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The Continuous Serial — A Definition

The purpose of this essay is to define the continuous serial so that *Coronation Street* can be seen not as a unique object for study but placed within the context of serials broadcast on British television and radio.* The definition I will give is not to be found in the subject matter of the serials concerned but in the way in which narrative, character and the passage of time are organised. In the first section of the piece three key characteristics will be identified, which I will argue are essential to any continuous serial. The two middle sections will analyse how narrative and characterisation are typically handled in the serial. The final section examines the way in which gossip, often seen as a distinctive feature of *Coronation Street*, is used to bind together the serial and to draw the audience into it. I hope to show how the continuous serial is able to run for years, preserving a basic stability while making enough changes to prevent tedious repetition. In their article on *World in Action*, Heath and Skirrow write that:

the central fact of television experience is much less flow than flow and regularity; the anachronistic succession is also a constant repetition and these terms of movement and stasis can be found as well within the single programme as within the evening's viewing (Heath and Skirrow, 1977, p. 15).

This notion of movement and stasis within a programme seems a fruitful one for the study of the serial; the intention of this essay is to examine how such a process can be seen to be at work.

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE CONTINUOUS SERIAL

The Organisation of Time

It can be argued that the most important influence on how the audience perceives the continuous serial is its regular appearance, in the same slot every week of the year. Twice a week, three times a week, five times a week,

* This essay is concerned only with British television and radio serials and is not intended to cover American serials. Examples are mainly taken from four serials which were running at the time of writing – Granada's *Coronation Street*, ATV's *Crossroads* (then running four nights a week in the London area), *The Archers* and *Waggoner's Walk*, both on BBC Radio with a 15-minute episode every weekday.

the familiar signature tune alerts us to the fact that the serial is about to begin. It does not disappear 'until the autumn' or 'until the next series'. It appears every week and the time which passes between each episode is always known to the audience. Because of this, the question of how time passes in a serial, of how time is constructed and perceived by the audience, is important in distinguishing the continuous serial from the series. The series, although it also uses the same characters across a number of episodes, normally deals with a particular story within a discrete episode. One can watch *Hazell* or *Z Cars* without it mattering how much time has narratively passed between episodes. Significantly, *The Archers*, on the other hand, is announced as 'the *everyday* story of country folk' even though it is only every week day. There is an appeal here to the audience's experience of time in the real world, as if we get through our own personal events during a day and then tune in to discover what has happened in Ambridge that day.

This feeling is usefully described, in terms of the novel, by Carl Grabo as being the convention of 'unchronicled growth'. 'In the novel,' he argues, 'when the story shifts from one sub-plot to another, the characters abandoned pursue an unrecorded existence' (Grabo, 1978, p. 67). The characters in a serial, when abandoned at the end of an episode, pursue an 'unrecorded existence' until the next one begins. In other words, we are aware that day-to-day life has continued in our absence even though the problem we left at the end of the previous episode has still to be resolved. I shall discuss this development of the conventional serial cliffhanger in the section on narrative, but for the moment it is important to note that the promise – 'continued tomorrow/on Wednesday/next week' – is almost invariably not fulfilled by the serials I am discussing, as it was by the movie serial or is still by the next segment of a comic or magazine plot.

In addition, the broadcast serial, whether it be daily or weekly, appears to have gone through a similar period of time as its audience, whereas in a series, narrative time within the episode is the only criterion for time passing. Serials vary, of course, in how scrupulously they adhere to this convention of time apparently passing at the same rate as in the outside world. In *Waggoner's Walk*, a Sunday in the serial may occur on a Wednesday, but even here the sense of a day gone by between episodes is still strong. *The Archers*, on the other hand, is the most punctilious in paralleling real time (7.05 p.m. transmission) so that if a character says that it is Thursday it is usually Thursday in the outside world. Even *The Archers*, though, cannot stick to this rigidly and events occurring at the weekend, for instance, have to be broadcast on a Friday or a Monday. *Coronation Street* also gives the impression of leaving a literal time between episodes, and significant days in the outside world such as bank holidays or special anniversaries are referred to and celebrated on the right day. In both *The Archers* and *Coronation Street*, public events – the Silver Jubilee, the decimalisation of the coinage, or the Royal Show in *The Archers* – are discussed in the programme as they are occurring in the outside world.

The strength of this convention can be illustrated by what happens when it is broken. When a lorry crashed into the 'Rovers Return' in *Coronation Street* in 1979, the dramatic nature of the incident was underlined by the spinning out of time. Two or three hours of narrative time dealing with the clearing of rubble and the discovery of victims took days and weeks of real time: tension was emphasised in this way and the normal feeling of day-to-day life was gone.

The Sense of a Future

The second characteristic of the continuous serial is the sense of a future, the continual postponement of the final resolution. Unlike the series which is advertised as having a specific number of episodes, the serial is endless. The apparent multifariousness of the plots, their inextricability from each other, the everyday quality of narrative time and events, all encourage us to believe that this is a narrative whose future is not yet written. Even events which would offer a suitable ending in other narrative forms are never a final ending in the continuous serial: a wedding is not a happy ending but opens up the possibilities of stories about married life and divorce; a character's departure from a serial does not mean that s/he will not turn up again several years later, as Lillian Bellamy does in *The Archers*. It is perhaps this sense of a future which also explains the way in which deaths in serials (Grace Archer, Martha Longhurst in *Coronation Street*, Amy Turtle in *Crossroads*) remain as high spots, remembered and indeed mysticised, not so much because of the characters involved, but because they are the only moments which are irreversible. Ray Langton in *Coronation Street*, paralysed from the waist down in a coach crash, regained the use of his legs within five months, but not even the scriptwriters can bring Ernie Bishop back to life.

The impossibility of 'closing' a serial was illustrated by events in *Waggoner's Walk*, which was brought to an untimely end by BBC cuts in May/June 1980. Very little attempt was made to tie up loose ends and several stories were abandoned *in medias res*. Indeed, the writers seem to have humorously recognised that a serial – even in this situation – has a future, by finishing the serial with a proposal of marriage which the woman concerned asks for time to think about. 'Of course,' comes the reply, 'you have all the time in the world', and it is left to the signature tune to bring the serial to an end. One is left with a sense that the serial has not stopped but is still taking place, an extreme case of 'unchronicled growth'.

The Interweaving of Stories

The third characteristic of a continuous serial is the way in which two or three stories are woven together and presented to the audience over a number of episodes. It is interesting to compare this with how stories are handled in series. In series such as *Hazell* or *Sergeant Cribb*, the story, as I have pointed out, is usually resolved within a single episode. Other series such as *The Brothers* or *Fox*, which are in effect non-continuous serials, do

have several storylines, but usually only one is dealt with at any length in a specific episode although the others may appear as sub-plots to keep them ticking over. It is characteristic of the continuous serial, however, that two or three stories dealt with are given approximately equal time in each episode and very often reflect on and play off each other. As one story finishes, another is begun so that at least two stories are always in progress. Looking at an episode from *Coronation Street* (29.12.76) may help to illustrate how this works.

The episode is concerned mainly with two stories. In one, Annie Walker is waiting anxiously for the result of a breathalyser test; in the second, Bet Lynch, who has moved in as 'housekeeper' to Mike Baldwin, is preparing for a party she is giving in his house. Both stories are worked through in separate scenes; both are discussed by non-participants in the pub; thematically, both deal with the common-sense notion of 'pride coming before a fall'. Annie's pride in her car and her respectability is being dented by the humiliation of the breath test and its aftermath, while Bet's pride in the house and her new relationship with Baldwin presages, for those who know *Coronation Street*, a certain fall. During the episode, Annie's story is resolved when she learns that the test has proved negative, and a new story is introduced, at the end of the episode, when Len Fairclough reveals at the party that he has had a letter from his son. Thus, the episode starts with two stories but when one is brought to an end, another immediately begins. It should also be noted that, although this particular tale of Annie and her car is resolved, Annie's pride still remains as a potential source for similar stories. It is possible for a serial to cover a wide range of stories and styles without disturbing the serial format by playing them against very familiar elements – the signature tune, the setting, long-standing characters. The audience is presented with a rich pattern of incident and characterisation – the dramatic is mixed in with the everyday, the tragic with the comic, the romantic with the mundane. The proportions will vary from serial to serial. *The Archers* sometimes seems to consist of nothing but the humdrum, while *Crossroads* frequently veers towards melodrama. In *Coronation Street*, comic stories centring on the Ogdens or Eddie Yeats often run alongside the more 'serious' dramatic stories. But because the unfamiliar is introduced within a context of the very familiar, the audience is able to cope with enormous shifts in style and material, even within one episode, which might otherwise be expected to occur across a whole evening's viewing.

These three characteristics, then, are the essential elements of the continuous serial and they distinguish it from other forms such as the series or the dramatisation of a novel. It is clear that all three – the organisation of time, the sense of an unwritten future, the interweaving of plots – are closely tied in with how narrative is handled in the serial. The next section therefore takes up the issue of narrative more directly.

NARRATIVE IN SERIALS

Much of the research done on narrative has concentrated on works which are read with the knowledge that they will come to an end. Narrative organisation is described as functioning through tension and the resolution of that tension by reaching a satisfactory ending (Scholes and Kellogg, 1979, p. 212). Todorov describes 'a minimum narrative . . . without which we cannot say that there is any narrative at all' as 'a movement between equilibriums which are similar but not identical' (Todorov, 1975, p. 163). The narrative ends, in other words, with the establishment of an equilibrium which balances that which was disturbed or disrupted at the beginning of the text. Barthes' work in *S/Z* has alerted us to the way in which narratives work by posing enigmas and questions which draw the reader through the text in search of an answer. The reader is kept involved through this pursuit which is in fact a pursuit of resolution. In the end, after delays, confusions and red herrings, comes the final resolution when 'all enigmas are disclosed' (Barthes, 1975, p. 209). Drawing on such sources, some critical writing has described the narrative process solely in terms of closure. Gill Davies sums up this position concisely in her article 'Teaching about Narrative':

Narrative in both the novel and the film has the same effect. It creates a sense of inevitability and closure in the action is felt to be predestined, tidy and without contradiction (Davies, 1978-9, p. 59).

In the same article, she writes that narrative is precipitated by an initial problem which it is the work of the text to render harmless and resolve:

no new issues are raised, everything is resolved and the audience is presented with a closed and comforting symmetry. (ibid.)

In the light of this emphasis on resolution and closure, work on serials and narrative offers a new perspective. As I have shown, serials are marked by their sense of the future, the promise which they hold out of being endless. While individual stories are resolved, the continuous serial must go on and the audience must be kept involved. In this section, therefore, I want to look at narrative in continuous serials in the light of their endlessness and, in particular, to concentrate on two devices of key importance – the use of the cliffhanger and of moments of temporary resolution. In addition, I will examine how the serial sets up different narrative conventions from those of the book and film and how this difference affects the audience's engagement with a continually unfinished text.

The Cliffhanger

The cliffhanger is often seen as the traditional hallmark of the serial. In this section, therefore, I want to look at how the use of the cliffhanger formally

differentiates the serial from the complete novel or film and at how the serials I am discussing have adapted this device.

All fictional – and indeed non-fictional – forms attempt to engage the audience by the posing and working through of an enigma. The importance of this strategy varies, however, from genre to genre. On the one hand there is the classic 30s detective novel in which the puzzle is all, outstanding character traits (violent temper, apparent timidity) only serving as clues or red herrings in the solution to the conundrum; on the other hand, there are novels like *A Portrait of a Lady* or *Mrs Dalloway* in which the evocation of character and setting is of far greater importance than the unravelling of the plot. In all cases, however, the resolution of the narrative is contained within the text. If we want to know what happens in a novel, we can read it all in one sitting, turn to the end of the book or dip into it at random. We can (at least in most local cinemas) choose to see the end of a film first – which is why Hitchcock's films were often advertised specifically with the notice, 'No one allowed to enter in the last ten minutes.' To some extent the spectator/reader can control his/her relationship to the suspense in these cases, while accepting that s/he must not break the rules if a specific form of enjoyment is to be gained. But the suspense in serials is forced on us, so that we are left waiting between one episode and the next, literally in suspense. The cliffhanger marks this enforced interruption.

The cliffhanger is normally thought of in terms of silent movie serials. The unfolding of the action is cut off at a crucial point so that the enigma is unresolved and the leading characters remain in danger. The audience is left with questions – how will the heroine escape, can the hero outmanoeuvre the enemy? The tension which arises from the sudden break in the narrative is expressed by the cliffhanger so that the different directions which the story could take are frozen until the next episode. The serials I am writing about, however, only occasionally use the cliffhanger device with its original dramatic effect. It is important to note the narrative construction through which this shift has been achieved. Continuing problems run through every serial, which the audience can follow while missing specific episodes. In *Coronation Street*, one such story would be the question of Deirdre's new relationships after the break-up of her marriage; similarly, in *The Archers*, several years ago, questions hung for a long time over the future of Jennifer Archer's marital status; in *Crossroads*, recurringly, there is a threat to Meg Richardson's control over the motel and she has to fight to retain it. These overall stories contribute to the framework of the serial, within which each episode will have its own structure, working with two or more plots, of which one is often used as comic balance to a more serious drama. The weighting of this interweaving will vary from serial to serial – *Coronation Street* and *Emmerdale Farm* rely more on the comic/serious balance than does *Crossroads*. In all serials, though, this episodic construction means that while major overall questions are left unanswered and unresolved, the cliffhanger can emanate from some minor matter, often comically pre-

sented and easily forgotten. It is, therefore, merely a formal device and is not necessarily related to the potential outcome of the story. In other words, it is a cliffhanger almost because it occurs at the end of an episode, and cuts us off from the created world of the serial. Because of this, the cliffhanger, although frequently used in the serial to pose a question, varies in intensity and importance. It is not necessary therefore to produce moments of high drama at the end of *every* episode, and a potentially rigid device is made more flexible by using it comically or for minor events. In terms of the balance between repetition (the regular use of a cliffhanger) and variation within the programmes, this is an important difference between the current television and radio serials and the much more rigid movie serials.

There is one further variant in how the cliffhanger is used to engage the audience with the narrative of the serial. This depends on the type of knowledge the audience is given within a specific episode and which in turn affects the kind of puzzle which is offered to the listener/viewer. Audiences can be kept in the dark over a particular problem – Benny, in *Crossroads*, is accused of murder, we do not know whether he did it or not, we want to get an answer to this question. Or the audience can be given knowledge – Benny is accused of a murder which we see that he did not commit; how can this mistake be remedied? These are two different types of suspense, the former much more a question of solving the mystery, the latter encouraging our involvement with a character. It is interesting to note here that *Coronation Street* uses the latter form of suspense much more frequently, but all serials use both these variants, teasing the audience with limited and carefully structured knowledge.

Moments of Temporary Resolution

It is clear then that the cliffhanger is an important device in the narrative organisation of the continuous serial. Its use, however, is also balanced by the rarer moments of resolution in the serial, the points at which a new harmony is very temporarily reached. Serials vary in how much they use this strategy. *The Archers* quite often finishes, particularly at the end of the week, with the coming together of the family at a meal or a gathering. The other serials tend to save such moments for festivals such as Christmas or communal occasions like weddings or funerals. Such moments are marked by the suppression of other stories, even though they will be picked up in the next episode. For once, the harmony within the group of characters will be stressed so that quarrels and differences which would threaten the equilibrium are temporarily suspended. The final image of such an episode is not one which looks forward to the next instalment but one which rounds off this one – the bridal pair embracing, a toast at a family celebration, a group of characters at the end of a street party. Of course, there is never a final resolution since the audience is aware of stories which are to be continued, but such moments do provide a respite from the hermeneutic dramas of the cliffhanger. Indeed, the two alternatives, the temporary resolution and the

cliffhanger, work together to provide variations within the established pattern of the serials' organisation.

The Use of the Past

So far, in this section on narrative, I have discussed how the serial form plays on the audience's desire to know what happens next. It is clear that the audience's engagement is also with what has happened in the past. The serial offers, as we have seen, an attenuated narrative which may in the case of successful serials go on for twenty or thirty years. In this situation, all viewers/listeners do not have the same knowledge of the serial's past and events remembered vividly by some are unknown to others. Episodes may have been missed; the viewers/listeners may be comparative newcomers to the programme; they may see/hear only a limited number of episodes, perhaps because of regular commitments elsewhere. Little attempt is made to bring the audience up-to-date with events it may have missed and the announcers who introduce the programmes obviously cannot offer a résumé of what has happened so far. There is therefore no guarantee that individual members of the audience will know very much about a particular serial's history.

It should be noted, however, that some viewers/listeners do remember a serial's past very clearly and expect any references to it to be accurate, down to the last detail. This accumulation of knowledge by the committed audience is recognised by those working on the programmes, who boast about the detailed attention to minutiae which their audience give the serial. The *Coronation Street* production team includes a programme historian who ensures that any references to the past are correct. Knowledge gained from watching or listening to the programme can be reinforced by reading the books based on the serials or magazines produced to mark special events. *Coronation Street's* 2,000th episode, for instance, was celebrated with a 'souvenir album' which included the script of the first episode and a history of events in the Street over the last twenty years. The serial, therefore, operates in a situation in which it must be accessible to all viewers while, at the same time, be accurate about its own accumulated past. This double necessity has certain effects on both the narrative in serials and the audience's involvement in that process.

Conversation in serials seldom turns to past events and it is very rare for a plot to hinge on or be affected by what has happened in even the recent past. There are set pieces when Ena Sharples talks about her girlhood or characters in *Emmerdale Farm* reminisce about the old life in the Dales, but such references draw on nostalgia for a community experience rather than knowledge of events in the serial's own history. Television serials can sometimes hint at the importance of a character who has appeared earlier in the serial by using his/her photograph in the décor. Thus, the photograph of the deceased Jack Walker is prominent in Annie's living room and is sometimes specifically focused on in her times of crisis. However, if knowledge of

the past is crucial to the audience's understanding of the plot, this is usually worked directly into the drama. One example of how this is done can be seen in the way in which the 25th anniversary of Grace Archer's death was handled in *The Archers*. First, Phil, who was her husband, is heard to be brusque with his son David, and generally upset for no reason; a conversation with his current wife, Jill, lets the audience know about the anniversary but does not give us any details; finally, Tom Forrest tells David the full story of the fire and Grace's death. Thus David, a member of the younger generation, stands in for those in the audience who are ignorant of what has happened and without disturbing the narrative flow allows them to be filled in on a piece of Archer history.

This example is particularly interesting because to *aficionados* of *The Archers* an explanation of such a famous event was unnecessary and indeed there were complaints that Tom had got the details wrong. I want to discuss later the audience's relationship with the serial form, but I think it is worth mentioning here the way in which the regular viewer/listener can fill out the narrative with recollections of past events in a way which is more significant than mere attention to historical detail would suggest. Thus, although references to Bet Lynch's illegitimate child are rare, a viewer who remembers the fact can bring its resonances to Bet's subsequent stories. Any viewer will recognise that Betty Turpin is a kindly, indeed motherly character, but if one remembers that she has had a son who was brought up by her sister then her behaviour has a sad edge of frustration. It is also possible for a viewer/listener to raise questions within the narrative which may not in fact be answered since they are not on the scriptwriter's agenda. Thus, while listening to a discussion of the problems of tenant farmers in *The Archers*, it is possible to speculate on the eventual return of Lillian Bellamy (the landlady) from Guernsey without even hearing her name mentioned. I would not want to overstress this contribution of the audience to the narrative process since clearly it is limited by the serial's own parameters. Nevertheless, it seems to me that the kind of work the audience can do has greater potential in the serial than in other narrative forms.

I have said that the people involved in producing serials pride themselves on being accurate about details of a serial's past; we have also seen that they cannot *assume* knowledge on the audience's part and therefore do not often refer to the past. This means in effect that serials actually provide more room to move within plots – though not within the established world of the serial – than series or plays where the action takes place in a single broadcast. For example, characters can disappear with vague explanations of holidays or visits to relatives or even no explanation at all. Strands of the plot which are not cleared up are lost in the establishment of the next stories, and any puzzled viewer/listener wonders if s/he missed an episode or two. Thus one week Sandy Richardson in *Crossroads* is being begged to return from London for the sake of the motel; the next week he (and everyone else) talks about his return as being caused by his failure in London. The two explana-

tions are not put together as a complex whole; they are used as mutually exclusive motivations – one working for last week’s stories, the other offering possibilities for this week. *Crossroads*, in fact, uses this device of jumping across lacunae in the narrative by turning the audience’s attention elsewhere more frequently than most serials, but it is used by them all.

Although the accumulated past is important to a serial, one could also say that the ability to ‘forget’ what has happened in the serial’s past is equally crucial. If the serial had to carry the heavy weight of its own past it would not be able to carry on. The stories would grind to a halt while the implications of past events were explained to new viewers/listeners. Instead, the serials, while clearly accepting, as in the case of Grace Archer’s death, that they have a past, cannot be bound by it. A rigid adherence to their own history is rejected in favour of a more flexible approach which allows serials to function in the present.

In this section, I have stressed the way in which the formal narrative strategies of the serial differ from those of the complete film or episode in a series and I have examined the use of the cliffhanger and the serial’s past. These strategies are important because they allow the serial, while always operating within the familiar format, to provide sufficient variation to prevent a sense of complete repetition. Thus, the past can be actively used within a story, be fleetingly referred to, or remain a potential resource for the audience. The serial may break at a point of unfinished action or high tension, at moments of no particular dramatic importance or at moments of temporary resolution. These variations are limited but they are sufficient to give ‘movement’ and difference within the repetition described by Heath and Skirrow. The rest of this essay will show that this use of narrative strategies based on difference and repetition is backed up by similar variations at the level of characterisation and plot.

CHARACTERISATION AND PLOT

In this section, I want to study the way in which characterisation and plot in a serial interlock in a way which provides a familiar base for the viewer but which generates enough surprises to prevent tedium. Thus the same plots can be used again with different inflections, the same character can be used in various ways, new characters can be introduced and disappear without comment, the same situation can generate different expectations. We can see how this process works by looking first at how the characters in a serial are used and secondly at how they are placed within particular plots.

The Use of Characters

A serial always uses more characters than a play or even a series in order to give variety and so that characters do not get ‘used up’ too quickly. Although based on one community (the Street, Ambridge, Emmerdale), a serial will have a fairly wide variation among the characters in terms of age, relation-

ships, and attitudes because, as we shall see, such variations permit a wider range of stories. A serial must have a core of characters who appear regularly over the years and who become familiar to the consistent viewer/listener. In addition, most serials introduce new characters for a small number of episodes featuring stories perhaps not applicable to the main characters.

Because the serial has to be comprehensible to both the committed follower and the casual viewer, and given the number of characters involved, characterisation has to be swift and sharp; the immediate sense of what a character is and what role s/he is likely to play has to be given quickly, using such elements as clothes and voice. The different styles of dress adopted by Hilda Ogden, Elsie Tanner and Annie Walker in *Coronation Street* tell us immediately the kind of characters we are engaged with. The much imitated voice of Walter Gabriel in *The Archers* gives us a clear idea of his age, social position and the fact that he is a comic character, before he has even finished a sentence. It should be noted, and this will be taken up later, that the referral point for these judgments is more often within the serial than out in the real world. Thus, it is precisely the contrast of appearance which is important – Hilda's rollers compared with Elsie's hair-do and Annie's hair style, her apron with Elsie's ruffled blouses and Annie's 'afternoon' dresses. We can only place Walter Gabriel's voice so exactly by referring not to our scanty knowledge of rural dialects but to the other voices in *The Archers* – Phil's modulated tones, Jack Woolley's hectoring, *nouveau riche* style, Dan Archer's less comic version of the dialect. In both cases, it is the fitting of a characteristic into the scale provided by the serial which enables us to place a character.

Having commented on this mode of characterisation, I want to group the characters in serials in three ways which I will argue provide the base for their use within the narrative. One can see each character as an individuated character, as a serial type and as the holder of a position, distinctions which will become clear in the following comments.

The *individuated character* is the character marked by traits which are presented as uniquely his or her own. (It is this aspect which is emphasised by articles in the press.) Certain characters, very often but not always those used for comic effect, will be particularly marked by one such trait – Albert Tatlock's stinginess, Joe Grundy's grouchy unsociability, Clarrie Larkin's naïvety (in *The Archers*). Others, especially the longstanding characters, will be constructed out of a number of such traits. Thus, Hilda Ogden is presented as a nag, a gossip and a woman who can occasionally take on a real dignity when confronted with her lot; David Hunter (*Crossroads*) is built up as a man with a smooth, suave exterior which conceals a capacity for feeling real hurt. It is by emphasising the number of these individuated characters that the serial is able to reinforce the notion that it is giving us an endlessly rich pattern of life and people.

The second way of looking at these characters is by seeing them as *serial types*. I have mentioned before that our reference point for understanding a

character is very often within the serial rather than outside it. It seems to me also that certain characters become types within whose range of traits other characters are also then shaped. Thus there is an 'Elsie Tanner type' – sexy, rather tartily dressed, hot-tempered, impulsive – who is also recognisable in other women in *Coronation Street* – Rita, Suzie, Bet (and I would also include Len Fairclough as a male equivalent). In addition, other women in the serial are defined by specifically *not* being an 'Elsie Tanner type' – Mavis, Emily and Gail, who has graduated from apprenticeship in this type to being its opposite. Similarly, in *The Archers*, there are a number of women – Jill, Carol, Peggy, Christine – who are basically the same type. They have different individuated characteristics – Jill's supposedly left-wing views, Carol's business efficiency – but they are all middle-aged, middle-class, concerned, caring women. And in *Crossroads* it is possible to pick out the 'Meg Richardson type' – Meg herself, Tish Hope, Meg's daughter Jill, Rosemary Hunter (before her breakdown) – who are all characterised by a combination of impeccable grooming, a hard exterior and an inward relish of emotion.

The third way of grouping the same set of characters is as *holders of a status position*: by this, I am referring to the position they occupy in the serial in terms crucially of sex, age and marital position and sometimes in terms of class and work. Thus, in *Coronation Street*, Ken Barlow, Steve Fisher, Mike Baldwin, Eddie Yeats, Fred Gee and even Albert Tatlock, however different they may be as individuated characters and serial types, are all, at the time of writing, unmarried men and therefore available for stories centring on courtship and marriage. The death of Renee has returned Alf Roberts to that position while Len Fairclough and Brian Tilsley have moved out of it by actually getting married. Other serials, *Waggoner's Walk* for example, use a number of characters who are both career women and mothers; *The Archers*, a number of male farmers; *Crossroads*, a number of unattached women, including Meg who is always being returned to that position. Of course, characters may hold more than one position, depending on what is being emphasised. Thus Tony Archer is a husband, son and father as well as being a farmer, and the emphasis will clearly depend on the particular story he is involved in at a given moment.

It is important perhaps to stress that these three categories are not exclusive; all characters at all times can be seen as an individuated character, a serial type and the holder of a particular status position. It is the interaction of the three categories which allows the character to be used in different ways and which gives both stability and flexibility to the narrative.

Characters in the Narrative

This analysis of the serial characters makes it possible to see how they can be used within the narrative organisation of the serial. It is clear that while some plots are available to everyone, others will be limited to those of a particular type or status position. Big events – birth, marriage, death – are

used sparingly to give them the feeling of a special occasion. (The complications of several characters dying and/or marrying at the same time could render *Coronation Street* something of a *Soap*-like farce.) Plots centring on marriage or birth are available to a limited, though still wide, range of characters; that of death is available to all, but different character traits will give the event its particular feeling of poignancy, grief, shock or even relief. When such events happen, they tend to take up a lot of time within an episode and, particularly in the case of television serials, are supported by off-screen coverage such as the production of special magazines.*

General plots, on the other hand, are the staple of the serial, the basis of the output. They revolve – in the serials I am discussing – around problems of relationships such as arise within marriages, between generations, in friendships and through quarrels and difficulties at home. These general plots are available to all characters since everyone is involved, in one way or another, in this complex web of relationships. Variety is then available through the individuals involved, which makes for the difference between, for instance, the same story concerning Annie and Billy Walker, Ivy and Brian Tilsley or Gail and her mother. We scarcely notice that the stories are centred around the same pressures between parent and child unless a play on that similarity specifically draws it to our attention. The serial type and status position of a character will indicate whether s/he is suitable for a particular story dealing with a particular relationship. Thus, if a plot in *Coronation Street* is to centre on a spectacular set piece of a quarrel it is likely to involve an ‘Elsie Tanner type’ who is the kind of character to indulge in and probably enjoy a major row. It is important to note, though, that it is possible to add a further element of variety by surprising the audience with a change in position or a character acting against type. Thus, the revelation that Bet Lynch was a mother put her in a position unknown to and unexpected by the audience. The use of characters against type, rather than status position, is more common and very effective. Emily Bishop’s anger, when expressed, is more surprising and moving than Elsie Tanner’s simply because it comes from an unexpected source. In *The Archers*, Joe Grundy’s moments of compassion after Doris Archer’s death have the same ability momentarily to surprise the audience.

Specific plots, unlike big events and general plots, are much more rigid in their use of characters. They are not available to everyone but are limited to those with certain character traits or to the holders of specific positions. Thus, in *Coronation Street*, any plot involving petty crime would almost certainly use Eddie Yeats and/or Stan Ogden (in earlier days, it would have been Dennis Tanner or Sunny Jim); in *The Archers*, it would use Joe Grundy and his sons; plots about show business, in *Coronation Street*, would involve Rita Fairclough. Very often occasional characters are brought in for these specific plots – the manager of Rita’s nightclub, for instance, or a visiting

* Rita and Len’s wedding, for instance, was marked by the production of a special magazine.

union official or ‘agitator’ for stories about the factory in *Coronation Street*. Such additional characters both give variety and increase the number and range of specific plots available.

Two Weddings

The variety which is achieved by this interaction can be mapped out by looking at two examples of the same ‘big event’ plot in *Coronation Street* – the wedding of Rita Littlewood and Len Fairclough and that of Emily Bishop and Arnold Swain. I have used the diagram form to show more concisely the implications of the two events (see Fig. 1).

The diagrams show that the same story holds quite different resonances and potential for future developments. The diagram for Rita and Len’s wedding shows that the potential for general plots is likely to come from the clash of similar types and that specific plots will be available, centring on Rita’s nightclub job and the fact that they have an employer/employee as well as a husband/wife relationship. The second wedding, on the other hand, shows the possibility of general plots which arise from the audience’s uncertainty over Arnold, a relative newcomer, as the holder of a position and a serial type. Nevertheless, we know that the bullying which is an individuated characteristic of Arnold will fit in with the passivity and suffering which mark Emily as a serial type and that a point can be reached at which she will fight back. Thus, the same big event plot, by using different characters, creates different situations and generates a variety of possibilities for future action.

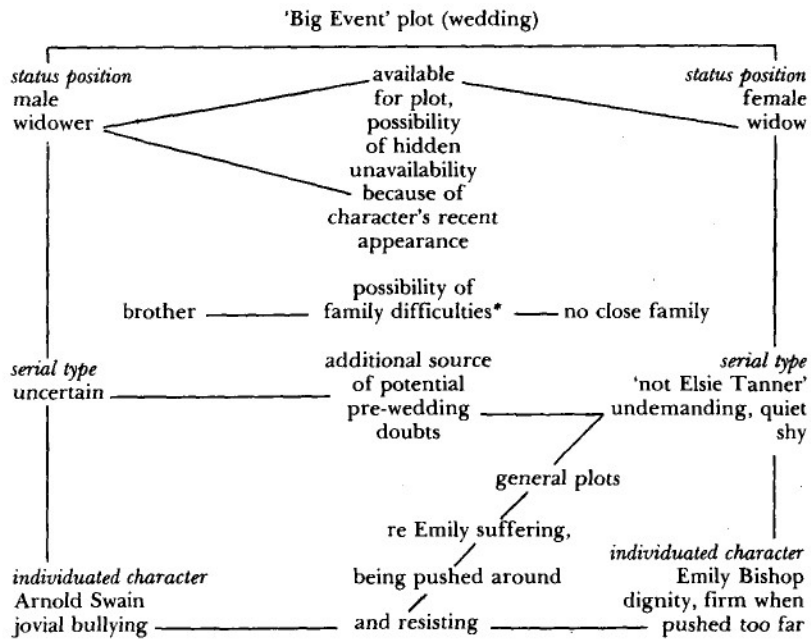
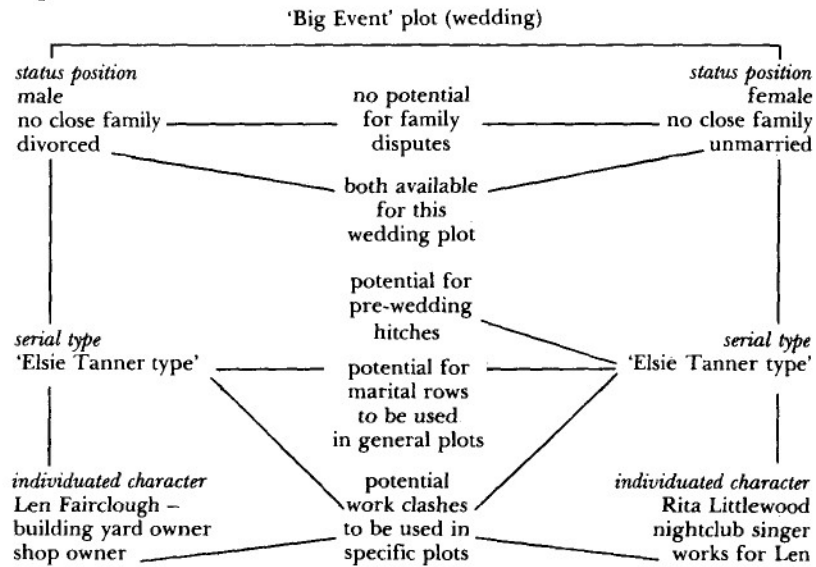
The ways in which individuated character/serial type/position holder fit into the big event/general plot/specific plot seem endless. It is important to note that what this interaction is designed to do is precisely to seem endless. One story can be repeated with different characters every few years; one character will disappear to be replaced by one of the same type and different position or same position and different type. The solid base of general plots, serial types and the more or less constant set of status positions remains while the specific plots and individuated characteristics give us the potential of variety. Always the same, always changing – that seems to be the continual dynamic of the serial and the essence of its use of character in the narrative.

THE ROLE OF GOSSIP IN THE SERIAL

Gossip within the Serial

In this final section, I want to try to analyse the role of gossip, which is frequently seen as being a characteristic of the serial and is quite often commented on within the serials themselves. On one level, gossip helps to create the feeling of day-to-dayness referred to at the beginning of this piece. (No one in *The Sweeney* or *Hazell* has time for aimless speculation about the doings of their neighbours.) More importantly, gossip in the serial constitutes a commentary on the action.

Fig. 1



* These diagrams were drawn before the revelation of Arnold's bigamy.

Much of the gossip which takes place provides the audience with new information or gives more detail about what has been happening. It plays an important role formally in binding together the various plots and the different characters and making them coherent. Thus, a character involved in one story will, in apparently casual conversation, pass on information about that story and receive, in exchange, news about the other plots in which s/he is not involved. The locations in which gossip can easily take place are therefore among the most frequently used sets in the serial – the pubs and corner shops in *Coronation Street*, *The Archers*, *Waggoner's Walk* and *Emmerdale Farm*, Coronation Street itself, the village green or the church hall in *The Archers*.* In these public locations, characters can appear and disappear, as required, in a way which seems quite natural.† The Rovers Return, for example, can present a continually shifting pattern of characters (and hence conversation) as members of one group of drinkers move to another and characters arrive and depart. A scene with two or three characters chatting about one story can wholly change direction with the arrival of another character with a different set of news. Such a setting means that the different plots can be brought together and commented on by characters who may not be directly involved in the action. This running commentary reveals the different moral positions which are taken up by the characters who comment on what is going on – Ken Barlow's liberal views counterpoint Ena's fundamentalist tenets – and provide the audience with a range of perspectives from which to understand the action. In addition, such conversations nearly always move on to speculation about what will happen next and what the characters involved are likely to do. This kind of speculative gossip both encourages the audience to pursue the enigma dangled before it and provides us with an insight into the characters concerned.

Gossip very often has a part in the action itself. Stories very frequently revolve round questions of knowledge or ignorance on the part of different characters, and the decision to tell a character about a previously unknown event is often a major issue. Such questions occur continually in the serials. In *Coronation Street*, how many people should be told about the death of Bet's son? How is Hilda Ogden to tell those who are striking on her behalf that she has got a new job? Should Deirdre Langton be told that her husband has been seen with another woman? Should Peggy Archer be told that her daughter, Lillian, has lied to her about a visit to Ambridge? Will Clarrie Larkin and the Grundys keep quiet about Nelson Gabriel's business venture? Knowledge revealed through gossip becomes, in this situation, some-

* It seems to me that the reason why *Crossroads* appears to lack cohesiveness and sometimes gives the impression of being a set of parallel plots is that it uses gossip as cement in this way far less often than the other serials. The motel lobby does not provide a suitable place for this kind of running commentary in the same way as a pub or corner shop elsewhere.

† Characters who would not meet at home or work can bump into each other in the pub or shop with the randomness of casual meetings in real life.

thing almost tangible, to be given, withheld, revealed accidentally or hinted at. Gossip becomes then not just a running commentary but an important part of the action, and it is almost impossible to draw the line between action and comment on that action.

Gossip outside the Serial

We have seen how gossip operates within the serial, both playing an important part at the level of action and presenting the audience with information, ideas and speculation on what might happen next. I would also argue that, in terms of information and speculation, gossip operates in a similar way outside the programmes in the discussion which a serial generates among its regular followers. The attraction of a successful serial is that it offers us a place, a metaphoric elbow on the bar, as commentator on the events as they unfold and our years of watching/listening make us experts. Such conversations will involve being filled in on recent episodes ('What happened in *Coronation Street* last night?') or on events in the distant past. They then move on to speculation so that discussion about who Deirdre Langton will eventually marry or whether Shula Archer will return from Bangkok is carried on not only by the characters in the serial but by the audience as well. This is not to say that the audience in general has been conned into thinking that the world of the serial is the real world. Indeed, the pleasure of such discussions comes from performing the delicate balancing act of discussing the characters as if they were real people with histories, motivations and futures while at the same time recognising the formal conventions of the serial in which they appear. We are told in newspaper reports, for instance, that Suzie Birchall and Steve Fisher are to be written out of *Coronation Street*. We can use this knowledge to speculate on how this will be done; will Steve be sacked, will they go off together, will Suzie make a success, this time, of things in London? It is this kind of informed speculation among the audience which characterises the response to a serial and which differentiates it from any other television form.

CONCLUSION

In this essay, I have discussed the formal terms within which a continuous serial operates and have tried to assess some of the effects of this process. The continuous serial has to work with a punishing schedule, normally appearing on television more than once a week and sometimes, on radio, five times a week. In order to do this, it establishes a base which becomes increasingly familiar to its audience while maintaining sufficient flexibility to be able to present apparently different situations. It provides us with the feeling of an unwritten future while giving necessary access to the past. We are constantly left wondering what will happen next – occasionally with a real cliffhanger. It presents us with 'new' events which are endless variations on regular patterns and provides a range of characters which is both varied

and limited. This balance of change and repetition is achieved through the organisation of narrative and character, and the succession of the narrative is cemented together by gossip, both inside and outside the text. I hope that this discussion of the serial in general will provide a useful base for the more specific work on *Coronation Street* which follows.