

Culture and Narrative Style

The ways people interpret and retell stories is often determined by cultural norms. Each of us is brought up in an “interpretive community,” which tells us how to understand stories and how to convey them to others. Tamar Liebes conducted a study in which she asked respondents to retell an episode of the American soap opera “Dallas.” The *purpose* was to examine the relationship between cultural background and choice of narrative form.

Using interview *methods*, Liebes assembled 54 five to six person groups and asked them, “How would you retell the episode you just saw to somebody who has not seen it?” Groups were chosen from different subcultures in Israel (Arabs, Moroccan Jews, Russian immigrants, and second-generation Israelis living in a kibbutz) and from second-generation Americans in Los Angeles. Although Liebes expected to see differences in narrative form used by these groups, there were no specific hypotheses about these differences. The research strategy was to let the responses suggest the direction of the analysis.

The research team began by reading a sample of responses. This reading showed three basic types of retellings. The first of these narrative strategies was labeled “linear”; here, the retelling followed a sequential story line. The second, called “segmented,” focused on a description of the personality of characters in the episode. The final strategy was “thematic”; here, respondents ignored events and character in order to explain the moral of the story.

Liebes did an independent textual analysis of the story. The episode consisted of two interwoven parallel plots. Sue Ellen has left J.R. and taken her child, while Pam has attempted suicide. Both J.R. and Bobby resort to illegal acts to gain possession of a child, J.R. using kidnapping and Bobby deciding to buy a baby. Thus, the story was a complex combination of several story lines.

Having determined the episode’s structure, the author’s next step was to examine how each group decided to retell it. *Results* showed that although all the groups simplified the episodes and added subjective perceptions, there was an identifiable correlation between ethnicity and narrative choice. The Arab and Moroccan groups used linear retellings, telling the story in a closed form as though it were an inevitable progression. The American and kibbutz groups offered segmented retellings, focusing on the psychological problems and motivations of a single character, generally Pam. These retellings were open and future oriented. Finally, the Russian group used a thematic strategy, explaining the popularity of the series in terms of its politics. They saw the episode as an example of capitalist propaganda. Ignoring the story, they concentrated on the overall message of the piece. Thus, the Arab and Moroccan groups explained the story sociologically; the American and kibbutz groups, psychologically; and the Russians, ideologically.

This study illustrates the extent to which in understanding stories people bring their own cultural perspectives with them, perspectives reflected in the ways they edit the story and recast it when asked to recount it to others.

Source: Tamar Liebes, "Cultural Differences in the Retelling of Television Fiction," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 5 (December 1988), 277-92.