight or ten hours it takes to read most novels gives way to the two or so hours it takes to see most movies, which gives way to the thirty to sixty minutes it takes to watch most TV shows, which gives way to the three to five minutes it takes to witness a rock video, which gives way to the two to ten seconds it takes to recognize an image, tire of it, and hit the remote-control button for another. (203)

But it should be clear from the tenor of the analytical chapters above that some claim is being made in this study that close involvement and informed interest in the particulars and nuances of narrative, and most particularly of series narrative, remains a central feature of television watching and the cultural and political processes of television. These processes, when considered from the angle of both textual production and textual consumption, are astoundingly complex.

In the end, it is the complexity of the process that insists that the construct known as primetime television ultimately does more than pay lip service to environmentalist ideologies and politics it embraces and represents. We have found its aesthetic particulars to force closure, to divert critical attention, to back off from systemic analysis, to ridicule and belittle environmental commitment. But this is speculation, based on a particular model of textual analysis that is adopted and employed by a particular writer at a particular moment for a particular set of reasons. This is not to undercut the analysis done in the study, nor the claims made based on that analysis, with a sudden rush to a reader-response relativism. The primetime narrative system intends to do the things its does. There are interests being met.

But the production of culture can never be contained entirely by the interests of its producers, any more than it can be contained entirely by the interests of its
consumers. These series of imaginative and ideological experiences we call primetime fictions are only moments in a much larger and arguably far more significant series of experiences in everyday life. We can only speculate, and look for evidence in support of these speculations in other moments and arenas of public discourse and action, as to how (and how much) these eco-comedies and eco-dramas “continue in the thoughts of all those present as part of their internal landscape” (Seed 1988: 7).
Works Cited


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Vita

James Brooking Wehmeyer was born in Fort Wayne, Indiana, on July 12, 1958, the son of Mary Moffet Wehmeyer and Charles Henry Wehmeyer. After finishing at Eastern High School in Middletown, Kentucky, in 1976, he entered Indiana University in Bloomington, Indiana. He received his Bachelor of Arts degree in English from Indiana University in 1981. In 1983 he began a graduate program in English at the University of Washington, in Seattle, Washington. He received his Master of Arts degree in English from the University of Washington in 1985. In the fall of 1986, he entered the Graduate School of The University of Texas at Austin. In 1991, he took an Assistant Professorship in the English Department of Fort Lewis College in Durango, Colorado.

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