

quirky, elaborate plots, digressions, and gratuitous literary references, to roughen and complicate the texture of those smooth commercial formulas and stereotypes. Thus quirkiness is one version of realism as plausibility, the realism of idiosyncratic characters and of moderate doses of narrative contingency and chaos. Valued viewers, many educated to appreciate more complex plots and idiosyncratic characters than the networks were providing, were apparently attracted by the new programs. But like every successful innovation on commercial television, quirk was turned into a commodity, a formula and mannerism, and declined in the mid-nineties as audiences seemed to tire of it. The lesson? Quality television often differentiates its characters and stories from more formulaic and modified shows by making a new and exclusionary quality—realism as quirkiness, for example—into a formulaic commodity.

Narrative Fiction: Conventions of Style

As we noted in chapter 4, the concept of style draws attention to the materials or medium at hand. An individual commercial or program may develop a distinctive style. The Cascade ad analyzed in chapter 4, for example, uses nondiegetic music, editing, color, and other stylistic choices from among the materials of the medium to sell soap and gender roles. Some music videos use style in quite novel and imaginative ways. But the most common style is the least distinctive, the style that is most naturalized and thus ideological, because it doesn't seem to be a style, a way of seeing and hearing, at all. Formulated between about 1907 and 1917 by directors, editors, and writers in Hollywood and later in other film industries, and central to the narrative realism or classical narrative form analyzed in the previous section, the *continuity style* is designed to produce the realist, diegetic space and time within which the narrative takes place.¹¹ And it does so more or less invisibly, self-effacingly, so that the narrative seems to tell itself, instead of existing only as the product of human choice. The continuity style is a collective industrial style used with variations in virtually all U.S. narrative television and film, and with modifications in many other countries' television and film industries as well. It is so efficient as an industrial practice that, for dominant narrative realist television and film, it is cross-cultural and globally ubiquitous.¹² Our analysis of this style in television is indebted to its analysis in *Film Art: An Introduction*, by David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson.

Narrative and the Continuity Style

Moving images and sounds on television are iconic signs—they look and sound like similar things in the world. But they are presented in shots that have breaks (cuts or edits) between them. As gaps in the smooth flow of narrative information and viewer attention, these breaks are a potential problem.¹³ The primary purpose of the narrative continuity style is to generate the illusion of a smooth, unbroken continuity across cuts by focusing our attention on story and characters and away from style. We may look at shots and listen to a sound track, but in our minds we seem to be privileged witnesses in a real-seeming world whose coherence can be assumed. The continuity style helps translate perceptions efficiently into stable, realist, consumerist understandings of character and story. It serves both clarity and commercialism.

On the big screen in a darkened theater, the realist illusions of the continuity style, the linearity and economy of narrative realist form, and indirect address often produce a strong effect of voyeurism, the visual pleasure, sometimes sexualized, of looking from a hidden, privileged vantage point at someone unaware of the look. On the smaller television screen, in a (usually) domestic space with frequent interruptions both from commercials and from other things happening, the voyeuristic effect is often weaker. In the movie theater, realism usually makes for a fascinated spectator, and expensive home theaters attempt to re-create the conditions for such voyeuristic pleasure. On television, realist continuity is often subsumed within a larger flow of apparently heterogeneous televisual imagery. The general effect is more often one of distraction.¹⁴






Much television, however, tells stories in continuity style. In order to analyze more closely the workings of the continuity style, we'll use the example of the first part of the opening scene from an episode of the popular situation comedy *Home Improvement*.¹⁵ Whereas most 43-minute dramatic programs are shot like theatrical and television movies, with one film camera, 22-minute situation comedies, like soap operas, game shows, and talk shows, are usually shot on videotape with multiple cameras on a brightly and evenly lit stage, often before a live audience. The bright, even lighting, single setting, and multiple cameras make taping much faster and thus cheaper, since the program can be shot in sequence like a play, with few interruptions for crew to move cameras or lights. There are a few differences between single- and multiple-camera styles, but the conventions of continuity style are generally followed in both.






The continuity style is designed to anticipate and cue viewers' responses, to construct the story from the viewpoint of a pleasurable omnipresent camera. The illusion of smooth continuity from one shot to the next, and from one narrative action to the next, is produced by a combination of techniques and narrational strategies. The narratives are usually divided into scenes, "segments that take place in one time and space."¹⁶ Commercial television groups these scenes into units to keep us watching through the commercial breaks and even into the next program. As viewers we are invited to ask a series of questions, the answers to which will lead us to new questions and so on. The process draws us in through each scene and from one scene to the next, into and through the commercials. The questions need not be conscious, but they guide our sense of the show. In the beginning of this opening scene from *Home Improvement*, we are invited to ask some or all of the following questions, depending on our familiarity with the show: What is Tim doing? (Working on his car.) Who is this new guy? (Joe, a new neighbor.) What's he like? (Loud and obnoxious.) How will Tim react to him? (Pleasant but evasive.)

The Continuity Style One: The 180° System

In order to generate this line of questions and answers in an easily consumable way, the dominant television and film industries have developed a practice of shooting and editing that ensures an apparently stable, predictable, and easily understood diegesis. The organizing principle of this practice is the 180° system. According to this system, in any narrative scene a center line or axis of action can be drawn between its central characters.

CHART 5.1. OPENING, HOME IMPROVEMENT

Shot or Sequence	Approx. Total Duration in Sec.	Image	Sound: Voice & Music
1a Long Shot 	8*	Dark garage, antique car gleams in foreground left. Camera rises to frame Tim as he enters through door in rear, switches on light, and raises garage door off right. Credits appear throughout this shot.	Low, soft jazz.
1b continues 	10	As camera moves right to keep him in left center frame, Tim crosses left to car, begins to work with head under dash.	Music continues.
1c continues 	3	After camera stops and reframes, Joe Morton runs in from offscreen just right of camera.	Music continues.
1d continues 	4	Stopping beside car, Joe looks at Tim working. Startled, Tim hits head on dash.	Music stops. Joe (loudly): Hey, tool man! Tim (softly): Owwww! (Audience laughter.)
1e continues 	8	Tim stands to greet Joe; they shake hands.	Joe: I watch you on TV all the time! I love you! Tim: Hey, I love you, too: Who are you? Joe (shaking Tim's hand with exaggerated enthusiasm): Joe Morton, your new neighbor! I just moved into the house across the alley! Tim (extracting his hand from Joe's grip): Hey, all right, I saw the moving van. Did I see a 50-inch square TV?

Shot or Sequence	Approx. Total Duration In Sec.	Image	Sound: Voice & Music
2 Medium Long Shot 	3	Cut-in to closer shot past Tim in profile to Joe, frontal.	Joe: Do you know what's great on the big screen? <i>Tool Time!</i>
3 Medium Long Shot 	2	Reverse angle: Tim frontal, Joe in profile.	Tim: Yeah, well. So, welcome to the neighborhood, Joe. What line of work are you in?
4 Medium Long Shot 	7	Same as shot 2.	Joe: I'm in meat! You know how they call you the tool man? (Hits Tim, then himself on chest with rolled newspaper) I'm the meat man! (Turning to show back of his jacket) Morton Meat! You heard of us? Eight locations, best meat in the Midwest (pulls pen out, hands it to Tim), want a pen? (Audience laughter.)
5 Medium Long Shot 	11	Same as shot 3. Tim looks at pen.	Tim: There's a cow on there. (Audience laughter.) Joe: Yeah! Turn it upside down, see what she does! (Tim turns pen upside down; it makes mooing sound.) (Laughter.) Joe: That's great!
6 Long Shot 	6	Joe slaps Tim on the back. Cut matches on action of slap. Camera tracks left and back to reframe as Joe walks behind, then to left of car.	Joe: Hey, this hot rod's a beaut! What year? Tim: It's a '33. Joe: Oh really? It looks more like a '34 body on a '33 chassis to me. Tim: No, it's a '33.

*Shot 1 is 33 seconds in duration; numbers for segments 1a to 1e indicate time elapsed during that segment.

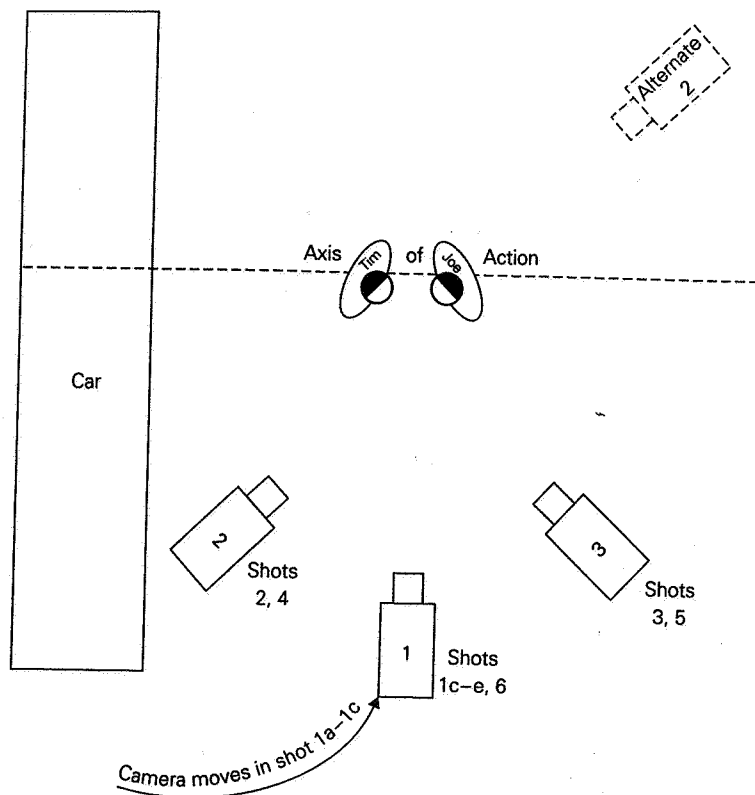


FIGURE 5.1. BIRD'S-EYE VIEW
TIM'S GARAGE
HOME IMPROVEMENT

Figure 5.1, an overhead view of the *Home Improvement* scene, shows the center line passing through Tim and Joe. According to convention, the camera should, in general, stay on one side of the axis of action or half circle (180°) formed by the line. The stated purpose of this practice or rule is to prevent viewer confusion by ensuring that there will always be some common space from shot to shot and that screen direction—"the right-left relationships in a scene"—will remain consistent.¹⁷ For the same reasons, cameras at football and basketball games and other sporting events generally stay on one side of a line from one goal to another. This presumably keeps viewers spatially oriented, including those who are inattentive.

To understand what might be confusing about crossing the 180° line, imagine camera position 2 on the other side of the line, approximately in the position of Alternate 2 on the chart. In that case, shots 2 and 4 (see chart 5.1), shot from alternate camera 2 position, would show Tim on the right looking left and Joe on the left looking right.¹⁸ Note, though, that in shots 3 and 5, intercut with 2 and 4, Tim is on the left looking right and Joe is on the right looking left. Thus in cutting back and forth across the line from shot 2 to 3, then 4 and 5, Tim and Joe could seem suddenly to switch places, and some inattentive spectators might get con-

fused. And if Tim and Joe were moving through the space as in a chase, they might appear inexplicably to change directions, back and forth. By keeping screen direction consistent throughout this part of the scene (the line will shift when Joe moves in shot 6), it is argued, the 180° system avoids potential spatial confusion. In a larger ideological sense, though, the 180° system helps restrict potentially complex, multicentered scenes with many characters to spaces organized around two characters, usually stars. Thus it is both centralizing and reductive. In addition, by keeping the characters in roughly the same left-right relation to one another from shot to shot, the system, like other parts of the continuity style, focuses attention on the characters and deflects it from the shot changes in editing and other techniques.

Is the 180° system necessary? Are viewers so easily confused? Directors, writers, and editors sometimes ignore the rules of screen direction to little or no discernible negative effect, especially on such shows as *Homicide* and *ER*. In the scene between Tim and Joe, the characters don't look very much alike, and there are plenty of performance, lighting, and other cues to differentiate them. So the convention may have more to do with maintaining the realist effect through hiding cuts than with preventing confusion. It may be one more underestimation of the audience's intelligence.

The Continuity Style Two: Analytic Editing

The 180° system provides a kind of foundation for the other elements of the continuity style, a basis for making narrative space appear to be stable, predictable, and easily readable. Beyond maintaining screen direction, the continuity style provides conventions for editing and shot choice. In order to reinforce viewers' sense that they are oriented in a "realistic" though fictional space and time, the first shot in a narrative scene is usually a long shot of the whole space—an *establishing shot* (chart 5.1, shots 1a–1e). Once the larger space has been established, it will be *analyzed* with medium shots and close-ups into smaller component spaces to generate and regulate the flow of narrative information (shots 2–5). Finally, the scene or scene segment usually ends with a *reestablishing* long shot (shot 6), reorienting viewers in space before moving to another part of the scene or to the next scene, repeating the pattern. (In a variation on this pattern, one or more close-up or medium shots will precede the establishing shot.) In the conventional symmetry of establishing, analyzing, and reestablishing space, the shot sequence of analytic editing constitutes a reassuringly predictable stylistic foundation for the less predictable movement of narration.

This predictability, though, is for viewers almost entirely implicit or preconscious. The surface experience of watching a narrative on television or film is of the camera and editing *following* a preexisting story and characters. When we are watching *Home Improvement*, it seems as though Tim and Joe are acting naturally, and camera and cutting just seem to know in advance what they are going to do. In fact, the invisible narrators (producers, writers, director, and technicians) construct story and style together. Choices of camera position, movement, and editing, like those of character position and action, lighting, setting, and sound, actually help *constitute* the characters and story that seem so self-evident to viewers. With our participation, these techniques construct the realist illusion that characters and story precede and exist independently of their representation

on television. On some level, of course, most of us know that the actors are not making up their lines as they go along and that almost everything that happens in a fictional television story is controlled and rehearsed. But do we realize that the continuity style actively anticipates, cues, and manages our responses rather than leaving things up to us? Why do we so often talk about the characters as if they were real people?

To understand this active organization of viewers' responses, we must analyze stylistic techniques as closely as television writers, directors, and editors do. But our purpose is different from theirs. They succeed by managing our responses; we, on the other hand, want to understand and control this power, hidden in television's *way* of telling stories. In the opening of the *Home Improvement* episode, the camera quickly establishes the first relationship of the scene, between Tim and his antique car, with a long shot across the car to Tim entering the garage in the background. The smoothly rising camera and careful lighting frame the figure neatly and clearly, anticipating our desire to identify the character. As Tim moves left to the car, the camera moves right to keep him in the left center of the shot. When the camera stops moving (shot 1c), the shot is still slightly unbalanced along the left-right axis by the empty space on the right side, implicitly waiting for Joe's appearance in the right center of the frame (shots 1d and 1e) to restore the rough left-right symmetry conventional in realist shots. The nondiegetic music conveniently stops just before the first line of dialogue (shot 1d). The first cut-in closer on the characters, shot 2, is motivated by Joe's response to Tim's question: "Did I see a 50-inch square TV?" "Do you know what's great on the big screen? *Tool Time!*" As the conversation develops, viewers presumably want closer shots of facial expressions and gestures. Style and narration help us want closer shots, then instantly supply what we "demand." Shots 2, 3, 4, and 5 cut back and forth on dialogue lines, always framing the speaker frontally, the listener in profile. (If one of these characters were a conventionally attractive woman, she would more often be framed and lit in partial profile to draw attention to and sexually objectify her body.) It is as if the omniscient camera as narrator knew in advance where to be, when to start and stop. Could supply influence demand here? Did we learn to enjoy the seemingly effortless omniscience and easy consumability of the continuity style because its makers stimulated demand by supplying it, by positioning us as wanting it? By teaching us its codes—and not to notice them?

The Continuity Style Three: Shot/Reverse Shot and Eyeline Match

Shots 2, 3, 4, and 5 are variations on a familiar convention of continuity editing called *shot/reverse shot*. According to this convention, typically used for conversation scenes, a shot of one character looking left alternates with a shot of another character looking right. Notice how, in shots 2–5, the framings are medium long shots with both characters appearing in both shots rather than each character in a separate shot, or over the shoulder of the other character. This "two-shot" (two characters in a shot) framing is characteristic of situation comedies, which are usually shot by two or three cameras. Since there are at least two cameras shooting this conversation at the same time, they may be staying relatively far from the characters in order to avoid showing the other camera in the shot.

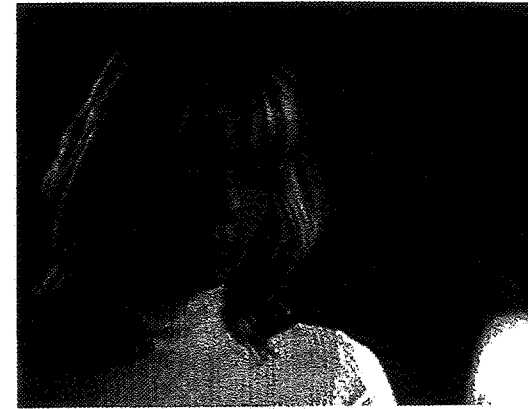


FIGURE 5.2

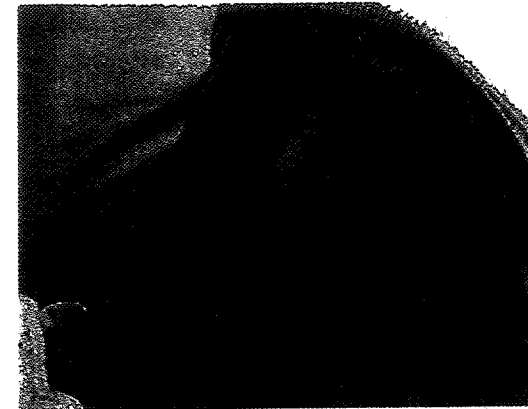


FIGURE 5.3

Another reason may be generic. As their name suggests, situation comedies find comedy in situations, in the interpersonal byplay of one-liners and character reactions. To give each character a separate shot in such scenes would be to isolate them when the focus is on their often simultaneous interaction. Thus the generic code of sitcoms favors long and medium-long shots of two or more characters. In contrast, melodramas like *General Hospital* and *Melrose Place* focus their narratives much more on the (imaginary) subjectivities of individual characters. So the genre emphasizes close-ups of faces to signify those subjectivities. Although shots 2 through 5 in our *Home Improvement* example function much like a shot/reverse shot sequence, they do not constitute such a pattern because both characters appear in both shots. An example of shot/reverse shot editing appears in two shots from an episode of *Melrose Place*, figures 5.2 and 5.3.¹⁹ Here the close relationship of the characters Amanda and Jack is partly constructed by the choice of close-up shots for this scene. Equally important, though, we can see how the shot/reverse shot pattern within the 180° system functions to stabilize the imaginary space even when the two characters are not shown in the same shot. Since there is little or no space common to both these shots, there is,

according to the assumptions of the continuity style, more possibility that inattentive viewers might be spatially confused than in the *Home Improvement* scene, where both characters are present in both shots.

The shots from *Melrose Place* stabilize the space by following the conventions of shot/reverse shot editing. Thus in terms of the way the characters are presented to the camera and so to us, the close shots of Amanda and Jack on *Melrose Place* are closer versions of the shots of Tim and Joe on *Home Improvement*. In both scenes, the center of attention in each shot is one character, presented more or less frontally to us and facing obliquely off frame to the left or right. The reverse shot shows the other character in a similar fashion though obliquely facing the other direction. The major difference is that in the *Home Improvement* scene the camera is farther away and so includes the second character in the shot as well. (In addition, Amanda looks down at Jack on the hospital bed, and he faces up.) The shot/reverse shot pattern often includes the second character from behind, over the shoulder, or in profile. As you can see from the overhead diagram of Tim's garage, Tim and Joe don't face each other directly but turn slightly toward the camera(s). This "cheating," borrowed from realist theater and film, presents them frontally to the camera while maintaining plausibility.

Since characters are in separate shots in the shot/reverse shot pattern, a complementary technique often helps to hold the spaces together. In the *eyeline match*, a character looks at something offscreen in the first shot, and the second shot shows what the character is looking at.²⁰ It might be an object, or a second character who is not looking back, as in the *Melrose Place* scene, in which Amanda seems to look at Jack but he has his eyes closed. If Jack opens his eyes, it will appear as if the two were looking at each other. With one character looking obliquely off right, the other obliquely left, the illusion that their gazes are meeting is quite strong.²¹ The combination of one or two eyeline matches with the shot/reverse shot can powerfully link two characters in two separate shots along the imaginary eyeline. Note that close-up shots of each character alone in the frame don't have to be shot in sequence, or even at the same time or place. The syntax of the continuity system ensures that we the audience will put the pieces together according to convention, actively constructing the illusion for ourselves. The continuity style self-effacingly supports narrative form in promoting our absorption in story and character.

The Continuity Style Four: Match on Action

The eyeline match links two shots through the look of a character. The *match on action* links two shots even more tightly through the continuation of a movement across an edit or cut. The movement begins in one shot and is completed in another with no perceivable gap or overlap in the action, so we will follow the movement and not notice the cut.²² In the *Home Improvement* scene, the cut from shot 5 to shot 6 is a match on action. The action is Joe's movement of slapping Tim on the back and stepping away to the back and left. It begins at the end of shot 5, just a second or two after the image shown in chart 5.1, shot 5, and continues through the cut as Joe crosses left behind Tim at the beginning of shot 6, just a second or two before the image shown in chart 5.1, shot 6. Joe's movement perceptually hides the discontinuity of the cut, as do dialogue lines and other sounds carried across the cut. The cut to the long shot also reestablishes the space and omni-

sciently anticipates Joe's movement to the left. Like the other parts of the continuity system, the match on action naturalizes the discourse of narrative realism. It helps promote the sense that the two-dimensional screen is a window onto a three-dimensional world, imaginary but real-seeming, pleasurable in the ways it draws us through its space and time. In fictional realism we seem to be within a coherent and self-enclosed diegetic world entirely designed for our viewing pleasure though never acknowledging our existence.

Television Realism Two: Nonfiction in Direct Address

Narrative fiction creates a diegesis, an imaginary space and time that usually seems realistic or plausible. But we almost always know that fictional stories are "made up," that their reality is figurative. The codes and conventions of narrative fiction cue us to suspend disbelief at apparent divergences from everyday reality.

In contrast, nonfiction television (and film and other media) usually claims implicitly to present literal, unmediated reality. Like fiction, nonfiction looks and sounds like what it refers to, the real world. Like fiction, nonfiction is coded to seem uncoded.²³ But nonfiction seems *more* immediate, more transparent, more real.

In the previous section we analyzed the conventions of narrative fictional realism: controlled lighting, balanced visual compositions, linear and economical story forms, and the continuity style, including analytic editing, shot/reverse shot, eyeline match, and match on action. Although fictional realism in indirect address seems to be unmediated, all these elements tacitly signify *control* over what is happening in front of the camera. Nonfiction genres like talk and stand-up comedy shows, infomercials, "reality TV," and other programs with hosts (*Good Morning America*, *America's Funniest Home Videos*) use some of these and similar techniques of control. Even news and documentary, in their images of anchors, correspondents, and interviewees, present a nonfiction discourse clearly preorganized and controlled like narrative fiction, for easy understanding.

However, central to news and documentary, exemplary nonfiction genres, is another set of codes and conventions. They include a shaky image produced by a handheld camera, an image that does not always capture its object in pleasing, balanced compositions; haphazard lighting and often monochromatic color; discontinuous, jumpy editing; and sound that includes extraneous noise, sometimes interfering with our ability to make immediate sense of what we hear.²⁴ These conventions of news and documentary nonfiction realism have very different meanings from those of narrative fictional realism. They signify that what we see and hear has not been controlled or staged but discovered. Thus it must be more literally real, more credible than fictional realism. *Its very lack of commercial polish and apparent control signifies raw authenticity.*

Seeing is believing; the problems with this widespread assumption are threefold. First, it ignores the selection, control, and mediation exercised by *all* video makers and filmmakers in the processes of preproduction, shooting, and editing, control that makers cannot choose to relinquish. Second, and perhaps more important, because these conventions automatically carry the authority of documentary truth, they can be copied to lend this authority to any argument, regardless of its merits. By using these conventions a video maker or filmmaker can make fiction look and sound like nonfiction, can appear to discover reality while

staging it. Reenactment of earlier events on such tabloid shows as *Hard Copy* and “reality television” like *America’s Most Wanted* has crossed this line in the nineties. In a more complex case, Oliver Stone’s 1991 film *JFK* mixed fiction, documentary, and simulated or staged documentary to argue that President John Kennedy was killed and his assassination covered up in 1963 through a conspiracy that included his successor, President Lyndon Johnson. Stone was attacked not only for his conspiracy theories but for combining documentary film from 1963 with pseudodocumentary film staged for *JFK* so that most viewers couldn’t tell the difference. His fictional images, charged some critics, by copying the documentary conventions in the 1963 film, sought from the audience an unwarranted and unethical presumption of documentary authenticity and truth to shore up his claims. Stone was deliberately confusing evidence and speculation, fact and fiction, through sophisticated technological fakery, it was alleged.²⁵ The lesson here is not so much whether Oliver Stone was right or wrong, though that is important. Rather, it is the unreliability of the conventions of documentary authenticity as guarantors of reality and literal truth. These conventions were always subject to manipulation; as technical means for simulating them improve, we will have to find ways of judging evidence and truth claims that are more thoughtful, analytic, and complex.

This brings us to the third and most radical reason for rejecting the presumption of reality in nonfiction conventions—radical because it questions not just the reality claims of particular documentary techniques but even deeper assumptions about the relation between images and their sources as well. Film and still photographs make indexical signs, images caused by light from the world as well as by the actions of their human makers. This is assumed to be particularly true of documentary and news, reflections of nonfiction reality. But the technical practice of image and sound recording is changing rapidly. New technologies of digital sampling increasingly replace the analog technologies of photography and sound recording and even videotape. This enables big-budget movies like *Jurassic Park*, *Twister*, and *Titanic* to meld convincing and “realistic” images of dinosaurs, tornadoes, and a ship at sea with those of human actors. It also makes possible the televisual simulation of moving images “peeling” off to reveal other moving images underneath, and other similar “eye candy” seen often in graphics-driven promotions, ads, and sports or magazine programs.²⁶ Bill Nichols describes this momentous technological change from representation or reproduction to simulation: “The image becomes a series of bits, a pattern of yes/no choices registered within a computer’s memory. . . . There is no original negative image as there is in photography against which all prints can be compared for accuracy and authenticity. There may not even be an external referent. Computer graphics can generate highly realist renderings of real-life subjects from software algorithms rather than external referents. The implications of all this are only beginning to be grasped.”²⁷ As more and more image and sound recording becomes digital, it is easier and more common to change these recordings in myriad ways, even to generate realistic new images and sounds by computer. The aura of truth of realistic images and sounds must erode.²⁸ We have to learn in new and more conscious ways that seeing and hearing are not believing.

While this brave new world of reality simulation struggles to be born, reminding us again that surface appearances can be unstable and untrustworthy, we cannot forget what is at stake. Ultimately, escaping is not an option. This planet, this

social and political and natural world, is the only one we have. And nonfiction realism on television, especially news and documentary, implicitly claims to represent directly to us this world and this planet in all their diversity. It is a principal way we know the world beyond the space of our own lives—serious business if we want a voice in our own world and our common fate.

Nonfiction television shows us important things we need to know about the real world and gives us seemingly incontrovertible evidence: Rodney King being beaten by Los Angeles police, or the space shuttle *Challenger* exploding during launch, or extraordinary sports performances. Such images and sounds continue to compel belief. This has really happened; it’s not made up. An old and very strong ideology tells us this is real. A press conference, an interview, and images from a nature documentary silently declare themselves as unmediated actuality.

Yet it is precisely the power of these images to mimic the real world that seems to demand an intervening narrator, a voice to explain them. Unlike those fictions carefully organized to show us meaningful stories seemingly without tellers, nonfiction images of the real world can be radically incomplete, fragmentary, without context, and meaningless. The solution is the narrator, anchor, host, or voice-over, who explains and organizes the images (and sounds) as evidence in an argument, addressing us directly.

Thus while television and film fiction usually lacks a narrator addressing us, nonfiction usually maintains direct address. This convention began with documentary film in the 1930s, when sound-recording equipment became widely available but largely limited to the studio. Until the early sixties, most documentary and news film was silent, with commentary and narration added later. Light, quiet cameras with synchronous sound recorders and improved microphones have created new options, but most news and documentaries are still dominated by the voice of the narrator or correspondent addressing us, telling us what the images mean.

Nonfiction television includes a number of genres—news, documentary, sports, talk shows, stand-up comedy, “reality television,” infomercials, home shopping—using variations on the conventional host or narrator in direct address. Narrators are arguably the voices of television’s framing or metadiscourse discussed at the end of this chapter, the announcers who connect programs, commercials, and promos with a flow of phrases. These include “it’s on later,” “stay tuned,” “tomorrow morning, don’t miss . . .,” “and then,” and “right after these messages.” Commercials honor this voice by imitation, trading on its credibility by using it to recommend products. And, of course, nearly lost in the flow and clutter are the network and station identifications, often crowded almost to invisibility by the voices of commodities.

Television News: A Hierarchical Discourse

Adapted from radio, print journalism, and documentary film, network news was one of television’s first nonfiction genres, and it has developed the convention of the narrator/anchor into the cornerstone of a whole hierarchical discourse of authority and mediation. Other nonfiction genres play variations on this system. Because network news conventions continue to be the models for those in documentary, public affairs, local news, and other, lighter nonfiction programming, and because television makes claims about the real world most explicitly through

