

Changing paradigms in audience studies

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Effects, uses, and decodings

The history of audience studies during the post-war period can be seen as a series of oscillations between perspectives which have stressed the power of the text (or message) over its audiences and perspectives which have stressed the barriers "protecting" the audience from the potential effects of the message.² The first position is most obviously represented by the whole tradition of effects studies, mobilizing a hypodermic model of media influence, in which the media are seen as having the power to "inject" their audiences with particular messages which will cause them to behave in a particular way. This has involved, from the right, perspectives which would see the media causing the breakdown of "traditional values" and, from the left, perspectives which see the media causing their audience to remain quiescent in political terms, or causing them to inhabit some form of false consciousness.

One finds curious contradictions here. On the one hand, television is accused of reducing its audience to the status of "zombies" or "glassy-eyed dupes" who consume a constant diet of predigested junk food, churned out by the media "sausage factory" and who suffer the anaesthetic effects of this addictive and narcotic substance.³ However, at the same time as television has been held responsible for causing this kind of somnambulant state of mind (as a result of the viewers' consumption of this "chewing gum for the eyes") television has also been accused of making us do all manner of things, most notably in the debates around television and violence – where it has been argued that the viewing of violent television content will cause viewers to go out and commit violent acts.¹ One point of interest here is that these "television zombies" are always other people. Few people think of their own use of television in this way. It is a theory about what television does to other, more vulnerable people.

The second key perspective has been the work that has developed principally from the uses and gratifications school. Within that perspective, the viewer is credited with an active role, and it is then a question, as Halloran puts it, of looking at what people do with the media rather than what media do to them.² This argument was obviously of great significance in moving the debate forward

– to begin to look at the active engagement of the audience with the medium and with the particular television programs that they might be watching. One key advance which was developed by the uses and gratifications perspective was that of the variability of response and interpretation. From this perspective one can no longer talk about the "effects" of a message on a homogeneous mass audience who are expected to be affected in the same way. However, the limitation is that the "uses and gratifications" perspective remains individualistic, in so far as differences of response or interpretation are ultimately attributed to individual differences of personality or psychology. Clearly, uses and gratifications does represent a significant advance on effects theory, in so far as it opens up the question of differential interpretation. However, it remains severely limited by its insufficiently sociological or cultural perspective, in so far as everything is reduced to the level of variations of individual psychology. It was against this background that Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model of communication was developed at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, as an attempt to take forward insights which had emerged within each of these other perspectives.³ It took, from the effects theorists, the notion that mass communication is a structured activity, in which the institutions which produce the messages do have a power to set agendas, and to define issues. This is to move away from the idea of the power of the medium to make a person behave in a certain way (as a direct effect which is caused by stimulus provided by the medium) but it is to hold on to a notion of the role of the media in setting agendas and providing cultural categories and frameworks within which members of the culture will tend to operate. The model also attempted to incorporate, from the uses and gratifications perspective, the model of the active viewer making meaning from the signs and symbols which the media provide. However, it was also designed to take on board, from the work developed within the interpretative and normative paradigms, the concern with the ways in which responses and interpretations are structured and patterned at a level beyond that of individual psychologies. The model was also, critically, informed by semiological perspectives focusing on the question of how communication "works." The key focus was on the realization that we are, of course, dealing with signs and symbols which only have meaning within the terms of reference supplied by codes (of one sort or another) which the audience shares, to some greater or lesser extent, with the producers of messages.

In short, the encoding/decoding model was designed to provide a synthesis of insights that had come out of a series of different perspectives – communication theory, semiology, sociology, and psychology – and to provide an overall model of the communication circuit as it operated in its social context. It was concerned with matters of ideological and cultural power and it was concerned with shifting the ground of debate so that emphasis moved to the consideration of how it was possible for meaning to be produced. It attempted to develop the argument that we should look not for the meaning of a text, but for the conditions of a practice – i.e. to examine the foundations of communication, but crucially, to examine those foundations as social and cultural phenomena. This was the point of interest

in socio-linguistics and in the connections with debates in the sociology of education (most notably around the work of Basil Bernstein) which was evident in the early development of the encoding/decoding model.⁴ It was also connected to the field of political sociology and notably with the work of Frank Parkin, in so far as his theory of meaning systems which might exist within a given society (dominant, negotiated and oppositional) provided the basis of the three decoding "potentials" identified in the encoding/decoding model.⁵ However, it remains a limited model, in so far as it simply provides for the three logical possibilities of the receiver either sharing, partly sharing, or not sharing the code in which the message is sent and therefore, to that extent, being likely to make a dominant, negotiated, or oppositional decoding of the encoded message. Further, following the encounter with the work of Hymes, Bourdieu, and Bernstein the encoding/decoding model also represented an attempt to develop an analysis of the role of social structure in distributing different forms of cultural competence throughout the different sections of the media audience.⁶

In the more recent period, a whole number of shortcomings with the encoding/decoding model of communication have been identified.⁷ These criticisms concern, for instance, the extent to which the model tends to conceive of language merely as a conveyor belt for preconstituted meanings or messages; the way in which it tends to confuse textual meaning with the conscious intentions of broadcasters; and the tendency to blur together under the heading of "decoding" what are probably best thought of as separate processes along the axes of comprehension/incomprehension, as opposed to agreement/disagreement with the propositional content of messages. Furthermore, the concept of the preferred reading, which is of course central to the encoding/decoding model, has been subjected to a number of criticisms. At one level one can ask how specific the concept of preferred reading is to the field of news and current affairs television (within which the encoding/decoding model was first applied). How one might effectively transfer that model to the analysis of fictional television remains a problem. There are also further problems about the exact status of the "preferred reading." Is it something which is in the text (a property of the text) or is it something which can be generated from the text by certain methods of semiological analysis, or is it a statement, or prediction by the analyst, as to how most members of the audience will empirically read a given program or message?

There are then a number of problems with the model and in particular with the concept of preferred reading as specified in that model. However, I would still want to defend the model's usefulness, in so far as it avoids sliding straight from the notion of a text as having a determinate meaning (which would necessarily impose itself in the same way on all members of the audience) to an equally absurd, and opposite position, in which it is assumed that the text is completely "open" to the reader and is merely the site upon which the reader constructs meaning. This latter "reader as writer" position seems to unite theories as apparently distanced as those of "uses and gratifications" and many forms of "postmodern" theory. In either case, any notion of particular forms of textual

organization as constraints on the production of meaning disappear entirely and the text is seen as infinitely (and equally) open to all interpretations. The point of the preferred reading model was to insist that readers are, of course, engaged in productive work, but under determinate conditions. Those determinate conditions are of course supplied both by the text, the producing institution and by the social history of the audience.

Psychoanalytic theories of the subject

The other key perspective on the audience which has been developed in recent years is the body of work, principally within film theory, based on a psychoanalytic perspective, which is concerned with the positioning of the subject by the text.

Despite the theoretical sophistication of much of this work, in offering a more developed model of text/subject relations it has, until now, contributed little to the empirical study of the audience. This is for the simple reason that those working in this tradition have, on the whole, been content to "deduce" audience responses from the structure of the text. To this extent, and despite the theoretical advances achieved by this work in other respects, I would argue that the psychoanalytically based work has ultimately mobilized what can be seen as another version of the hypodermic theory of effects – in so far as it is, at least in its initial and fundamental formulations, a universalist theory which attempts to account for the way in which the subject is necessarily positioned by the text. The difficulty, in terms of audience studies, is that this body of work, premised as it is on universalist criteria, finds it difficult to provide the theoretical space within which one can allow for, and then investigate, differential readings, interpretations, or responses on the part of the audience. This is so quite simply because the theory, in effect, tries to explain any specific instance of the text/reader relationship in terms of a universalist theory of the formation of subjects in general.

From within this perspective emphasis falls on the universal, primary, psychoanalytic processes through which the subject is constituted. The text is then understood as reproducing or replaying this primary positioning, which is then the foundation of any particular reading. My argument would be that, in fact, we need to question the assumption that all specific discursive effects can be reduced to, and explained by, the functioning of a single, universal set of psychic mechanisms – which is rather like a theory of Platonic forms, which find their expression in any particular instance. The key issue is that this form of psychoanalytic theory poses the problem of the politics of the signifier (the struggle over ideology in language) exclusively at the level of the subject, rather than at the intersection between constituted subjects and specific discursive positions – i.e. at the site of interpellation, where the discursive subject is recognized to be operating in interdiscursive space.

In making this argument, I follow Stuart Hall's critique of the Lacanian perspective. Hall argues that "without further work, further specification, the

mechanisms of the Oedipus complex in the discourse of Freud and Lacan are universalist, trans-historical and therefore 'essentialist.'⁸ To that extent, Hall argues, these concepts, in their universalist forms, cannot usefully be applied, without further specification and elaboration, to the analysis of historically specific social formations.

This is to attempt to hold on to the distinction between the constitution of the subject as a general (or mythical) moment and the moment when the subject in general is interpellated by the discursive formation of specific societies. That is to insist on the distinction between the formation of subjects for language, and the recruitment of specific subjects to the subject positions of discursive formations through the process of interpellation. It is also to move away from the assumption that every specific reading is already determined by the primary structure of subject positions and to insist that these interpellations are not given and absolute, but rather, are conditional and provisional, in so far as the struggle in ideology takes place precisely through the articulation/disarticulation of interpellations. This is to lay stress on the possibility of contradictory interpellations and to emphasize the unstable, provisional, and dynamic properties of subject positioning. It is also to recognize that subjects have histories and that past interpellations affect present ones, rather than to "deduce" subjects from the subject positions offered by the text and to argue that readers are not merely bearers or puppets of their unconscious positions. It is to insist, with Volosinov, on the "multiaccentuality of the sign" which makes it possible for discourse to become an arena of struggle.⁹

However, it must also be recognized that, within this psychoanalytic perspective itself, the gap between real, empirical readers and the "inscribed" ones constructed and marked in and by the text has increasingly been recognized. To that extent real readers can then be seen to be subjects in history, living in social formations, rather than mere subjects of a single text (cf. the distinction between the inscribed reader of the text and the social subject who is invited to take up this position). This is further to recognize that address is not synonymous with textual address, and that particular positions are a product of textual address in conjunction with the immediate discourses and apparatuses that surround and support it, and that the social subject always exceeds the subject implied by the text. We can point here to the work of Paul Willems and Steve Neale who developed this break with the ahistorical and unspecified use of the category of the subject.¹⁰ It follows from this break that the meaning produced by the encounter of text and subject cannot be read straight off from textual characteristics or discursive strategies. We have to take into account what Neale so aptly described as "the use to which a particular text is put, its function within a particular conjuncture, in particular institutional spaces, in relation to particular audiences."¹¹ This is, further, to recognize that the meaning of the text will also be constructed differently depending on the discourses, knowledges, prejudices, or resistances brought to bear on the text by the reader. One crucial factor delimiting this will, of course, be the repertoire of discourses at the disposal of

different audiences, and the individual's position in the social formation will tend to determine which sets of discourses a given subject is likely to have access to, and thus to bring to their encounter with the text.

These then are, in my view, the main difficulties with much recent psychoanalytic work, in so far as it is a theoretical perspective which presumes a unilateral fixing of a position for the reader, imprisoning him or her in its structure, so as to produce a singular and guaranteed effect. The text, of course, may offer the subject specific positions of intelligibility, it may operate to prefer certain readings above others; what it cannot do is to guarantee them – that must always be an empirical question. This is, in part, because the subject that the text encounters is, as Pecheux has argued, never a "raw" or "unacculturated" subject. Readers are always already formed, shaped as subjects, by the ideological discourses which have operated on them prior to their encounter with the text in question.¹²

If we are to theorize the subject of television, it has to be theorized in its cultural and historical specificity, an area where psychoanalytic theory is obviously weak. It is only thus that we can move beyond a theory of the subject which has reference only to universal, primary psychoanalytic processes, and only thus that we can allow a space in which one can recognize that the struggle over ideology also takes place at the moment of the encounter of text and subject and is not "always already" predetermined at the psychoanalytic level.

Valerie Walkerdine has recently produced an analysis which addresses the question of how a psychoanalytic mode of analysis might be developed while avoiding the problems of "universalism". Walkerdine sets out to offer an understanding of a particular working-class family's viewing habits and pleasures (and, in particular, the pleasure which the husband derives from watching the *Rocky* films) within the terms of what she describes as an "ethnography of the unconscious." Her concern is with "the production of subjectivity in the actual regulative practices of daily life" and with the "effectivity of filmic representations within the lived relations of domestic practices." In particular, Walkerdine aims to avoid the common problem associated with psychoanalytic accounts which tend to "impose universalistic meanings on particularistic viewing situations."¹³ Walkerdine offers an illuminating analysis of a class-specific mode of masculinity. Thus, in seeking to understand this working-class man's obsession with the *Rocky* films, rather than simply understanding the fighting in the films as "macho violence" (and thus the appropriate object of pathologization in a liberal anti-sexist discourse), Walkerdine examines it in relation to this man's own understanding of himself as a "fighter," struggling to defend his (and his family's) rights in an oppressive system. Thus, for this working-class man, for whom advancement through mental labor is not an option, there remains only the body – and the struggle for advancement is then expressed either through manual labor, or ultimately, through fighting. From this perspective then

fighting is a key term in a discourse of powerlessness, of a constant struggle not to sink, to get rights, not to be pushed out. In that lived historicity fighting is quite specific in its meaning, and therefore not coterminous with what fighting would mean in a professional middle class household. This is an argument against a universalism of meaning, reading and interpretation.¹⁴

From my own point of view, Walkerdine's analysis is of interest not simply on account of the important "break" which it makes by developing a mode of analysis derived from psychoanalytic theory which is, for once, historically and contextually specific, but also because it opens up the whole question of how we understand the specific conditions of formation of "pleasures" for particular groups at any one historical moment.

Moreover, the idea of the determining effectivity of the single text which has been the cornerstone of much film theory is not simply deficient when we consider the role of promotional material within the cinema. It is certainly deficient when we consider the consumption of television, given the higher level of interpenetration of different materials across the flow of television scheduling. In this context, Nick Browne has usefully suggested a notion of the televisual text which is quite different from the traditional notion of the discrete and separate text. He proposes the concept of the "supertext" which consists of "the particular program and all the introductory and interstitial materials – chiefly announcements and ads – considered in its specific position in the schedule." He thus argues that the

relevant context for the analysis of form and meaning of the television text consists of its relation to the schedule, that is, to the world of television and secondly, of the relation of the schedule to the structure and economics of the work week of the general population.¹⁵

As Larry Grossberg has put it, "not only is every media event mediated by other texts, but it's almost impossible to know what constitutes the bounded text which might be interpreted or which is actually consumed."¹⁶ This is because the text does not occupy a fixed position but is always mobilized, placed, and articulated with other texts in different ways.

However, it can be objected that this new emphasis upon intertextuality runs several risks, notably that contextual issues will overwhelm and overdetermine texts and their specificity. The question is whether, in following this route, we run the danger of arriving at a point in which the text is simply dissolved into its readings.

Texts and readings

The primary issue which contemporary work has opened up in this connection concerns the definition of the text itself. To what extent can we still usefully speak of the separate text, as opposed to what has variously been described as the

"paratext" or the "supertext"? I want to begin here by referring to Tony Bennett's work on the problems for textual analysis highlighted in his case study of the "James Bond" phenomenon.¹⁷ In that study, Bennett quotes Pierre Macherey as asking what studying a specific text should entail. Macherey argues that studying a text involves studying not just the text, but also everything which has been written about it, everything which has collected on it or become attached to it, like shells on a rock by the seashore, forming a whole encrustation. At that point the very idea of a separable text becomes problematic. Macherey moves us toward a perspective on the text which, rather than looking at it as a given and separable entity, is concerned with the history of its use and its inscription into a variety of different material, social, and institutional contexts.¹⁸

John Fiske has called for a re-theorization of the televisual text, which would allow us to investigate its openness by mobilizing Barthes' distinction between "work" and "text." Barthes argued that the work is the physical construct of signifiers, that becomes a "text" only when read.¹⁹ The text, in this formulation, is never a fixed or stable thing but is continually being recreated out of the work. Fiske has extended this argument toward the idea of a "readers' liberation movement," involving a theory of audience reading which

asserts the reader's right to make, out of the program, the text that connects the discourses of the program with the discourses through which he/she lives his/her social experience, and thus for program, society and reading subject to come together in an active, creative living of culture in the moment of reading.²⁰

While I sympathize with this concern with "readers' rights," I would argue that the concept of rights in this context is problematic, in so far as it is perhaps less a question of the readers' rights to make out of a program whatever meaning they wish (which presumably involves a moral or philosophical discourse concerning "rights" in general) than a question of power – i.e. the presence or absence of the power or cultural resources necessary to make certain types of meaning (which is, ultimately, an empirical question).

Jane Feuer has usefully identified a number of the problems which lurk around here. As she notes, from the standpoint of the reception theories on which Bennett draws, the question of what constitutes the text is extremely complex. As she notes, from this perspective it becomes increasingly hard to separate the text from its contemporary encrustations – fan magazines, the ads, the product tie-ins, the books, the publicity articles and so on, and indeed, the very sense of attempting this separation is called into question. Feuer's argument is that this approach endlessly defers the attribution of meaning. Whereas Bennett argues that "the text is never available for analysis except in the context of its activations," as Feuer puts it,

the reception theorist is asking us to read those activations, to read the text of the reading formation. Thus, audience response criticism becomes another

form of interpretation, the text for which is now relocated. If we take the concept of the "openness" . . . of a text to its logical extreme, we have merely displaced the whole problem of interpretation, for the audience responses also constitute a representation, in this case a linguistic discourse. In displacing the text onto the audience, the reception theorist constantly risks falling back into an empiricism of the subject, by granting a privileged status to the interpretations of the audience over those of the critic.²¹

In Feuer's formulation, the problem is that when one attempts to combine this perspective with empirical audience work,

the authors begin by reacting against theories which assume that the text has a total determinity over the audience. They then attempt to read their own audience data. In each case, the critic reads another text, that is to say, the text of the audience discourse. For the empirical researcher, granting a privileged status to the audience response does not create a problem. But it does for those reception theorists who acknowledge the textual status of the audience response. They then have to read the unconscious of the audience without benefit of the therapeutic situation, or they can relinquish the psychoanalytic conception of the subject – in which case there is a tendency to privilege the conscious or easily articulated response.

Feuer concludes that studies of this type are not necessarily "gaining any greater access to the spectator's unconscious responses to texts than do the more speculative attempts by film theorists to imagine the possible implications of spectator positioning by the text."²²

Certainly, much of the audience work discussed here (including my own) is inevitably subject to the problems of reflexivity that Feuer raises. In my own research²³ I have offered the reader a "reading" of the texts supplied by my respondents – those texts themselves being the respondents' accounts of their own viewing behavior. However, in relation to the problems of the status of any knowledge that might be produced as a result of this process of "readings of readings" I would still argue that the interview (not to mention other techniques such as participant observation) remains a fundamentally more appropriate way to attempt to understand what audiences do when they watch television than for the analyst to simply stay home and imagine the possible implications of how other people might watch television, in the manner which Feuer suggests.

In the case of my own research, I would accept that in the absence of any significant element of participant observation of actual behavior beyond the interview situation, I am left only with the stories that respondents chose to tell me. These stories are, however, themselves both limited by, and indexical of, the cultural and linguistic frames of reference which respondents have available to them, through which to articulate their responses, though, as Feuer rightly notes, these are limited to the level of conscious responses.

However, a number of other points also need to be made. The first concerns the supposedly lesser validity of respondents' accounts of behavior, as opposed to observations of actual behavior. The problem here is that observing behavior always leaves open the question of interpretation. I may be observed to be sitting, staring at the TV screen, but this behavior would be equally compatible with total fascination or total boredom on my part – and the distinction will not necessarily be readily accessible from observed behavioral clues. Moreover, should you wish to understand what I am doing, it would probably be as well to ask me. I may well, of course, lie to you or otherwise misrepresent my thoughts or feelings, for any number of purposes, but at least, through my verbal responses, you will begin to get some access to the kind of language, the criteria of distinction and the types of categorizations, through which I construct my (conscious) world. Without these clues my TV viewing (or other behavior) will necessarily remain opaque.

The interview method then is to be defended, in my view, not simply for the access it gives the researcher to the respondents' conscious opinions and statements but also for the access that it gives to the linguistic terms and categories (the "logical scaffolding" in Wittgenstein's terms²⁴) through which respondents construct their worlds and their own understanding of their activities.

The dangers of the "speculative" approach advocated by Feuer in which the theorist simply attempts to imagine the possible implications of spectator positioning by the text are well illustrated in Ellen Seiter *et al.*'s critique of Tania Modleski's work (see Chapter twelve of this volume). Seiter *et al.* argue that Modleski's analysis of how women soap opera viewers are positioned by the text – in the manner of the "ideal mother" who understands all the various motives and desires of the characters in a soap opera²⁵ – is in fact premised on an unexamined assumption of a particular white, middle-class social position. Thus, the subject positioning which Modleski "imagines" that all women will occupy in relation to soap opera texts turns out, empirically, to be refused by many of the working-class women interviewed by Seiter *et al.* In short, we see here how the "speculative" approach can, at times, lead to inappropriate "universalizations" of analysis which turn out to be premised on particular assumptions regarding the social positioning of the viewer. This is precisely the point of empirical work – as Ien Ang puts it, to "keep our interpretations sensitive to concrete specificities, to the unexpected, to history" – to the possibility of, in Paul Willis' words, "being surprised, of reaching knowledge not prefigured in one's starting paradigm."²⁶

Contexts, media, and modes of viewing

The question here is how we might develop a mode of analysis which combines a focus on the understanding of viewing practices with an understanding of the readings of specific program material in specific contexts. There are three main issues that I wish to address. One concerns the adequacy of the traditional model within film theory, which relates the spectator to the cinema text, or film. The

second concerns the problem of the non-transferability of the modes of viewing associated with the cinema to the dominant mode of viewing associated with television. The third is concerned with the need to specify variations within the different modes of viewing of television.

First, I want to consider the theorization of the film audience, within the context of the cinema. Predominantly, within film theory, the subject which is addressed is the subject of the text, i.e. the film. At its simplest, I want to argue that there is more to the matter than the question of the film text, and that it is necessary to consider the context of viewing as much as the object of viewing. Simply put, films traditionally had to be seen in certain places, and the understanding of such places has to be central to any analysis of what "going to the pictures" has meant. I want to suggest that the whole notion of "the picture palace" is as significant as the question of "film." This is to introduce the question of the phenomenology of "going to the pictures," which involves the "social architecture" – in terms of décor and ambience – of the context in which films have predominantly been seen.

Quite simply, this is to argue that there is more to cinema-going than seeing films. There is going out at night, the sense of relaxation combined with the sense of fun and excitement. The very name "picture palace" by which cinemas were known for a long time captures an important part of that experience. Rather than selling individual films, cinema is best understood as having sold a habit, or a certain type of socialized experience. This experience involves a whole flavor of romance and glamor, warmth and color. This is to point to the phenomenology of the whole "moment" of going to the pictures – "the queue, the entrance stalls, the foyer, cash desk, stairs, corridor, entering the cinema, the gangway, the seats, the music, the lights fading, darkness, the screen which begins to glow as the silk curtains are opening."²⁷ Any analysis of the film subject which does not take on board these questions – of the context in which the film is consumed – is, to my mind, inadequate. Unfortunately most recent work in film theory has, in fact, operated without reference to these issues, and has largely followed the protocols of the literary tradition, in prioritizing the status of the text itself, abstracted from the context of consumption.

Second, I want to raise a query about the possibility of transferring any insights gained from the understanding of the film audience to the different context of the understanding of a television audience. As Larry Grossberg has put it, "film theory rests on the assumed privileging . . . of a particular form of engaged subjectivity . . . [in which] the viewer [is] engaged in a concentrative act in which they are absorbed into the world of the film."²⁸ Now, not only must this cease to apply in relation to film when we consider its consumption either on broadcast television or on video in the home, since these provide a quite different context of reception, and therefore a quite different set of subject positions for the viewer. The problem is all the more marked if we try to transpose theories developed in relation to the activity of the cinema audience to the activity of the television audience.

John Ellis has usefully pointed to the distinctions between cinema and television, in terms of their different regimes of representation, of vision, and of reception. Ellis attempts to sketch out cinema and television as particular social forms of organization of meaning, for particular forms of spectator attention. He argues that broadcast TV has developed distinctive aesthetic forms to suit the circumstances within which it is used. The viewer is cast as someone who has the TV switched on, but is giving it very little attention – a casual viewer relaxing at home in the midst of a family group. Attention has to be solicited and grasped segment by segment. Hence, Ellis argues, the amount of self-promotion that each broadcast TV channel does for itself, the amount of direct address that occurs, and the centrality given to sound in television broadcasting. As Ellis puts it "sound draws the attention of the look when it has wandered away."²⁹

Ien Ang has noted that what is particularly interesting here is the way in which Ellis treats the aesthetic modes developed by television, not as neutral or arbitrary forms, but as rhetorical strategies to attract viewers. In short, he offers the beginnings of a rhetoric of television. However, in relation to the third issue noted in the introduction to this section, the need to specify variations in the different modes of viewing television, Ien Ang points out that while Ellis' work is of considerable interest in this respect, he

continually speaks about broadcast TV in general and tends to give a generalised account of televisual discourse which is consciously abstracted from the specificities of different programme categories, modes of representation and types of (direct) address. (. . . [thus Ellis'] preoccupation seems to be with what *unifies* televisual discourse into one "specific signifying practice"). As a result, it becomes difficult to theorise the possibility that television constructs more than one position for the viewer.³⁰

Ien Ang goes on to argue that the point is that

different types of involvement, based upon different ideological positions can be constructed by televisual discourse. It does not make sense, therefore, to see televisual discourse as a basically unified text without . . . internal contradictions . . . [rather] . . . we should analyse the different positions offered to viewers in relation to different parts of the televisual discourse.³¹

In summary, the key issues identified here are the status of the text; the relation of text and context; the usefulness of an expanded notion of the "supertext"; the problem of "medium specific" modes of viewing; and the further problem of variations of modes of viewing within any one medium. It is this set of concerns, I want to argue, which provide the framework within which one must, in fact, consider the particular readings which specific audiences make of individual programs.

Genres, pleasures and the politics of consumption

One of the most important developments in recent work in this field has been the shift from the concern with interpretations of specific films or television programs to the study of patterns of engagement with different types or genres of material. What is at issue here is how we can begin to understand the particular pleasures which particular types (or genres) of material seem to offer to particular audiences in specific social situations. In this respect, Janice Radway offers what I would regard as an exemplary proposal for the appropriate mode of analysis. As she puts it

a good cultural analysis of the romance ought to specify not only how the women understand the novels themselves but also how they comprehend the very act of picking up a book in the first place. The analytic focus must shift from the text itself, taken in isolation, to the complex social event of reading.³²

I will return later to this theme, in discussing the need to combine analysis of viewing contexts and modes of viewing with the analysis of specific readings, but first I want to focus on the issue of how popular taste and popular pleasures can be understood. From my own perspective, the most interesting question is that of why particular types of material are particularly attractive to specific segments of the audience. The key reference, most obviously, is to the work of Pierre Bourdieu on patterns of taste, and the distribution of these patterns within different segments of a society.³³ The issue is how best to understand the "fit" between particular cultural forms and particular patterns of taste.

In an earlier period, Barthes suggested that what was needed was an aesthetic based on the pleasures of the consumer. My own argument is that the critical issue is, in fact, the analysis of the particular pleasures of specific audience groups rather than any abstract concern with the nature of "Pleasure" as such. To pursue the latter route would be to risk replicating all the difficulties encountered by the attempt to develop a theory of "the subject in general" in so far as all specific instances of pleasure in all their various forms would be unhelpfully subsumed within the general theory, as mere "replays" of a universalized psychic mechanism.

Here, in fact, it seems quite possible that we have much to learn from the commercial world. In the context of the proliferation of channels and the much heralded advent of "narrow casting," the commercial world has been fast to identify the issue of audience segmentation as one of the keys to the successful pursuit of profit. It is of some considerable interest that, within the realm of British television it was, as Ian Connell has argued, undoubtedly the commercial channel, ITV, which "led the way in making connection with and expressing popular structures of feeling."³⁴ As Connell argues, by its very logic a commercial station is bound to attempt to meet the tastes and needs of its audience more directly than any station (of a left- or right-wing political persuasion) which takes a more paternalist attitude toward its audience.

There are, evidently, a number of political difficulties running through these debates, as has been well evidenced in Britain certainly by the debates between Ian Connell and Nicholas Garnham concerning the question of commercial television, popular taste, and public broadcasting.³⁵ These same political difficulties have also been brought into focus in another context, in the debates between writers such as Jane Root and Kathy Myers,³⁶ who have attempted to analyse the specific forms of pleasure which are offered to consumers (and particularly to women) – as against those such as Judith Williamson³⁷ who argue that the project of attempting to understand popular pleasures continually runs the risk of ending up as an uncritical perspective which simply endorses popular tastes because they are popular.

In a similar vein to Williamson, Tania Modleski has also recently argued that we face a danger of "collusion" between "mass culture critics" and "consumer society." Modleski's argument is that

the insight that audiences are not completely manipulated, but may appropriate mass cultural artefacts for their own purposes, has been carried so far that it would seem that mass culture is no longer a problem for some "marxist" critics If the problem with some of the work of the Frankfurt School was that its members were too far outside the culture they examined, critics today seem to have the opposite problem: immersed in their culture, half in love with their subject, they sometimes seem unable to achieve the proper critical distance from it. As a result, they may unwittingly wind up writing apologies for mass culture and embracing its ideology.³⁸

Modleski claims that the stress on the "active" role of the audience/consumer has been carried too far. However, she is also concerned that the very activity of studying audiences may somehow turn out to be a form of "collaborating with the (mass culture) industry." More fundamentally, she quotes, with approval, Terry Eagleton's comments to the effect that a socialist criticism "is not primarily concerned with the consumers' revolution. Its task is to take over the means of production."³⁹

It seems that, from Modleski's point of view, empirical methods for the study of audiences are assumed to be "tainted" simply because many of them have been and are used within the realms of commercial market research. Moreover, in her use of Eagleton's quote, she finally has recourse to a traditional mode of classical Marxist analysis, the weakness of which is precisely its "blindspot" in relation to issues of consumption – and, indeed, its tendency to prioritize the study of "production" to the exclusion of the study of all other levels of the social formation. The problem is that production is only brought to fruition in the spheres of circulation and exchange – to that extent, the study of consumption is, I would argue, essential to a full understanding of production.

I want to argue that the critical (or "political") judgment which we might wish to make on the popularity of *Dallas* or any other commercial product is a quite

different matter from the need to understand its popularity. The functioning of taste, and indeed of ideology, has to be understood as a process in which the commercial world succeeds in producing objects, programs (and consumer goods), which do connect with the lived desires of popular audiences. To fail to understand exactly how this works is, in my own view, not only academically retrograde but also politically suicidal. As Terry Lovell has argued, goods which are produced for profit can only, in fact, acquire an exchange value if they also have a use value to those who consume them. As Lovell puts it:

the commodities in question – films, books, television programs, etc. – have different use values for the individuals who purchase them than they have for the capitalists who produce and sell them, and in turn, for capitalism as a whole. We may assume that people do not purchase these cultural artefacts in order to expose themselves to bourgeois ideology . . . but to satisfy a variety of different wants, which can only be guessed at in the absence of analysis and investigation. There is no guarantee that the use value of the cultural object for its purchaser will even be compatible with its utility to capitalism as bourgeois ideology, and therefore no guarantee that it will in fact secure “the ideological effect.”⁴⁰

Popular forms: soap opera and American culture

I want now to move on, within this general framework, to look in a little more detail at two particular areas of work on the question of the “fit” between particular types (or genres) of programming and particular types of audiences. These two areas are, first, the study of soap opera in relation to a feminine audience and, second, the study of “American culture,” American fictional programming (and *Dallas* as a particular instance), in relation to non-American audiences.

In relation to the study of soap opera, the body of work developed by writers such as Tania Modleski, Dorothy Hobson, Jen Ang, Charlotte Brunson, Janice Radway, Ellen Seiter *et al.*, and Ann Gray is now extensive and I shall not comment here in detail on it.⁴¹ However, I would argue that what is most interesting about it is precisely the concern to understand how and why it is that this specific variety of programming is found to be particularly pleasurable by women. Whether one locates that pleasure in the homology between the narrative style of the programming and the constantly interrupted and cyclical nature of many women’s domestic work-time, or whether one locates the issue centrally around the “fit” between particular feminine forms of social and cultural competence and the particular focus of these texts on the complexities of human relations, the mode of inquiry is, to my mind, exemplary in so far as it takes seriously, and is concerned to investigate in detail, the specific types of pleasures which this particular type of programming offers to a distinct category of viewers.

Jen Ang draws on Pierre Bourdieu’s notion that popular pleasures are characterized by an immediate emotional or sensual involvement in the object of pleasure (i.e. the possibility of identification) so that popular pleasure is first and foremost a pleasure of recognition.⁴² As Ang says, the question is what do *Dallas* lovers recognize in *Dallas*, and how and why does that pleasure work? Clearly, one part of that identification, for a feminine audience, must be the way in which soap operas do give expression to the contradictions of patriarchy. Thus, even if the women within these narratives cannot resolve their problems, given the structure in which they operate, minimally these are programs in which those problems are recognized and validated. However, these forms of identification themselves are clearly variable. Some soap operas clearly work on a level of empirical realism, in so far as the characters within them are presented as living in situations comparable to those of significant numbers of their audiences (*Brookside* in the UK). In other cases, like *Dallas*, as Ang argues, the realism need not be of an empirical kind. The stories can be recognized as realistic at an emotional level, rather than at a literal or denotative level. As Ang puts it “what is recognized as real is not knowledge of the world, but is subjective experience of the world: a ‘structure of feeling.’”⁴³ As she suggests, it would seem to be this “tragic structure of feeling” in soap opera which, for many women, is what is recognized and is that with which they can identify.

However, *Dallas* can also provide us with a useful bridge to the second theme noted above. This is to focus on *Dallas* not so much as a soap opera but as “yet more evidence of the threat posed by American style commercial culture against ‘authentic’ national cultures and identities . . . i.e. *Dallas* as the symbol of American cultural imperialism.”⁴⁴ Here the issue becomes not so much one of gender but one of how *Dallas* “works” for non-American audiences, i.e. how and why it can be pleasurable for a whole range of audiences outside of America and indeed, outside of the First World. In this context the most important work is that which has been conducted by Elihu Katz and Tamar Liebes on international readings of *Dallas*.⁴⁵ Their project was designed to investigate how it is that US commercial culture can be so popular throughout the world – how it is that such a variety of international audiences can attend to it and indeed seem enthusiastic about it. In short, the issue is, what is it about *Dallas* that is compatible with the lives of its variously cultured viewers? How is this compatibility expressed? Or, negatively, when and where does the program not work? One of the key issues which Katz and Liebes have been concerned to investigate is the way in which certain levels of the program might be expected to be universally understood (for instance the universality of family conflict) whereas decodings of other levels of the program might be expected to vary by social category of viewer, either in terms of nationality, ethnicity, class, or sex. The broad framework within which this project was initially conceived has allowed questions to be asked such as whether the “meaning” of the program is to be found in the genre, in the interactions of the characters, in the moral issues as embodied in these characters,

or in the narrative form. As Tamar Liebes herself has written, this research project has not been aimed at "attempting to demonstrate effect, but rather . . . to investigate those processes that are prerequisite to any possible effect, namely, understanding, interpretation and evaluation . . . i.e. to address the question of how American films and television programs can cross cultural and linguistic frontiers."⁴⁶

Their research has thrown up a number of examples of how community members from a variety of ethnic origins negotiate the meanings of the program by confronting the text with their own traditions and their own experience. Moreover, this research has illustrated the important function which programs of this type can serve for viewers in providing them with an "occasion" or forum in which to debate issues of concern to them. As Katz and Liebes have shown, this is not a process which simply goes on in a reflective manner, after the event of program transmission – rather the viewing process itself is likely to include ongoing comment, and indeed debate along these lines. Of further, substantial, interest is the material which the research has produced, not simply in terms of differential interpretations or evaluations of this or that program item, but in relation to the different "angles of vision" (for instance, the distinction between poetic and referential readings) which different groups bring to the program.⁴⁷

In the British context, where the very phrase "wall to wall *Dallas*" has come to represent the notion of television at its very (and quintessentially American) worst, this kind of precise investigation of the specific meaning of the program in different contexts is to be particularly welcomed. What I want to briefly explore now is a further set of issues, within this debate, about the way in which "glossy" American series are held to have "invaded" European culture.

I want to try to relate the argument about cultural imperialism back to the issues raised earlier concerning popular taste, but now from a different perspective. The idea that English or European "high culture" is in danger of being swamped by a relentless deluge of "Americana" is not new. In the British context Dick Hebdige traces these fears back to at least the 1930s, when writers as different as the conservative Evelyn Waugh and the socialist George Orwell were united by a fascinated loathing for modern architecture, holiday camps, advertising, fast food, plastics, and, of course, chewing gum.⁴⁸ To both Waugh and Orwell, these were the images of the "soft," enervating, "easy life" which threatened to smother British cultural identity. By the 1950s, the battle lines in this debate were drawn – real working-class culture, quality, and taste on one side; the ersatz blandishment of soft disposable commodities, streamlined cars, rock and roll, crime and promiscuity on the other. As Hebdige says, when anything American was sighted, it tended to be interpreted – at least by those working in the context of education or professional cultural criticism – as the "beginning of the end." Hebdige describes how the images of crime, disaffected youth, urban crisis, and spiritual drift became "anchored together around popular American commodities, fixing a chain of associations which has become thoroughly sedimented in British common-sense."⁴⁹ Thus, in particular, American

food became a standard metaphor for declining standards. The very notion of the Americanization of television came to stand for a series of associations: commercialization, banality, and the destruction of traditional values.

The debate which Hebdige opens up here goes back centrally to Richard Hoggart's work on *The Uses of Literacy*.⁵⁰ Hoggart's book is a detailed appreciation of traditional working-class community life, coupled with a critique of the "homogenizing" impact of American culture on these communities. According to Hoggart, authentic working-class life was being destroyed by the "hollow brightness," the "shiny barbarism," and "spiritual decay" of imported American culture. This lamentation on the deleterious effects of Americanization was, and continues to be, advanced from the left just as much as from the right of the political spectrum. However, Hebdige's central point is that these American products – streamlined, plastic, and glamorous – were precisely those which appealed to substantial sections of a British working-class audience (and, in television terms, were related to the same dynamics of popular taste which lay behind the mass desertion of the working-class audience toward commercial television when it began to be broadcast in the UK in the 1950s). While, from the paternalistic point of view of the upholders of "traditional British values," these American imported products constituted "a chromium hoard bearing down on us," for a popular audience, Hebdige argues, they constituted a space in which oppositional meanings (in relation to dominant traditions of British culture) could be negotiated and expressed.

I would note a number of connections in this respect. First, the point which Hebdige develops about the appeal of American culture to disadvantaged groups within another society is paralleled by Ien Ang's findings concerning the nature of the pleasures offered by American-style commercial programming to working-class audiences in Holland.⁵¹ Second, the work which Tim Blanchard has done in Britain, analysing the differential preferences of various categories of teenagers for different types of television programs, adds some further support to the argument.⁵² He identified a pattern among the young people he interviewed in which black English teenagers had a particularly high regard for American programming; this is by no means simply to do with the fact that there are more black characters in American shows, but is closely related to Hebdige's argument about the subversive appeals of certain types of "vulgar" commercial products for subordinated groups.

In concluding this section, I would also like to add one more twist to the story. The images which Orwell and Hoggart use to characterize the damaging effects of American popular culture have a recurring theme: the "feminization" of the authentic muscle and masculinity of the British industrial working class, which they saw as under attack from an excess of Americana – characterized essentially by passivity, leisure, and domesticity, warm water baths, sun bathing, and the "easy life." When the discussion of American programming is combined with the discussion of programming in the form of soap opera, principally understood as a feminine form in itself, we are clearly, from Hoggart's or Orwell's position,

dealing with the lowest of the low, or as Charlotte Brunson has characterized it "the trashiest trash."⁵³ Audience research which can help us begin to unpick the threads which lie tangled behind this particular conundrum would seem to be of particular value.

Television and everyday life: the context of viewing

One of the most important advances in recent audience work has been the growing recognition of the importance of the context of viewing. In the case of television this is a recognition of the domestic context. Of necessity, once one recognizes the domestic, one moves rapidly toward questions of gender, given the significance of gender in contemporary modes of domestic organization. I will return to this point, but for the moment, let us begin by noting, with Ien Ang that

an audience does not merely consist of the aggregate of viewers of a specific program, it should also be conceived of as engaging in the practice of watching television as such . . . so decodings must be seen as embedded in a general practice of television viewing.⁵⁴

In this connection, Thomas Lindlof and Paul Traudt have argued that

much TV audience research has concentrated on questions of why to the exclusion of what and how. Scholars have attempted to describe the causes and consequences of television viewing without an adequate understanding of what it is and how it gets done.

As they argue, "in order for many of the central theoretical and policy questions to be satisfactorily framed, let alone answered, a number of prerequisite questions concerning what the act of television viewing entails . . . need to be posed and investigated."⁵⁵ This is not, by any means, to return to any abstracted notion of the specificity of the medium of television, or even the specificity of television viewing as such, as if that itself were an invariable and homogeneous category. However, it is, first of all, necessary to distinguish television viewing as a practice from, for instance, cinema viewing, or indeed, from the viewing of video.

As Larry Grossberg argues,

the very force and impact of any medium changes significantly as it is moved from one context to another (a bar, a theatre, the living room, the bedroom, the beach, a rock concert . . .). Each medium is then a mobile term taking shape as it situates itself . . . within the rest of our lives . . . the text is located, not only intertextually, but in a range of apparatuses as well . . . thus, one rarely just listens to the radio, watches TV, or even, goes to the movies – one is studying, dating, driving somewhere else, etc.⁵⁶

In Grossberg's version of the argument,

the indifference of the media displaces the problematic of cultural theory from that of coding . . . to that of the apparatus itself . . . television makes this displacement particularly obvious and disconcerting – in so far as television viewing constitutes a large temporal part of our lives . . . we must note its integration into the mundanities of everyday life, and simultaneously, its constant interruption by, and continuity with our other daily routines.⁵⁷

As Grossberg points out,

one rarely intently gazes at television, allowing oneself to be absorbed into the work, but rather distractedly glances at it or absorbs it into our momentary mood or position . . . television is indifferent to us (it doesn't demand our presence, yet it is always waiting for us).

Thus, as he argues, we need to face up to the consequences of the fact that

viewers rarely pay attention in the way that sponsors (or advertisers) want, and there is little relation between the television's being on, and either the presence of bodies in front of it, or even a limited concentration or interpretative activity being invested in it.⁵⁸

Hermann Bausinger approaches the problem of the domestic context of viewing from a similar angle.⁵⁹ and quotes the following remark made by an interviewee: "Early in the evening we watch very little TV. Only when my husband is in a real rage. He comes home, hardly says anything and switches on the TV."⁶⁰ Bausinger notes that many media analysts would interpret this man's action as signifying a desire to watch TV. However, as Bausinger goes on, in this case "pushing the button doesn't signify 'I would like to watch this,' but rather 'I would like to see and hear nothing.'"⁶¹ Conversely, he notes, later, the opposite case where "the father goes to his room, while the mother sits down next to her eldest son and watches the sports review with him. It does not interest her, but it is an attempt at making contact."⁶²

By way of a protocol, Bausinger also helpfully provides us with a number of points to bear in mind in relation to domestic media consumption:

- 1 To make a meaningful study of the use of the media, it is necessary to take different media into consideration, the media ensemble which everyone deals with today – the recipient integrates the content of different media.
- 2 As a rule the media are not used completely, nor with full concentration – the degree of attention depends on the time of the day, or moods, the media message competes with other messages.
- 3 The media are an integral part of the way the everyday is conducted (for example, the newspaper as a necessary constituent part of "breakfast") and (media) decisions are constantly crossed through and influenced by non-media conditions and decisions.
- 4 It is not a question of an isolated, individual process, but of a collective

process. Even when reading a newspaper one is not truly alone, it takes place in the context of the family, friends.

5 Media communication cannot be separated from direct personal communication. Media contacts are materials for conversation.⁶³

In a similar way, Paddy Scannell has usefully analysed what he calls the "unobtrusive ways in which broadcasting sustains the lives, and routines, from one day to the next, year in, year out, of whole populations."⁶⁴ This is, in effect, to pay attention to the role of the media in the very structuring of time. Another oblique connection is worth noting here. The perspective which Scannell advances is closely related to Bourdieu's insistence on the materiality of the subject, as a biological organism existing chronologically. This is to emphasize the study of the organization of time as a necessary focus for any sociology of culture. At another level, Scannell's focus is on the role of national broadcasting media as central agents of national culture, in the organizing of the "involvement" of the population in the calendar of national life. Similarly, he analyses the way in which broadcast media constitute a cultural resource "shared by millions" and the way in which, for instance, long-running popular serials provide a "past in common" to whole populations. Here we move beyond both the study of the isolated text, and at the same time beyond any abstract notion of the study of television as an undifferentiated "flow." Rather than having recourse to either of these opposite, but equally inadequate positions, we must attend to the issue of television scheduling and the manner in which, for instance, as Richard Paterson has argued,⁶⁵ the broadcasting institutions construct their schedules in ways which are designed to complement the basic modes of domestic organization, but also, inevitably, then come to play an active and constitutive role in the organization of domestic time.

This, then, is to advance a perspective which attempts to combine questions of interpretation with questions of the "uses" of television (and other media), an approach more commonly associated with a broadly based sociology of leisure. This perspective relocates television viewing within the overall context of domestic leisure. Given that television is a domestic medium it follows that the appropriate mode of analysis must take the unit of consumption of television as the family or household rather than the individual viewer. This is to situate individual viewing within the household relations in which it operates, and to insist that individual viewing activity only makes sense inside of this frame. Here we begin to open up a whole set of questions about the differences hidden behind the indiscriminate label of "watching television." It is to begin to consider the differential modes of viewing engaged in by different types of viewers, in relation to different types of programs, shown in different slots in the overall schedule, in relation to different spaces within the organization of domestic life.

Clearly, if we are considering television viewing in the context of the family, things are pretty complicated. First of all one is not able to treat the individual viewer as if he or she were a free or rational consumer in a cultural supermarket.

For many people (and especially for the less powerful members of any household) the programs they watch are not necessarily programs which they will have chosen to watch. In the context of the domestic household, viewing choices must often be negotiated. Moreover, this perspective introduces, as one of its premises, what Sean Cubitt has called "the politics of the living room," where, as he puts it, "if the camera pulls you in to involvement with the screen, the family is likely to pull you out."⁶⁶ This is also to try to get beyond the way in which television is often understood – simply as disruptive of family life. It is to look at the way in which television is also used by people to construct "occasions" around viewing, in which various types of interaction can be pursued. This is also to get away from the idea that people either live in social relations or watch television. Rather one must analyse how viewing is done within the social relations of the household.

However, a number of points follow from this. As soon as one thinks about television in the context of social relations then one is inevitably thinking about television in the context of power relations. If one is considering the domestic context, then it will inevitably be gender relations, in particular, that will come into focus, within the household. This is to introduce a whole set of possible connections and disjunctions between gender relations and the organization of private and public life – not least, the differential positioning of women and men within the domestic space of the household. In short, if, for men, their concept of time and space is organized around a notion of "worktime" and the "public" – from which the domestic is a respite, for most women (even those who do work outside the household) the fundamental principles of organization operate in a different way. For them, the domestic is not understood as a sphere of leisure, but rather as a sphere in which a further set of (domestic) obligations take precedence, which complicate and interrupt any desires they may have to watch television. Dorothy Hobson's work on the complicated modalities of women's viewing has explored some of these issues,⁶⁷ though again it is worth noting the way in which it is women's viewing which becomes the "marked" category, and the "problem" for analysis – as opposed to the "unmarked" (i.e. masculine) mode of viewing, which constitutes the taken for granted norm of the activity.

In this connection, it is also important to take note of James Lull's work on TV viewing in the domestic context. One of the issues which Lull investigates is the question of "who is responsible for the selection of television programs at home, how program selection processes occur, and how the roles of family position and family communication patterns influence these activities."⁶⁸ Lull's point is that program selection decisions are often complicated interpersonal communications activities involving inter-family status relations, temporal context, the number of sets available, and role-based communications conventions. Here we approach the central question of power. And within any patriarchal society the power at issue will necessarily be that of the father. This perspective involves us in considering the ways in which familial relations, like any other social relations, are also and inevitably power relations. Lull's central finding in his survey of

control of the television set was that fathers were named (not surprisingly) most often as the person who controlled the selection of television programs.

In essence, as Lull puts it, "the locus of control in the program selection process can be explained primarily by family position."⁶⁸ Thus, to consider the ways in which viewing is performed within the social relations of the family is also, inevitably, to consider the ways in which viewing is performed within the context of power relations and the differential power afforded to members of the family primarily in terms of gender and age.

In making these points about the structure of the domestic viewing context, there is a certain sense of simply restating things which we "already know," from our own experience of domestic life. This very insistence on the importance of these banal considerations is made difficult by their "taken-for-grantedness" – as the invisible routines and structures inside of which our lives are organized. In Britain, the results of a study conducted during 1985 by Peter Collett, in which a video camera was placed inside the television sets of a number of different households, thus providing film of families watching television, had notable effects in getting these considerations on to the agenda of public discussion.⁷⁰ No one who saw the tapes could really have claimed to have been surprised by what they saw – pictures of people sitting in a room with their back to the television, pictures of empty sofas in front of the screen, pictures of people dressing their children, eating meals, and arguing with each other while seemingly oblivious to the set, etc. However, it seemed that it was only at the point at which this kind of videotape "evidence" of these everyday situations was made available, in the context of respectable scientific research within a framework of behavioral psychology, that it was possible, certainly for the broadcasters, to begin to take these questions at all seriously.

In making these points about the complex nature of the domestic setting in which television is viewed by its audience, I am not arguing for any kind of "new optimism" which would allow us to rest content in the secure understanding that because so many other things are going on at the same time, nobody pays any attention to television and therefore we shouldn't worry about it. Rather, I am trying to move the baseline, against which we precisely should then be concerned to examine the modes and varieties of attention which are paid to different types of programs, at different points in the day by different types of viewers. It is precisely in the context of all these domestic complications that the activity of television viewing must be seriously examined.

Old perspectives for new

Centrally, I have been trying to argue that the most useful work which has been conducted within audience studies in the last few years is that which has taken on board the questions raised about the flow of television, the positioning of the subject, the contextual determinations operating on different types of viewing of different media, alongside a close attention to the varieties of patterns of taste,

response, and interpretation on the part of specific members of the audience. Here I would specifically like to support the arguments made by Elihu Katz and Tamar Liebes when they note that they are

in disagreement with others who believe that the unit of television viewing is better conceptualized as background, or as "a strip" that cuts through an evening's viewing, or as a pervasive barrage of messages about society that is embedded in all of prime time. Our argument is simply ... that certain programs – some more than others – are identified by viewers as discrete stories and, as such, viewing entails attention, interpretation, evaluation and perhaps social and psychological consequences.⁷¹

It is this kind of close attention to, for instance, the varieties of subject positioning which, I would argue, we need to pursue. Without this kind of detailed empirical attention to what actually happens in particular situations, we run the danger of lapsing into the kind of structuralist perspective which in Peter Dahlgren's words,

incorporates a view of meaning and consciousness ... and the unconscious ... where the subject is essentially dominated by the object ... [and] the cultural text is reduced to an abstract grammar, with meaning residing wholly in its confines. The negotiation of meaning and the historicity of consciousness is denied.⁷²

As Dahlgren continues,

in the heady wake of the structural reading of Freud it seems that the only alternative to the infamous transcendental subject has been a view which understands the subject not only as decentered by, but also created by, the grammatical structures of the unconscious. The unconscious becomes an abstract drive shaft of history, while the individual subject is emptied of any conscious intentionality.⁷³

Similarly, I would want to argue that the varieties of postmodern relativism in which the text is seen as infinitely "iterable" or writable, according to the whim of the subject, are equally unhelpful, if for the opposite reason. The demonstration that theoretically "anything goes," in terms of the potential polysemy of any text, is very different from the demonstration that empirically "just anything" happens when it comes to the actual reading of television texts. Such an approach not only abandons any notion (however attenuated) of the effectivity of the text. It also flies in the face of the empirical evidence we have of the way in which attention, modes of viewing, response, and interpretation are patterned in observable empirical clusters as between different sectors of the audience.

Peter Dahlgren has advanced what, in my view, is a very useful definition of a perspective which he describes as a concern with the "social ecology" of viewing. He attempts to combine this perspective with a concern for what he also describes as the different "epistemic bias" of different media (in so far as each medium fosters a somewhat different dispositional relationship between itself

and its audiences) and indeed, a concern with the differential "epistemic biases" of particular types of television material. In a similar vein, Robert Deming has advanced an analysis of the ways in which specific channels offer particular positionalities to their viewers,⁷⁴ and Ellsworth remarks on the way in which MTV (the American all-music cable channel)

offers student-age viewers a place to stand in relation to other individual groups in the culture ... a social identity ... that positions the inscribed viewer as a middle-class consumer of rock music with enough money to purchase record albums, concert tickets, fan magazines and rock influenced fashion, while excluding and evaluating those who are female, ethnic, working-class.⁷⁵

Thus, as Deming argues,

the position "I" assume, when called by *Dynasty* is different from but related to the position I assume when called by *Dallas* ... I am called to assume a position vis-a-vis those two texts, but not all that I am is so called, only that which is appropriate ... I bring with me, as a Real Social Subject, all my genre-, program-, and culture-specific competence but, again, *only* [what] is appropriate to the subject-text position.⁷⁶

It is this level of differentiation of subject positions in relation to different types of material which, it seems to me, is important for us to explore.

In short, this is to examine the material varieties of the positioning of the subject, not in some transhistorical or universalistic mode, but from a perspective which would also properly involve very material questions about the physical organization and inhabitation of the domestic space within which television is ordinarily viewed.⁷⁷

The object of study, from this perspective, then focuses on systems of cultural behavior and is necessarily concerned with the organization of diversity.⁷⁸ Here one can most usefully look for guidance to that body of work in socio-linguistics which has been concerned with the study of communicative acts, in particular socio-cultural contexts. My own argument is that the study of viewing will most effectively be pursued along these same lines.

To make these points is to argue, ultimately, for the return of the somewhat discredited discipline of sociology to a central place in the understanding of communication. In this connection, I shall close by quoting from Richard Nice who, some years ago, in a commentary on the significance of Pierre Bourdieu's work, argued that

those who seek to expel sociology ... in favor of a strictly internal analysis of what happens on the screen, or how the viewing subject is articulated, can only do so on the basis of an implicit sociology which, in so far as it ignores the social realities of the differential distribution of cultural competences and values, is an erroneous sociology, the more insidious for being unrecognized.⁷⁹

Notes

- 1 Jane Root, *Open the Box* (London: Comedia, 1986).
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