Commercials usually are quite different in type from the contents of a narrative program, with new actors, locales, subject matter, and so on. Thus they probably have relatively little impact on our ability to resume watching and understanding the narrative. Moreover, narratives seem to be one of the easiest kinds of information to remember. If people are asked to memorize strings of abstract items, such as a complex algebraic equation, they are far better able to remember them if they make up a little story about the individual items. These two aspects of memory imply that we are well equipped to deal with commercial interruptions.

The implications of such abilities are obvious. Despite the prominence of the concept of flow in television studies, the individual program can be usefully studied as a self-contained unit, apart from the original schedule in which it may have appeared. This is not to say that this is the only way to study it, but certainly it is not as unproductive as some commentators assume.

I should emphasize at this point that the concept of flow has not dominated the field entirely. Many analyses of individual series and episodes have been done without regard to viewing strips, commercials, and other aspects of flow. Most of these, however, have interpreted primarily the content of these programs, usually with an orientation toward the political struggles of women, ethnic minorities, the working class, and other groups. What I am emphasizing here is something rarer: the formal analysis of television. I shall be looking at storytelling techniques that may help constitute the specificity or at least the salient differences characterizing television. Although the storytelling capacities of television may share certain traits with drama or films, there are probably differences as well. My purpose here will be to test that hypothesis by using film as my comparison point.

Classical Film, Classical Television

In analyzing mainstream commercial television fiction, the most obviously comparable type of film is what has been called the "classical Hollywood cinema." This term refers to a stable set of norms of storytelling that were formulated during the early years of the cinema, primarily in the period from about 1910 to 1917. As David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and I argued in our book The Classical Hollywood Cinema, these norms provided the means to make unified, easily comprehensible, entertaining films. So successful have Hollywood films been internationally that this system remained largely intact until at least 1960, with minor variations added along the way. In Storytelling in the New Hollywood, I argued further that the norms in widespread use in recent decades are essentially still those of the "Golden Age" of studio filmmaking in the decades before 1960. This is not to say that all films draw on all aspects of that model, and certainly there are some films that stretch the conventions. I mean rather that the norms are still there to be drawn on, and most films do. Here I would like to take one further step and suggest that many of these norms have been adopted or adapted by television precisely because they have been so suited to telling straightforward, entertaining stories.

Before laying out what the primary norms of storytelling are, however, I shall explain briefly the application of the word "classical" to popular film and television. This usage is not based simply on the fact that initially film and later television have employed the same basic techniques and formulas for nearly a century with so little change. It stems also from the fact that both television and film came into being in an era during which there was a huge expansion of popular storytelling media in general. During the late nineteenth century, the cheap popular-fiction magazine
spread through both the U.S. and Britain. In the U.S., touring dramatic companies presented well-known plays like *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in all but the smallest towns. Along with this expansion came a need for many more writers to generate stories. In learning their trade, these writers turned to simplified versions of classical notions of what constitutes a story. In particular, Aristotle's strictures concerning beginnings, middles, and ends, and his views on unity have been widely repeated in how-to manuals for every narrative art. This Aristotelian approach has retained its force until today. The most recent screenplay manuals will invariably invoke Aristotle as a starting point for learning story structure. (I discuss such manuals' advice in Chapter 2.) Thus discussion of "classical" narrative in television is not wholly whimsical. It stems from film's and television's historical origins.

To illustrate these storytelling principles, I have chosen one successful example from film and one from television. I am not claiming that the film *Jurassic Park* (1993) is a masterpiece, though I do admire many aspects of it. I think some of the acting is overdone, and the plotline requiring Dr. Grant to learn to love children is simplistic. In general, however, the story perfectly exemplifies classical techniques. For my television example, I have chosen an episode from *The Bob Newhart Show*, one of the best American situation comedies.

In *Storytelling in the New Hollywood*, I described the core of classical storytelling in this way:

Hollywood favors unified narratives, which means most fundamentally that a cause should lead to an effect and that effect in turn should become a cause, for another effect, in an unbroken chain across the film. That is not to say that each effect follows immediately from its cause. On the contrary, one of the main sources of clarity and forward impetus in a plot is the "dangling cause," information or action which leads to no effect or resolution until later in the film.\(^{24}\)

This notion of the dangling cause is particularly important, since the whole notion of certain narrative lines being temporarily suspended seems to be largely unknown in television studies. As we shall see in Chapter 2, this technique contributes a great deal to our ability to follow narratives across interruptions, including commercial breaks.

To take a simple example from *Jurassic Park*, after the Tyrannosaurus rex attack at the film's center, palaeontologist Alan Grant rescues John Hammond's granddaughter, Lex; the car in which her brother Tim has been riding falls over the edge of an embankment. There follows a scene in the park's control room, where the villainous Nedry's sabotage of the park's computers (which itself picks up on a dangling cause) has baffled the technicians. On the return to Grant and Lex, we easily remember that Tim is in need of rescue from the car, now lodged in a tree. We are able to pick up even on causes that are left dangling for many scenes, especially if they are presented vividly or redundantly.

Unity and clarity require that everything in the film should be "motivated," that is, justified in some way. Motivation often involves "planting" information to be used later. Twice in *Jurassic Park* we are shown or told that Lex is a computer geek, a skill that allows her quickly to reboot the park's security systems during the film's climax—something no one else has been able to accomplish.

As this example suggests, the Hollywood cinema also bases the action closely on the traits of the characters. Causes arise almost entirely from the characters' traits and actions and only occasionally from suprapersonal forces like floods and fires. Even the di-
nosaurs in *Jurassic Park*, which provide so much action, are there only as a result of Hammond's entrepreneurship, and each of them, benign or aggressive, behaves as its species would dictate. As soon as the characters appear, or even before we see them, they will be assigned a set of definite traits, and our first impressions of those traits will last through the film; that is, the characters act consistently. Hammond is first seen bubbling over with enthusiasm, eager to solicit support for his project of breeding dinosaurs. He retains his optimism even in the face of setbacks and completely abandons his dreams only at the very end. If we see characters doing something that seems to run counter to their traits, some explanation will usually be given. In *Jurassic Park*, the lawyer is established in the second scene as conservative and concerned with the bottom line; he is very critical of Hammond's park and inclined to withdraw the investors' backing. Fairly quickly, however, he becomes Hammond's biggest supporter. This abrupt change is explained by his first sight of the dinosaurs, when he mutters, awestruck, "We're gonna make a fortune with this place." Even in moments of emotion, he thinks in monetary terms.

In virtually all cases, the main character in a classical Hollywood film desires something, and that desire provides the forward impetus for the narrative. We can call this figure the goal-oriented protagonist. Almost invariably, the protagonist's goals define the main lines of action. In *Jurassic Park*, there is no single protagonist, but Hammond's attempts to establish a dinosaur-based park determines the main plotline. Most films actually have at least two major lines of action, and the double plotline is another distinctive feature of the Hollywood cinema. As we all know, romance is central to nearly all Hollywood films, and typically one line of action involves a romance, while the other concerns some other goal of the protagonist. These two goals are usually causally linked. In *Jurassic Park*, the second line of action stems from Ellie's goal of reconciling Grant, her fiancé, to the idea of having children, and as he gradually develops a loving and protective attitude toward Hammond's grandchildren, her goal is achieved. Although the couple are already engaged at the beginning of the film, the prospects for a happy marriage have increased by the end. Ellie's goal relates to the main plot in a simple fashion, through the danger into which the park plunges all the characters. Villains, of course, also have goals, and the clash between these and the positive characters' goals creates much of the narrative's conflict. Nedry's desire for wealth causes him to steal the dinosaur embryos and shut down the park's security and communications systems.

Again, the idea of goals seems obvious, yet there are types of films that do not use this strategy. In the European art cinema, for example, characters often act because they are forced to, not because they want to. Michelangelo Antonioni has made a number of films where the protagonists seem unable to actively pursue their goals. *L'Avventura* (1960), for example, involves a search and a tentative romance, both of which would be the kinds of goals common in Hollywood films; yet the film concentrates on the psychological inability of the characters to follow through on these goals. In other art films, characters may conceive goals but never achieve them, as in Jaco Van Dormael's *Toto le héros* (1991).

In Chapter 4, I discuss films and television programs that use a similar approach to goals.

In addition to their overall definite, linear causality, part of the appeal of Hollywood films stems from their ease of comprehension on a scene-to-scene level. Keeping the ongoing causality, time, and space intelligible across transitions is particularly important in the media involving moving images. A cut can transport us instantly from one scene to a new space containing an
action involving different characters, taking place at a different
time. Several techniques keep us from being disoriented by these
changes.

A simple but effective device is the dialogue book, a line spoken
at the end of one scene that prepares us for what happens next. At
the end of the scene where the avuncular Hammond shows his
guests the dinosaurs for the first time, Grant asks, "How d'you do
this?" Hammond responds, "I'll show you." The next scene shows
the characters arriving at the visitors' center and watching a pre-
sentation on dinosaur DNA. Here the same characters are in-
volved, and the action continues in a nearby space after a brief ellip-
sis. Early in the film, however, a more potentially disorienting
transition occurs. The lawyer visits an amber mine and mentions
Grant's name to a minor character, the mine foreman. The latter
remarks, "Grant's like me. He's a digger." There is a sudden shift
to shots of brushes clearing sand from a fossil skeleton. This is a
new locale, and Grant has not yet appeared in the film, but we are
prepared to understand that the man we next see is Grant, a dig-
ger, and that this site is where he digs. A title identifies it for us:
"Badlands, Near Snakewater, Montana." Such expository writing,
by the way, whether through superimposed titles like this one or
signs within the setting, have helped establish a new locale since
the silent-film era.

Temporal relations are often made comprehensible by the use
of a deadline—a device that often serves to build suspense as well.
Jurassic Park has two long-range deadlines. Hammond is initially
given forty-eight hours to prove the viability of his park to the vis-
iting experts. In this case the deadline is not met, since circum-
stances force him to abandon his goal. The villainous computer
expert Nedry also has a deadline: he must get the stolen dinosaur
embryos to a ship that is leaving at seven o'clock. Moreover, the
transport device will keep the embryos alive for only thirty-six
hours. Nedry misses this deadline, but rushing to meet the ship is
what causes him to go astray and be killed by a dinosaur. Charac-
ters in films also often make appointments, which usually provide
a short-term sense of how much time has passed between scenes.

One means for fixing important causes or lines of action vividly
in our minds is the motif. Films tend to use visual motifs that be-
come emblematic of an important idea. For example, when we see
Grant terrify a child early on, he uses a fossil velociraptor claw
to illustrate his grisly account of the dinosaur's killing methods
(Figure 2). We see him handling it a couple of scenes later, as he
and Ellie sit in the helicopter across from Malcolm (Figure 3);
Grant will soon become jealous when this new acquaintance be-
gins flirting with Ellie. Thus the claw becomes associated with
Grant's obsession with his work and unfriendly attitude toward most other people. (His first reaction to Hammond's appearance at the excavation site had been anger.) Finally, as he plays a fatherly role by guarding the two sleeping children, he tosses the claw away (Figure 4). Thus the point is underscored with a motif that is not causally important in itself but that traces a character change. Similarly, a verbal motif is Hammond's chipper line as he displays aspects of the park, "Spared no expense!" He says this four times before finally repeating it softly and with a touch of sad irony as he and Ellie sit eating melting ice cream and she explains why his dream is impossible.

While not all classical films employ motifs as carefully as *Jurassic Park* does, virtually all aid viewer comprehension by conveying important information redundantly. An event may be mentioned by a character as about to occur, we may then see it occur, and other characters may then discuss it. We do not actually see the velociraptors until late in *Jurassic Park*, but the death of a worker in the opening sequence and the episode of a live cow being lowered into the raptor cage and torn apart amply demonstrate how dangerous they are. Moreover, the Kenyan gamekeeper explains the raptors' mode of hunting in detail, expressing a reluctant admiration for their intelligence and skill. By the time the raptors start attacking the main characters, we are well primed to understand this new threat.

Similarly, character traits are often established and reiterated several times. Immediately after Grant is introduced, he deliber-
ately frightens a rude child among a group of tourists by describing a velociraptor attack, as previously mentioned. Soon after, his fiancée, Ellie, who wants to have children, chides him for this, and he lists some of his objections to children. In case we missed all this, it is mentioned briefly in the next scene, where Hammond is describing his park to the pair: “Our attractions will drive kids out of their minds.” Grant responds, “And what are those?” Ellie, willfully misunderstanding, teases him by answering, “Small versions of adults, honey.” When the group climbs into the vehicles for the tour of the park, Grant evades the hero-worshipping Tim, who has latched onto him, by tricking him into sitting in the other car. Thus by the time Grant ends up alone with the kids in the jungle, we are well aware of the fact that he does not like children. We also strongly suspect that he will learn to love them, since that is Ellie’s goal.

The techniques of classical cinema I have been describing can be found in television as well. In order briefly to demonstrate this claim, I shall look at an episode of *The Bob Newhart Show* called “Big Brother Is Watching” (1974). The action primarily involves Ellen, sister of the psychologist Bob Hartley, and her attempts to find an apartment in Chicago. When she fails and decides to move in with her boyfriend Howard, Bob’s objections create bad feelings among the characters. Here is a scene-by-scene summary of the action:

“Big Brother Is Watching”

**CREDITS**

[COMMERCIAL BREAK]

**SCENE 1** (Bob and Emily’s apartment) Bob’s sister Ellen has recently moved to Chicago and is living with her mother. She can’t stand this and wants her own apartment. Her boyfriend Howard offers to let her stay with him, but she feels she has known him too briefly. She accepts Emily’s offer to let her stay temporarily with her and Bob and makes an *appointment* to go apartment hunting with Emily the next day.

**SCENE 2** Bob and Emily prepare to sleep in their den while Ellen has their bedroom; Bob complains about this arrangement.

**SCENE 3** (Bob’s office) Carol, the receptionist, tells the dentist, Jerry, that she has been taking gourmet cooking classes and makes an *appointment* to have him over for dinner on Tuesday. Ellen visits Bob and tells him that Emily has been bossy during their apartment hunting and she has decided to move in with Howard after all. Bob claims to accept this.

**SCENE 4** (Bob and Emily’s apartment) Ellen prepares to move her things across the hall to Howard’s place. Bob suddenly threatens Howard if they continue.

[COMMERCIAL BREAK]

**SCENE 4 CUE** Howard refuses to take Ellen’s side, not wanting to alienate his best friend. Upset, Ellen stalks out.

**SCENE 5** (Bob’s office) Carol mentions to Bob that Ellen is now staying at her apartment; Ellen appears and says she is still angry with Bob and Howard.

**SCENE 6** Jerry comes into Bob’s office and is offended when Bob calls Howard his “best friend.” Bob realizes all his friends are upset with him.

**SCENE 7** At home in her apartment, Carol, in curlers and robe, orders a pizza to be delivered (having forgotten her invitation to Jerry). Emily and then Bob come in, hoping to see Ellen, who is