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## The Sense of Place in *Frank's Place*

Horace M. Newcomb

*FADE IN* . . . words that appear on the left margin, one inch from the top of every screenplay. And because they appear on every screenplay they are common and commonplace, overlooked, ignored. In the *production economy* of the film and television industries they signify merely, *start here*.

This, of course, is the technical meaning of the term. Even when filmic representations do not begin with fades the reader is to understand that it is the rising light of exposed film, a technical process, a direction to the camera that is mentioned. To the production staff and crew, even to the actors, even to writers, both the technique and the technical reference to "Begin Here" are important.

But in the *narrative economy* of film and television, in the structure of meanings we critics refer to as *texts*, the words are far more powerful. They foretell. Translated, they could whisper, *Once upon a time*, or even *In the beginning*. They offer a tale, a story. Most likely it is a story told before, and we read/view from this point only to see how the tale is told this time, to see what new discoveries can still be made within this familiar pattern. From such a perspective, then, Fade in is a powerful signifier. More than an invitation, it is both promise and lure. Still, in this economy of pleasure and significance, of emotion and suspense, of carefully selected and limited exposures to a represented human experience, we tend to overlook the fact that we fade *from* somewhere *to* somewhere.

Where are we when we are called upon to Fade in? And to where do we fade? How are we to understand a term of such evocative elegance? Surely our concern is with more than the top left corner of the first page of the screenplay, with more than technique, with more, even, than the first day of principal photography

when that first page may be left behind in the production manager's office in favor of the first page actually to be shot. For us, Fade in is entry not to physical space, but to a *sense of place*.

It draws, seduces us into a world like ours but different from it. To judge the world we enter too strictly by the one we leave is to risk grave error—to miss the point of it all. This sense of gentle, gradual, fragile, almost blurred entry suggests a bridge to a world only partially familiar, a world in which to see without being seen, to "listen in," to move about as freely as the camera will allow. We are, as has often been noticed, voyeurs. But we are also visitors, for our entry has been requested, by commercial interests and by creators, artists who without us would wither. We are tourists, for we witness behaviors common to us only in the necessary particulars, comparing the way these "strangers" do "different" things with "our" behaviors, values, practices, and meanings.

The somnolent tone of the words—Fade in—suggests, too, that we are dreamers. We dream in at least two senses of the word. We enter a state in which we explore our own experiences, remade, displaced, altered by what lies (and by the lies) beneath them consciously or unconsciously. And we enter the state of our desires, dreaming of better, ideal worlds.

The kinds of places referred to above—worlds, states—and the activities that are suggested to take place within them—viewing, listening, visiting, touring, even dreaming—demand guides and guidelines, demand maps. In this sense, then, after the initial invitation of Fade in, the screenplay can be seen to serve as such a map. In the production economy of film and television the producer, director, crew, and actors are moved about, guided as it were, by this set of written instructions. This is particularly the case because the "text" is never produced as it is on the page, in a carefully constructed set of causal relationships, movements, and purposeful alterations of time and event. It is created, most often, in the manner cheapest, in every sense of the word, with schedules of actors, crew, and physical environment carefully determined beforehand.

It is therefore essential for the producer or production manager to be able to *extract* the physical environment easily, economically, from the total script. So just as every screenplay instructs all participants to Fade in, every scene has its *slugline*. The slugline denotes interior or exterior, denotes a specific location, and denotes day or night. (Beginning screenwriters, in my experience, are taken with the notion of filming dusk or dawn. Such instructions cause much amusement for experienced production managers and directors aware of the difficulty of filming "golden time," defined as much by physical difficulty, that is, cost, as by aesthetic appreciation.) The sluglines thus become the detailed map of the fictional world we enter. The screenplay, dismantled by the production manager and rearranged into a shooting schedule, is remade into a map of the budget required to create that world. This is to say the sluglines can be read in two ways, as guides to the production economy *and* to the narrative economy of the work. The distinction I wish to make here is one between *location*, essential to production, and *place*, essential to narrative.

Every television series is constructed around a set of locations, some recurring, some altering. In comedy, most locations recur, and the production economy is based in this limited reproduction of, most often, interiors. The narrative economy is grounded in the constant exploration of character as defined, revealed, and altered by events that *can occur within* this restricted physical environment.

All locations have some basic meaning, of course, but that meaning most often results from simple associations established in the worlds of our own experience or, just as often, in our experiences in reading, in viewing films, or other television. That is, we distinguish among the "meanings" of the physical worlds of *Dallas* and *Dynasty*, a distinction based on an assumed knowledge of differences between Texas-rich and other kinds of rich. Or we may distinguish among the worlds of *Dynasty*, *The Cosby Show*, and *Hill Street Blues*, distinctions loosely associated with ideas about class and workplace. Or we may distinguish among *Hill Street Blues*, *Simon and Simon*, and *Miami Vice*, basing our sense of different place meanings on knowledge of genre.

In some cases, however, location is transcended. It becomes place, or is invested with a sense of place. The distinction, in my view, rests on the fact that place (as opposed to location) is itself imbued with meaning. Thus, characters can be defined, revealed, and altered merely by coming into contact with place. Events, even those we have seen before, are made special because they occur "here."

Given this generalized sense of place meanings, it is clearly in the interest of (the desire and aim of) every television writer and producer to create a location that can, in time, take on far more specific meanings of its own, that is, to transform location into place. This happened with the Bunkers' living room, with the Hill Street squad room, to some extent with the streets of Miami, and powerfully with the Women's bathroom in *Cagney and Lacey*.

When the creators of television shows choose as their locations places that *already* bear significant cultural meaning, then tailor them to have specific meanings capable of adding or establishing significance regardless of character or event, they have contributed mightily to the narrative economy of the series. They have made it possible for writers to construct specific stories based simply on the entry of "strangers," or on the encounter of regular characters with the rules of place, or on the alteration of those rules, the development of those characters or events that are associated specifically with the place. They have thus modified in advance the production economy of the series, not only by working with sets of culturally derived formulas for dramatic action, but also by making it possible for actors, set designers, line producers, camera operators, directors, and production managers to apply those cultural rule systems in their own work. Relatively few television series have managed to begin with this already established sense of place. *Frank's Place* is one of them.

Many of the chapters prepared for this book touch on some of these ideas, on the specific rules and meanings of places available in this series. My purpose here is to outline a set of relationships among them, relationships that enable us

to understand *Frank's Place* as a set of cultural meanings constructed by the intersection between existing codes of place and the individualized characters who inhabit those places.

### REGION AS PLACE

The South is place, charged with meaning. It is a matrix of contradiction, a pattern of paradox. The region has its own shaded markers, its internal distinctions. Highland and lowland, tidewater and coastal plain, hill country and delta, swamp and piney woods, are inflected in terms of accent and dress, architecture and crop, hunter and hunted, and, most significantly, class and race.

Even in the wash of mass mediation that has rolled over nations like floodwater since the turn of the century, this region has maintained a sense of place. I will even argue that the influence of mass mediation, while surely altering that sense, has secured it. The region has seen itself represented or forgotten and has chosen to recreate itself in the artifice of craft fairs, local pageants, architectural revivals and renovations. It has established its journals (*Southern Living* and a host of smaller imitators) and its public image, the New Industrial-Information Society South, exemplified in Atlanta.

In the latest version of its populist impulse the South attempts to spread its broad, open, good-face-smile across the chin of the nation. But the corners of that grin remain and bear repetition—class and race. So with gentility and genuine hospitality, with relaxed elegance and good food, with a new, energetic public spirit, come the echoes of violence and demagoguery, oppression, and anger.

In all these patterns it is *memory* that drives the impulse of Southern meaning, memory that regulates the selection and application of image and event. Memory underlies the self-consciously constructed but useful fictions. Still, unwilling and unable to escape the accumulated weight of its own past, its own realization of those fictions, a real history, the education of memory, operates to regulate social interaction.

It is possible that with the decline of the western and the related decline of the meaning of the West, only the South maintains such a distinct sense of region as place. As a result, television shows set there gain in a ready-made set of meanings, but run the risk that those meanings are not as widely shared as they once were. To the degree that the codes of "southernness" must be *explained* they are a liability in the world of television. *Frank's Place*, by activating the codes of race in its most basic premise, recalls much of the sense of southernness, and in exploring those codes explicates them, in the particular version of the show's creators, for the mass audience. The show therefore reestablishes, with a new inflection, the regional meanings in which it is embedded.

None of this is meant to suggest that the show would not be as distinctive if set in another region. It would. But that difference would have to be established for all but a few viewers. A mass audience brings to the show its own varied, but alert senses of the South. To the degree that those senses are played upon,

modified, confirmed, or subverted, the narrative economy of the show is enriched.

### CITY AS PLACE

The names of cities clarify this process and add to the riches of place. What would it have meant to have located *Frank's Place* in Ottumwa, Sacramento, East Lansing, or Scranton, in Portland, Fargo, or Brunswick? It surely would have meant something. But again, the burden of definition would have rested on the expository skills of the show's creators.

I have clearly loaded the dice with these examples. Chicago (in a waning Sandburgian sense), Los Angeles, New York, Washington, D.C., we might argue, offer their own compacted meaning structures. But I take it as significant that the strongest set of metropolitan meanings in recent television history has come from *Hill Street Blues*, which simply activated the anonymous code of "urbanness." *Miami Vice* runs a close second, and since Miami eludes southernness this show serves as an excellent example of the way in which meaning can be *constructed* rather than appropriated.

New Orleans offers, by contrast, a thick, dense web of meanings. Many of these have been consciously engaged by the makers of the show. The photographs and sound track of the title sequence present us with one set of meanings. Various plots have instructed us to the existence of others. The show draws stamina from its brew of music, religion, cuisine, custom, and mythology. It can call upon shared, and doubtless stereotypical, notions of voodoo or cooking contests. But it can also modify those notions with special, individualized responses to them and with camera work and sound that break our complacent expectations for the appearance of these types and icons in television comedy.

Moreover, the particular power of meanings specific to New Orleans is directly related to that city's specific inflections on regional meanings mentioned above, most immediately to New Orleanian versions of race and class. The self-conscious history of the city is rooted in the fine distinctions that often appear in the show, distinctions regarding not only black and white, but creole and cajun, white and black creole, and so on. That these "namings" also apply to foods is hardly coincidental in New Orleans or in the show, which makes the choice of the restaurant as setting all the more important. Where else better to explore the gumbos and étouffés, the roux and sauces of racial and social significance?

### COMMUNITY AS PLACE

"Working people don't go out in the middle of the week and white people don't come down here at night."

Tiger's explanation to Frank about why there's no real "night business" at the Chez is an equally clear definition of the community in which the restaurant

is located. In one sentence New Orleans has been defined away from its travel brochure romanticism toward a neighborhood specificity, its charm transformed into significant sociology. At this level a mass audience does *not* share a set of specific meanings. What it shares, to some degree, is the sense that a very special set of codes does apply, but that it will have to learn these codes as the show develops.

Some of this is accomplished rather quickly with the establishment of character. We learn easily that Reverend Deal is a type, and what his role in the community is. We learn that there are specific power relationships within the community, that Mrs. Lamour wields a matriarchal authority of more than trifling import. This sense of neighborhood specificity is one of the intriguing attractions that tugs us into the show's continuing narrative. We want (or should want) to see more and learn more about these people, their place, their meanings.

### SET AS PLACE

Thus the circle contracts toward the most specific, and most unique, aspect of place in the series, the physical locus of the actual television narrative. It is far more precise, more material than the other, conceptual aspects of place touched on above. And for these very reasons it is more ambiguous. We will have to come to know it for its meanings to contribute precisely to our full awareness of this fictional world. But because it is a restaurant, certain shared conceptions and meanings surround and inhabit it.

*Frank's Place* could have been a pool hall. It could have been a grocery store or a record store, a barber shop or a book nook. It could even have been another sort of eating establishment, a diner or a hot-dog stand. In any of these cases certain meanings of place would have been associated.

It probably could not have been public premises of a professional nature, a courtroom, say, or a doctor's office. *Place* is too casual a title for such spaces—and too personal. We can't really imagine *Hill Street Blues* as "Frank's (Furillo's) Place." The very application of the name suggests a shift in the meaning of that show, suggests a *misnomer*. Nor can we think of *Gunsmoke* as "Matt's Place." We probably can't even think of the WJM newsroom as "Mary's Place." Those spaces are defined by their function, generic and occupational. Who would trust a doctor whose shingle read "Marcus's Place"? But a restaurant is given over to meaningful moments. Its menu, its form of service, its staff, its clientele are all forms of expression.

The *Chez* exceeds even this kind of meaning, though it takes a bit of series development for us to understand these special complexities. It is really five spaces, again calling attention to the production economy of the show, reminding us that this is filmed, TV, on-the-set comedy. Any move off this set, outside the *Chez*, to the housing projects, for example, or to the boxing arena or Bubba's family dining room for Passover, calls attention to the importance of the *Chez* as meaningful construct. And within the narrative economy of the series, each

of the five interiors bears its own significance. The bar, the dining room, and the kitchen, Frank's office and his apartment each offer the chance for different forms of enactment. Especially important is the fact that Frank inhabits the locus of his labor.

### STRANGER AS GUIDE

Whatever we learn about these rooms, this special community, whatever we learn about the detailed rather than the general version of New Orleans, whatever we learn about new moments of old Southern patterns, we learn with Frank. His sensibility and point of view are ours. When he encounters an instructor—Tiger, or Miss Marie—we, too, are tutored.

The *Chez* is *Frank's* place because he inherited it. But not one of these rooms will be *Frank's place* until he learns its meanings. Much of the delight many of us have taken in the series comes from the same sense of "being instructed," of learning what it means to be "here." The paradoxical sense of comfort in being guided, as it were, by a stranger in a strange land is fundamental to the structure of television narrative. The close of every episode promises that there is more to come, more to this world than we yet know. In a very real sense the power of television narrative rests in its *untold* stories, in anticipation, in what lies over the hill—or in Frank's case, in what lies in the next room or who comes through the door.

In short, the real sense of place, the sense that makes the show work in its best moments, is our shared sense of learning the rules, the meanings, of the very specifically circled, layered, and overlapped physical and geographical locations I have briefly described. Frank knows southernness, knows New Orleans, the neighborhood, the *Chez* as generally as we do. True, he has special connections through family, through being black. But he has redefined even these things or is cut off from aspects of them that are crucial to being himself in this new place. Incident after incident could be cited to support this view of the show, but two, from the "Return to New Orleans" episode, stand out for me.

The first is the Boston sequence, when the curse actually "works." Whatever pulls Frank toward New Orleans has destroyed the system of rules and meanings that govern Boston. The laws of nature, the rules of gender, the patterns of civil society have all been broken. Frank leaves, then, a man without meanings. When he walks through the door of the *Chez* he's the pure initiate. When Tiger asks him "Where you at?" Frank misses any sense of dialect or slang meaning and answers, with his best fraternity pledge's smile, "I'm right here." One can almost hear the "actives" chuckling, "We've got a live one now." It's going to be fun—comedy—to educate this guy.

A second example of the significance of place can be seen in the contrast between Frank's dream of his new life and the reality of "night business at the *Chez*." The "place" Frank dreams of is easily understandable (at least by every professional academic who has ever dreamed of opening a restaurant). Frank is

in control. Athletic and political celebrities wait for his words. Romance is easy, and thorough. Contrary to his recent experiences in Boston, he is now even able to alter nature. Healing Bertha Lamour with a prophet's insistence and a (parodic) shaman's eye, he makes his presence into a rapturous religious moment. Then he wakes to the reality of a few surly drinkers, a sour cook who turns into Sambo to impress his new boss, and an empty set of tables.

What clearer indicator of *misreading* do we need? Instead of being the center, the definer of meaning, Frank discovers he must relearn everything. He does not know where he is, which brings us to the most powerful sense of place in the show.

### SELF AND STATUS AS PLACE

At the deepest level—the level that adds drama to this comedy—Frank does not know *who* he is. Certainly, he does not know it in this new place where all his previous status and authority are undercut by the new rules. The real emotional hook of the series title, then, is that Frank does not “know his place.” Frank's dream is of social elevation. It's recognition he's after, and affirmation. Property, prestige, presence in a community rich in friendship as well as money; these are the things he imagines as his deserved “state.” The reality of his situation is that being a professor of Italian Renaissance history cuts no ice at the Chez, in his neighborhood, in New Orleans. And for a black man who has given up the sense of status he gained by being successful in Boston, who has given up his place there, his accomplishments mean little in the face of one old Southern reality.

“White people don't come down here at night.” How little it takes to remind us that we have far to go.

But in the face of this reality *Frank's Place* reminds us constantly of another, of the richness of place and place meanings. In doing so it reminds us of how far we have come. It suggests that we can get even farther if we acknowledge the texture of this world. We can learn the meanings of place and community found in the numerous touches that run throughout the series: Bubba's pained journey into the projects; the trickster Deal's lovely self-awareness; a Brooklyn-born basketball coach in Mississippi; jazz and African popular music; a black Tulane quarterback-surgeon; a homeless brother who refuses to leave the alley he makes his own; Mrs. Lamour's ruthlessly precise deployment of her power; the subtle and pernicious racism within the black community. All these things could have occurred anywhere but they are made more important by occurring here. Place is the ground on which these meanings are figured.

In the opening episodes, Frank still has these things to learn, and we have to learn at his pace. It is significant, then, that another undercurrent runs beneath all these notions of place and person—the always present sense of Frank's father, the true instigator and premise of this series. For me, the most highly charged moment in Frank's return to New Orleans is the look on his face when he enters

the apartment above the Chez. He sees his father's *place* and doubtless contrasts it with his own. In choosing to return he chooses to accept this world.

The spare furnishings, the window over the alley, the chair before the window, the prominently featured bed, all speak of a reality far different from Frank's dream sequence. When he goes back to this apartment after his first, disappointing, real taste of “night business at the Chez” he sits in that sad chair and waits for the cat to come, waiting and puzzling over his place, knowing as we all do that his place waits a few steps away. He must sleep in the dead father's bed.

Because this is a television series, we wait to see how he will do it, wait to see how he will come to live here, learn the rules, live the new life. His mistakes will be the most prominent feature of this process, for this is comedy, and misread rules stand as the foundation of most of our jokes.

If we are saddened by the small-minded material decision that has closed off our interest in this world, we can at least hope someone has put a “spin” on the network executives who abbreviated our pleasure—and “we” know what that “means,” because we've been “there.”