Introduction: media audiences, postmodernity and cultural contradiction

The essays collected in this book have been written in the course of a decade—a decade which has been characterized by irrevocable and accelerated postmodernization in many fields of social and cultural practice. Since the 1970s the discourse of postmodernity has gradually but definitively taken hold of the Western world. These essays bear the mark of this present mood and can be read as attempts to come to terms with some of its theoretical and practical implications. They do this with respect to a rather humble site of discursive knowledge: media audiences. In this Introduction, I will indicate how the postmodern—as a historical trend and as a mode of knowing—has impacted on (our understanding of) media audiences, especially television audiences. At the same time, I will also suggest how a critical theoretical and analytical engagement with audiences—which, as I have argued elsewhere (Ang 1991) and throughout the essays to follow, necessarily involves a deconstruction of the very unity and solidity of 'audience' as an object of analysis—can highlight and illuminate some of the consequences of what some have called 'the condition of postmodernity' (Lyotard 1984; Harvey 1989; Jameson 1991).

In the course of the 1980s, the label 'postmodern' to describe the world became virtually inescapable—that is, increasingly pertinent and widely accepted, a part of popular commonsense. I remember occasions, earlier in the decade, when those annoyed by the hype could still afford either to dismiss any talk about 'postmodernism' as a passing fad, or to reject the very notion of the postmodern as a vacuous, meaningless category. As the end of the century approaches this is clearly no longer possible: the implications of the so-called postmodernization of the contemporary world—economic, social, cultural—have become too insistent to ignore or refute, if still incompletely understood in its diverse, complex and contradictory facets. Dick Hebdige (1988:182) has noted that as the 1980s wore on 'postmodern' has clearly become a buzzword with an enormous degree of semantic complexity and overload. But while many of us have by now become rather blasé about anything having to do with postmodern*ism*—and in some respects rightly so—I still think it is necessary to continue to learn in much greater detail and with much more nuance about postmodern*ity,* or about what 'living in a postmodern world' might mean; to go beyond the many sweeping generalizations and platitudes enunciated about it. In my understanding, one of the most prominent features of living in a postmodern world means living with a heightened sense of permanent and pervasive cultural contradiction. But if this is so, how does this manifest itself in the concrete texture of our daily lives? The essays in this volume can all be read as emanating from this concern with the concrete, even 'empirical' level of the cultural contradictions of postmodernity. From a variety of angles they attempt to clarify not only that contemporary television audiencehood can best be understood as a range of social experiences and practices shot through with cultural contradiction, but also that looking at these experiences and practices provides us with an excellent inroad into what it

means, concretely and empirically, to live in a culture that can be described as 'postmodern'.

All too often 'the postmodern condition' is constructed as a structural *fait accompli,* a homogenized, one-dimensional and increasingly global reality, as if there were a linear, universal and radical historical transformation of the world from 'modernity' to 'postmodernity'. Such totalizing accounts run counter to what I see as some of the more enabling aspects of what the postmodern—as a heuristic category—signifies, namely the very dispersal of taken for granted universalist and progressivist assumptions of the modern. If the Enlightenment project of modernity was based on a belief in the possibility of a world singularly organized around the principles of universal reason, rationality and truth, then postmodernity signals not so much a radical end of the modern era, its wholesale supersession and negation by an alternative set of beliefs, but rather an awareness and recognition of the political and epistemological *limits* of those principles—what Lyotard (1984) has called the loss of master narratives. This prevailing incredulity towards modern metanarratives has been the result not only of having gone through, but also of living with the not altogether sanguine consequences of a historical phase in which modernist self-confidence and optimism literally ruled and shaped the world. The current appeal of the phrase 'new world disorder'—meant not only as an ironic debunking of the lofty pronouncement of a New World Order after the collapse of state socialism in Eastern Europe but also to signify a more general sense that the world today is in a state of malaise, if not 'out of control'—suggests the pervasiveness and intensity of a postmodern 'structure of feeling', to use Raymond Williams's (1977) term. Postmodernity here 'denote[s] a way of (…) living with the realisation that the promise of modernity to deliver order, certainty and security will remain unfulfilled' (Smart 1993:27). This doesn't mean that chaos is the order of the day, but that any sense of order, certainty and security—i.e., of structure and progress—has now become provisional, partial and circumstantial. The postmodern doesn't cancel out the modern, but highlights the impossibility of the latter's completion as a universal project while still having to grapple with the complex and contradictory heritage of an unfinished (and unfinishable) modern, warts and all. In this sense, the postmodern articulates the deepening and elongation of the cultural contradictions which were inherent in the modern itself. Living in a postmodern world, in the words of Angela McRobbie, is living 'within the cracks of a crumbling culture where progress is in question and society seems to be standing still' (1994:22).

The essays in this book have all been written, in one way or another, under the influence of such a questioning of modern certainty. They also aim to question—implicitly rather than explicitly—the globalizing narratives of postmodernism itself. Thus we have to ask: which culture is crumbling, for whom is progress in question, and when/where does society seem to be standing still? The intellectual challenge posed by the postmodern, as I see it, consists of the need to come to grips with the emergence of a cultural space which is no longer circumscribed by fixed boundaries, hierarchies and identities and by universalist, modernist concepts of truth and knowledge. In this sense, what this book—in line with my earlier books *Watching Dallas* (1985) and *Desperately Seeking the Audience* (1991)—hopes to contribute to is a move away from various modernist ways of understanding television audiences, which I believe have dominated established traditions of communication research and which now have generally reached

their point of exhaustion. Why? Because television itself has undergone massive postmodernization—manifested in a complex range of developments such as pluralization, diversification, commercialization, commodification, internationalization, decentralization—throwing established paradigms of understanding how it operates in culture and society into disarray. This transformation of television points to the central 'mover' of postmodern culture: an increasingly global, transnational, postindustrial, post-Fordist capitalism, with its voracious appetite to turn 'culture' into an endlessly multiplying occasion for capital accumulation. This has resulted in a seemingly unstoppable ballooning of the volume and reach of television and other media culture in the last few decades, which can therefore no longer be conceived as an easily researchable, contained and containable reality. The 'dominant paradigm' of mass communication research, firmly locating itself in modernist social science, has become obsolete because its scholarly apparatus was not able to grasp the new questions and issues which emerged out of the 'mess' created by the postmodernization of television.[1] This 'crisis' of the dominant paradigm, addressed in some of the essays in this book, was significantly paralleled by the simultaneous growth since the mid-1970s of what we now know as 'cultural studies', a mode of intellectual work which readily addresses the elusiveness of the postmodern in its ongoing commitment to interdisciplinarity and openness of theorizing (Hall 1986b). Since the early 1980s, it is within the emerging discourses of cultural studies that new ways of understanding audiences, not only of television but also of other media, have been most productively developed.

What the essays in this book perhaps most pertinently unfold—what they 'represent'—is the gradual, uneven and not always easy carving out of *some* interpretive frameworks for such an understanding, which I by no means want to present as in any way definitive or complete (indeed, this would run against the postmodern spirit itself). They explore the implications of what I believe are not only the central theoretical assumptions of cultural studies, but also a key historical feature of postmodern culture itself: that the cultural pervades everyday life and that cultural meanings are not only constructed, but also subject to constant contestation.

Once we move from a modernist to a postmodern understanding, from a disciplinary discourse to a cultural studies one, the very status of 'media audiences' as a discursive category changes. 'The audience' no longer represents simply an 'object of study', a reality 'out there' constitutive of and reserved for the discipline which claims ownership of it, but has to be defined first and foremost as a discursive trope signifying the constantly shifting and radically heterogeneous ways in which meaning is constructed and contested in multiple everyday contexts of media use and consumption. As I have put it elsewhere, any representation of the social world of television audiences can only be conceived as:

> a provisional shorthand for the infinite, contradictory, dispersed and dynamic practices and experiences of television audiencehood enacted by people in their everyday lives—practices and experiences that are conventionally conceived as 'watching', 'using', 'receiving', 'consuming', 'decoding', and so on, although these terms too are already abstractions from the complexity and the dynamism of the social, cultural,

> psychological, political and historical activities that are involved in people's engagements with television.
>
> (Ang 1991:14)

To put it differently, as far as I am concerned, studying media audiences is not interesting or meaningful in its own right, but becomes so only when it points towards a broader critical understanding of the peculiarities of contemporary culture. Not only is it important to remember that audience-related practices only acquire significance, and can only be meaningfully comprehended, when they are articulated with other, non-audience practices (after all, people are not always acting out their membership of a variety of media audiences). What we also need to take into account is the very historical distinctiveness of living in a world where the presence of mass media—and therefore of media audiences—has become naturalized. We should resist what mass media research has generally done, that is, in Todd Gitlin's words, '[certify] as normal precisely what it might have been investigating as problematic, namely the vast reach and scope of the instruments of mass broadcasting, especially television' (1978:206). Gitlin continues by pointing to the 'the significance of the fact that mass broadcasting exists in the first place, in a corporate housing and under a certain degree of State regulation' (ibid.). Gitlin here obviously refers to the close connection between mass broadcasting and the emergence and maturation of social modernity. And while Gitlin tends to argue against any emphasis on audience research as a result of its, in his view, inevitable collusion with the 'dominant paradigm', I believe that we cannot do without some, non-reductionist, non-fetishizing, perspective on the 'audience' if we are to come to grips with life in 'the postmodern condition'.

Broadcast television has been one of the most powerful media of modernity. As a medium of mass communication, it was generally put into motion in the social realm throughout the core of the Western world at the apex of social modernity, the 1950s and 1960s, a time when confidence in the possibility and superiority of a modernity based on infinite economic growth and 'Western' values (e.g. individual freedom, democracy and affluence for all) was riding high. These modern societies thought of themselves in self-contained, national terms, each capable of maintaining order and harmony through the consent of the vast majority of the population. This was a modernity ideally built out of a nationally coherent, if not culturally homogeneous citizenry, whose private lives were organized within nuclear families living in comfortable, suburban middle-class homes. Television, typically institutionalized in the centralized mode of broadcasting (Williams 1974; Ellis 1982), was thought to play a central role in the orchestration of the millions of these individual families into the national imaginary, the rhythms and rituals of the life of the nation. In 1946, an American TV producer could enthuse about the integrative power of the then very new medium this way:

> Picture a program each afternoon with a chef inviting the house-frau to cook the evening meal along with him. Right then in the television studio and in millions of homes across the country, step by step, an entire meal is prepared for evening's consumption. All over the country millions of husbands will come home to identical dinners prescribed by this chef. All this may seem a little patterned and regimented, but just think for a

> moment how our government will make use of this type of program to maintain our economic stability. For example, if the farmers have just harvested a surplus crop of potatoes, the chef in preparing the daily meal can feature many potato dishes. On the other hand, if there was a shortage of any commodity on the market the chef can arrange to work around that commodity over the economic elements of the country.
>
> (Marlowe 1946:15)

This cosy functionalist fantasy exemplifies how the articulation of 'centralised transmission and privatised reception' (Williams 1974:30) embodied by broadcast television operated as a modernist cultural technology *par excellence*. It served to contain the centrifugal tendencies of spatial dispersion and social privatization which went along with the suburbanization of modern life because it could, so it was assumed, cement the isolated households together in a symbolic 'imagined community' of the nation (Anderson 1983). In this sense, high modernity depended upon, and was sustained by, the transformation of populations into regular and dedicated television audiences (see, e.g., Spigel 1992; Silverstone 1994). The dependable existence of such a television audience can be seen as a founding myth of suburbanized, nationalized modernity. Here we have the political significance of the television audience in modern culture—as a rhetorical figure if not a social reality.

For in social reality, television audiences—as historical constructs of populations in general—have always behaved in less than perfect ways; perfect, that is, in the modern sense of orderly, responsible, willing. They watch the 'wrong' programmes, or they watch 'too much', or they watch for the wrong reasons, or, indeed, they just don't get the 'correct' things out of what they watch. Scholarly interest in television audiences has generally been consistent with such perceptions of 'imperfect' audience behaviour. Mass communication research, to a large extent a subdiscipline of American functionalist sociology, has been fuelled by a neverending concern with television's 'effects' and 'uses'—a concern which betrays an implicit ideological connivance with the modernist framework.[2] After all, what theoretically undergirds this type of investigation is a perspective where audience behaviour or activity is problematized in the light of their potential conformation to, or disruption of, 'normal' social processes and ordered social structure. The persistent worry about the 'dysfunctional' effects of television on 'vulnerable' sections of the audience is indicative of this. For example, in the voluminous study *Television and Human Behavior* (Comstock *et al.* 1978), one of the largest empirical surveys on this topic ever done in the United States, four such 'vulnerable' groups have been singled out for special research attention: women, blacks, the poor and the elderly. Comstock *et al.* legitimize this special focus with the liberal argument that '[t]hese groups are heavy viewers and the object of concern over whether society is fulfilling its responsibilities and obligations to them' (ibid.: 289). It would be more to the point to say that the very focus on these groups articulates their construction as deviant from the (white male middleclass) norm which forms the implicit and explicit cultural core of American social modernity. The frequently resurging moral panic over televised violence—a panic all too often accompanied by the purposeful ambition among researchers to find scientifically supported 'solutions' to the problem—is another example of the intellectual bias towards 'rational control' in the 'dominant paradigm'. In

short, in its 'tendency to serve either the media industry, its clients, or the official guardians of society and public morality' (McQuail 1994:296), mass communication research, by offering scientific knowledge about the audience (or, more precisely, about what could be done in order to 'administer' the audience), has performed a power/knowledge function which is particularly characteristic of the modern desire for social order (Foucault 1980; Bauman 1987; Ang 1991).

My own critical engagement with audience studies took off from what I perceived to be the limitations of this kind of positivist and functionalist scientific knowledge, for both epistemological and political reasons. It is clear that there was always something written out of this knowledge, that the discourse of mass communication research effectively makes it impossible for us to think about what it means, in qualitative cultural terms, to *be* a television audience—or, better, to live in a world where we are all interpellated to television audiencehood. Relegated to the plebeian receiving end of the highly visible and public mass communication process, television audiences have been reified as the invisible, silent majorities of the suburban wasteland, subjected to the objectifying gaze of social science and authoritative arbiters of taste, morality and social order. What increasingly became an epistemological strait jacket was the myth of cultural integration which underpinned the dominant, functionalist view of audiences—a myth which, ironically, was reproduced in neo-Marxist critical theory through a rewriting of 'cultural integration' as something *imposed* on audiences by a 'dominant ideology'. In both cases the relative autonomy of the 'receiving end' outside and beyond the mass communicational order was unthinkable: the audience was merely a function of the systemic design, and privatized reception completely subjected to the requirements of centralized transmission. This, of course, was the source of the looming image of the 'passive audience'.

Watching Dallas was a direct intervention in this discursive vanishing act. The book foregrounded the cultural complexity of the site of that receiving end, the diversity and sophistication, but also the contentiousness of viewer interpretations circulating about the TV serial which became one of the most prominent symbols of the dreaded Americanization of European culture. But I would like to stress that the book was never merely intended as a debunking of the 'passive audience'. What the book aimed to bring to the surface, more than anything else, was precisely the heightened sense of cultural contradiction elicited by the massive popularity of this famous and controversial American soap opera, especially in Western Europe. It is perhaps not exaggerated to see the moment of *Dallas*—the early 1980s—as a key one in the slow unravelling of modern European culture, based as it has traditionally been on a firm, modernist containment of commercial mass culture. In this sense, the moment of *Dallas* was quintessentially postmodern!

The dissatisfaction I had with the assumptions and presumptions of mainstream mass communication research was shared by many colleagues. This may itself be seen as a sign of postmodern times emerging. Thus it was that the 1980s saw the emergence of a new interest in studying media audiences, all concerned with uncovering and highlighting the importance of 'struggles over meaning' in the reception process of the media. In short, what these new approaches—discussed extensively in some of the essays in this book—have brought to the attention was that complex and contradictory 'living room wars' are taking place wherever and whenever television (and other media) sway

people's daily lives in the modern world. Indeed, the popular television audience has been one of the key analytical sites in the expansion of cultural studies in the 1980s (for the best overview, see Morley 1992). Mostly, the emphasis has been on how audiences are active meaning producers of texts and technologies, and that meaning production is dependent on the very intricate requirements of the micro-politics of everyday life (those related to gender being one of them). Given the interest in exploring the micro-politics of media consumption in everyday contexts, it is not surprising that there has been a great investment in ethnographic methods of research. I do not need to elaborate on this methodological dimension here—it is a theme I return to in several of the following chapters.

These studies have produced a wealth of new knowledge about media audiences, so much so that they are now sometimes called 'the new audience research'—a label I utterly dislike because it reinforces the misleading assumption that 'audience' is a self-contained object of study ready-made for specialist empirical and theoretical analysis. In light of this pigeonholing, there is a pressing need to position this kind of work more squarely in a broader context of cultural and social theorizing. This is especially necessary because, as they have become more established and more popular, the 'new audience research' have also suffered from an image problem in cultural studies. Most importantly, they have been accused of exaggerating the power of audiences in constructing their own meanings, promoting a 'cultural populism' (McGuigan 1992) where the audience is celebrated as cultural hero. And true, there is certainly a redemptive bent in the inclination of this work to 'save' the audience from their mute status as 'cultural dopes' (Brunsdon 1989). However, I contend that there is nothing inevitably populist about the suggestion that audiences appropriate television in ways suitable to their situated practices of living. John Fiske (1993) is right to stress that this appropriative power of the audience is the power of the weak; it is the power not to change or overturn imposed structures, but to negotiate the potentially oppressive effects of those structures where they cannot be overthrown, where they have to be lived with. The romanticization of this position, often inspired by a superficial adoption of Michel de Certeau's (1984) theory of everyday life as the site of subversive tactics, comes when the term 'resistance' is adopted *tout court,* without qualification, to evoke people's resourcefulness and creativity in 'making do' in less than advantageous circumstances.[3] But the recognition that audiences are active meaning makers does not have to lead to their romanticization. Rather, it can be the starting point for a discussion about both the reach and the limits of modern designs of ordered social life, about the cultural contradictions of life in (post) modernity.

One of the problems here is precisely that the new audience studies have been seen as promoting the idea of 'the active audience'—the very notion that engenders its populist credentials. The 'active audience' has been held up as a rejection of all that classical critical theory—especially that of the Frankfurt School trajectory—has been committed to criticize: the increasing commercialization and commodification of the cultural and media industries. The emphasis on the 'active audience' has been taken to be a refutation of the thesis, derived from this line of critical theory, that the masses are 'victims' of the system, arguing instead that because audiences are 'active' in their pursuit of pleasure from watching TV—making their own choices and meanings—popular television is a site of cultural democracy rather than cultural oppression. But this rendering of the 'active

audience' is an unnecessarily narrow one, too preoccupied with finding a 'correct' critical position about popular television—a position which, depending on your standpoint, would be either optimistic or pessimistic. Such priority given to the need for 'legislative' political judgement—which, incidentally, mirrors a dominant tendency in debates pro and contra postmodernism—is itself, as Bauman (1987) has pointed out, a particularly modernist intellectual preoccupation which obscures rather than illuminates what is at stake in the 'cultural turn' in audience studies. Far from just advocating the optimistic and self-congratulatory liberal mirage of consumer freedom and sovereignty, I want to suggest that the new figure of the 'active audience' within cultural studies can be taken as a marker of the very transition from the modern to the postmodern I have been talking about here. In other words, I want to see the discursive emergence of the 'active audience' as a sign of heightened cultural contradiction in contemporary society.

Of course, the idea that audiences are 'active' in their encounters and engagements with the media is in itself a rather banal observation (Morris 1988a). But it becomes more theoretically substantial if we understand it precisely in the context of the postmodernization of television and of culture and society more generally. Jim McGuigan observes:

> Active audience research and the meaning of television in everyday life took a certain priority during the 1980s. Such research was rarely linked to the complex economic determinations, technological and policy changes occurring around television nationally and internationally.
>
> (McGuigan 1992:128)

Similarly, John Corner remarks that 'so much conceptual effort has been centered on audiences' interpretative activity that even the preliminary theorization of [media power] has become *awkward*' (1991:267). McGuigan's and Corner's comments do ring true—there has indeed not been much attention paid to the relation between the cultural and the economic in most audience studies, new or otherwise, although the same can be said about most work in the political economy of the media (Golding and Murdock 1991). But I want to suggest that if we shift the perspective somewhat, if we take the 'active audience' not just as an empirical phenomenon but as the sign for a particular new problematic, then the apparent gap between the cultural and economic—or that between emphasis on interpretation and emphasis on effects—ceases to be so great. I want to go beyond the view that attention to the 'active audience' is necessarily antagonistic to a consideration of media power. Far from it. The 'active audience', I suggest, can be taken as a condensed image of the 'disorder of things' in a postmodernized world—a world which has seriously destabilized the functionalist connection between television and modernity. This doesn't mean an end to television's power, but a reconfiguration of it in postmodern terms.

There have indeed been rapid alterations surrounding the place and operation of television itself during the last twenty years or so. We know the symptoms: national public broadcast TV hegemony (in Europe) was undermined by increasing commercialization and internationalization; the sweeping reach of network TV (in the United States) was eroded by the advent of dozens, if not hundreds, of smaller, more specialized and localized channels; not only in the industrialized world but also in the

Third World cable, satellite and video cassette recorders have begun to destabilize and decentralize the institutional and technological arrangements of TV provision which had been in place for decades. In short, scarcity has been replaced by abundance, state control by commercial initiative. These are signs of the irrevocable postmodernization of television, which has corroborated a radically altered landscape for television audiences. In industry and advertising circles there is talk of the diversification, fragmentation and demassification of the audience. They have become acutely aware that audiences are not gullible consumers who passively absorb anything they're served, but must be continuously 'targeted' and fought for, grabbed, seduced. This shift in institutional awareness throughout the rapidly globalizing media industries, which intensified during the 1980s, signifies the emergence of the spectre of the 'active audience' at the very heart of corporate concerns. It is common industry wisdom that it is *never* possible to predict the success or failure of a particular film or programme, despite all sorts of safety valves such as formulaic production, use of stars and celebrities, and market research. Here the 'activeness' of the audience is associated rather frantically with its imputed fickleness, recalcitrance and unpredictability. And with the anticipated expansion and transnationalization of the communications industries under global capitalism, the battle for audiences throughout the world will only heat up further as new 'frontiers'—e.g. China—are being opened up.

So the 'active audience' is not just a scholastic academic invention, populist, liberal pluralist or otherwise, but a mythical discursive figure quintessentially attached to the postmodernization of the capitalist cultural industries. In political economic terms, the shift involves a transition from Fordist to post-Fordist consumption, where audience markets are increasingly thought of in terms of 'niches', made up of flexible tastes and preferences, rather than in terms of fixed demographics. With increasing competition, shows are no longer churned out to an anonymous mass audience, but tailored for specific, hard-to-get audiences. The 'active audience', then, is both an expression and a consequence of what Lash and Urry (1987; 1994) have called disorganized capitalism, where the instabilities of the free market economy are built into the production system itself, which has now embraced notions of flexibility, mobility and flow.

The emphasis on audiences as active meaning makers in the new audience studies is indeed congruent with this modification in industry perspective—and some would argue that this is exactly why it is theoretically and politically suspect—but to leave it at this observation would overlook what I see as the more complex, *critical* significance of the notion of the 'active audience'. Let me explain how the figure of the 'active audience' can be used productively to illuminate the way in which contradiction, inconsistency and incoherence pervade contemporary, postmodern culture.

The rapid take-up of video recorders since the late 1970s is a case in point. The popularity of the video recorder represents a key instance of a symbolic opting out of the centralized transmission structure of the broadcasting framework. It also effected a major disturbance of the modern arrangement of television where the distribution and scheduling of programmes was monopolized by a limited number of powerful central providers. Significantly, the VCR was (and is) especially popular among groups who have traditionally been poorly served by centralist, modernist television (such as migrant groups) or is used to watch material generally excluded from the official imaginary of 'normal' social order (such as hardcore porn). What we have here is a clear manifestation

of the ‘active audience’, but of course this does not imply a conscious intentionality on the part of VCR users to ‘resist’. It would make more sense to suggest that when given the opportunity, people opted for ‘choice’: they wanted to decide for themselves what to watch (and thus contributed to the successful emergence of the video shop), or at least they wanted to be able to watch programmes at times convenient to them (using the ‘time shift’ facility of the VCR). In other words, audiences simply *retreated* from the integrative pull of modern television here. The VCR disrupted the modern entanglement between centralized transmission and privatized reception because it displaced the locus of control over the circulation of cultural texts to more local contexts. With the VCR, then, we have witnessed the ‘active audience’ in action. This does not mean, however, that audiences are moving out of the industry’s sphere of influence: rather, that their relation to the industry is shifting from that of the more or less passive audience-mass to that of the selective individual consumer.

‘Choice’ is now promoted as one of the main appeals of television to its audiences and is presented as the ultimate realization of audience freedom. The proliferation of new technologies—such as satellite TV, fibre-optic cable, interactive television and so on—and the ever greater range of specialized programming for ever more specialized audiences is creating an image world which seems to suggest that ‘there is something for everyone’s taste’—a delirium of consumer sovereignty and unlimited choice. As Jody Berland has observed: ‘In locating their “audiences” in an increasingly wider and more diverse range of dispositions, locations, and contexts, contemporary cultural technologies contribute to and seek to legitimate their own spatial and discursive expansion’ (1992:42). The discourse of choice is a core element of that legitimation. Seen this way, the figure of the ‘active audience’ has nothing to do with ‘resistance’, but everything to do with incorporation: the imperative of choice *interpellates* the audience as ‘active’!

What we have here is a contradiction which is built into the very formation of postmodern culture. ‘Choice’ is now one of the prime discursive mechanisms through which people are drawn into the seductions of consumption, but at the same time, because ‘choice’ is by definition an openended, procedural mechanism—it can be manipulated but not imposed—there can be no guarantee that people will make the ‘right’ choices, that is, the ones which sustain the reproduction of the ‘system’. Uncertainty is thus inherently built into the ‘system’ of postmodern capitalism. On the other hand, if consumers are seen positively as ‘making space’, ‘winning space’, etc., by activating their own choice—as much of the ‘new audience studies’ have highlighted—this can also be seen as their final cooption into the political economy of the cultural industries. In other words, the ‘active audience’ is both subject and object of postmodern consumer culture.

Mike Featherstone suggests quite rightly that ‘the much-talked-about cultural ferment and disorder, often labelled postmodernism, may not be the result of a total absence of controls, a genuine disorder, but merely point to a more deeply embedded integrative principle’ (1991:20). This ‘more deeply embedded integrative principle’ might not be a central(izing) mechanism which ensures something like a ‘common culture’, but a decentralized, self-perpetuating mechanism which operates through an endless proliferation of choice insistently put on offer by the market forces of an increasingly global, disorganized capitalism.

One observer estimates that as interactive television enters living rooms in some US cities, consumers will have a choice of 7000 to 14,000 programmes a week. To help consumers find what they want to watch, an interactive electronic programme guide is being developed with which they can navigate through this enormous menu (Clancey 1993). By the end of 1995, there will be some 800 transponders available for satellite TV transmission over the Eastern Asian region, deemed to be the most lucrative market for global broadcasters today. In a region which is described by some commentators as 'TV-starved', the prospect of increased choice is unsurprisingly and unthinkingly hailed as 'progress'. But even here '[t]he million-dollar question is: how many [channels] are enough?' (*Asiaweek* 1994).

In postmodern culture the discourse of choice has expanded exponentially—it is a discourse in which the rhetoric of the liberatory benefits of personal autonomy and individual self-determination has become hegemonic. No longer tied to 'tradition' or the restrictions of class, gender or race, subjects in the postmodern world are now impelled to constantly reconstruct and reinvent themselves; in pursuit of happiness, life is defined as the ability to make an ever-increasing number of choices. The concept of 'life-style' articulates this particularly postmodern predicament. Life-styles are the fluid and changeable popular aesthetic formations of identity produced through self-reflexive consumption and disembedded from stable social networks (Chancy 1994:208; Lash and Urry 1994:142). But if such postmodern lifestyles suggest a liberation from social necessity, don't they also imply a compulsion to activeness, to self-reflexivity, to creative self-construction? Seen this way, the 'active audience' represents a state of being *condemned* to freedom of choice.

Far from being romanticized or celebrated, then, it is in this context that the practices of active meaning making in the process of media consumption—as part of creating a 'life-style' for oneself—need to be understood. I want to suggest that the significance of the new audience studies should not be sought in their deconstruction of the idea of the 'passive audience'—that figure of an older, arguably modernist paradigm—but in their exploration of how people live within an increasingly media-saturated culture, in which they *have* to be active (as choosers and readers, pleasure seekers and interpreters) in order to produce any meaning at all out of the overdose of images thrown before us. Paradoxically, then, postmodern consumer culture requires people to be more semiotically skilled, more sophisticated or educated in their meaning making abilities. As Lash and Urry put it, it

> is not that the inflation of images leads to an inability to attach meanings or 'signifieds' to images, or even the triumph of spectacle over narrative. It is instead that the speed at which we attach meanings to signifiers has and will greatly increase.
>
> (Lash and Urry 1994:55)

But Lash and Urry speak in the name of a too abstracted, generalized 'we'. After all, for whom does all this apply? And how do different people in different places, living in different conditions and under different circumstances, with more or less semiotic skills and familiarity with postmodern aesthetics, actually attach meanings to the images they encounter, whether or not they are of their own choosing? I believe that that it is this

concern with specificity and particularity which has been the special contribution of the new audience studies—and which I hope the essays in this book further expound. The ethnographic impulse in this work should be understandable from here. Kirsten Drotner is lucidly succinct when she says that 'it is precisely the complexity of ethnography that makes it popular: it seems better equipped to prise open for analysis the ambivalences of modernity in its present phase of development' (1994:343).

McGuigan has made the terse remark that 'it is not much help for falsely modest intellectuals merely to record how well ordinary people are doing against the overwhelming odds' (1992:249). This is true, but I suggest that what is at issue is not so much to give ordinary audiences a pat on their backs for doing so well in 'resisting'; what is at stake, and what this book attempts to come to grips with, are the contradictions encountered and negotiated in the ordinary practices of living in a postmodern world. The cultural politics of these encounters and negotiations are themselves contradictory. On the one hand, then, McRobbie is right to suggest that '[a]s the media extends its sphere of influence, so also does it come under the critical surveillance *and* usage of its subjects' (1994:23). But on the other hand, as I have argued above, active usage as such doesn't guarantee any critical purchase, let alone resistance or subversion. As semiotic skills become more valued and exploited within the cultural logic of postmodern capitalism, semiotics itself, with its once pathbreaking emphasis on the constitutive role of codes in the operation of signs, ceases to be a radical theoretical toolkit. As Terry Eagleton wrily observes: 'It would be possible to see semiotics as the expression of an advanced capitalist order' rather than a critical instrument to expose it (1994:3). Here we have one instance of what Drotner calls 'the ambivalences of modernity', or what I have referred to as the heightening of cultural contradiction in postmodernity.

This brings me, however, to one last word of caution. This has to do with the danger of overstating the relevance of audience studies within cultural studies. In this respect, I want to argue for the need to be aware of the *limits* of using the trope of media audiences for understanding contemporary culture. Berland has cogently pointed to the problems of such an emphasis:

> As the production of meaning is located in the activities and agencies of audiences, the topography of consumption is increasingly identified as (and thus expanded to stand in for) the map of the social. This reproduces in theory what is occurring in practice: just as the spaces of reception expand in proportion to the number of texts in circula-tion, so the time accorded to reception expands in proportion to (and through appropriation of) other modes of interaction.
>
> (Berland 1992:42)

Indeed, what is occurring in practice worldwide, under the aegis of postmodern capitalism, *is* the increasing colonization of the times and spaces of people's everyday lives for the purposes of media audiencehood. But Berland is right to suggest that this process shouldn't be mistaken, in theory, as encompassing our 'whole way of life', not even in the postmodern world. Unless we succumb to the fallacy of conceiving postmodernity as a one-dimensional, totalized reality, then, we must remain sensitive to those spatio-temporal instances when/where the social exceeds the topography of

consumption, where/when people enter into modes of interaction (still) not appropriated by, or which cannot be properly understood from the perspective of, their subject position(ing)s as media audiences.

Part I
RETHINKING AUDIENCES

1
The battle between television and its audiences

Recently, television studies has been confronted with the difficulty of reconciling two theoretical approaches, the histories of which have largely been unfolding independently from or in opposition to each other: the 'sociological' and the 'semiological' approach. Whereas the sociological approach (embodied in such diverse research trends as the political economy of the media and the uses and gratifications paradigm) has traditionally been dominant in mass communications theory, a semiological point of view has gained popularity during the last two decades or so, as a result of the limitations felt in the preoccupations of the 'sociologists'. In summary, these limitations concern the neglect of the *specificity* of television as a system of representation, and an over-simplistic idea of communication as the transmission of transparent messages from and to fully autonomous subjects.

Instead, semiological approaches have put forward the conception of media products as texts. The analysis of the construction of meanings in and through televisual discourses is stressed, as are questions relating to the modes of address presented in televisual texts, influencing the way the receiver ('reader') is positioned in relation to those texts. Thus, the semiological approach has attempted to overcome any notion of conscious institutional or commercial manipulation, on the one hand, and of free audience choice, on the other.

However, discontent with this relatively new theoretical point of view has also been voiced. The nearly exclusive attention to textual structures is seen to have created new blind spots: the established semiological approach tends to ignore the social, political and ideological conditions under which meaning production and consumption take place. As a way out, more and more researchers insist nowadays on the necessity of combining sociological and semiological insights. As Carl Gardner and Julie Sheppard have recently put it:

> analysis of any mass medium has to recognise its complex *dual* nature—both an economic and industrial system, a means of production, increasingly turning out standardised commodities *and* at the same time a system of representation, producing meanings with a certain autonomy which are necessarily multivalent and unpredictable.
>
> (Gardner and Sheppard 1984:38)

This new credo in television studies has usually been translated into a formulation of the so-called text/context problematic. It is stressed that an analysis of a text must be combined with an analysis of its social conditions of existence. One important dimension of this text/context problematic refers to the delicate relationship of texts and viewers, theorized by Stuart Hall (1980a) and others in the so-called encoding/decoding model. One of the goals of this model was to undermine the implicit assumptions of many sophisticated, semiologically based analyses, according to which the subject/ viewer of a text coincides with the subject position constructed in the text. For instance, David

Morley (1980a, also 1981) has attempted to develop an 'ethnography of viewing', by sorting out the different readings or decodings made by different groups of viewers (defined according to socio-cultural criteria) in relation to a specific set of texts. Working within a similar theoretical model, Charlotte Brunsdon has adopted a different strategy to tackle the same problematic: her concern is how female viewers are capable of reading and enjoying soap operas, a capability which she locates in the specific cultural competences women have, that is, their familiarity with the narrative structure of the soap opera genre, their knowledge of soap opera characters and their sensitivity to codes of conduct of personal life and interpersonal relationships. In other words, instead of emphasizing the differences between readings or decodings, Brunsdon (1981) has tried to account for the specificity of the confrontation between one type of texts (soap operas) and one category of viewers (women).

Both theoretically and politically, this new problematic constructs a more dynamic conception of the relation between texts and viewers. It acknowledges the fact that factors other than textual ones play a part in the way viewers make sense of a text. Thus it places the text/viewer encounter within a firm socio-cultural context. It conceives of viewers as more than just passive receivers of already fixed 'messages' or mere textual constructions, opening up the possibility of thinking about television viewing as an area of cultural *struggle*. However, the model has limitations. Apart from various problems having to do with, for example, an adequate theorization of the concept of decoding (see Wren-Lewis 1983), the encoding/decoding model can be said to have a quite narrow view of the role of the audience: its effectivity is limited to negotiations open to viewers within the given range of significations made possible by a text or genre of texts. Moreover, this model's very conception of the audience tends to be a limited one. Within this theoretical model, the sole problem is the way in which texts are received/ decoded in specific socio-cultural contexts, failing to take into account that decodings are embedded in a more general practice of television viewing as such. It then becomes possible to question the relevance of the concept of decoding, with its connotations of analytical reasoning, for describing the viewer's activity of making sense of a text, as watching television is usually experienced as a 'natural' practice, firmly set within the routines of everyday life (see, e.g., Dahlgren 1983). It goes without saying that a practice which is *felt* to be 'natural' structurally is not natural at all. However, it seems reasonable to assume that the 'naturalness' of the experience of watching television has an effect on the ways in which individual texts are received and dealt with.

What is at stake here is the way in which television audiences relate to watching television as a cultural practice. What does that practice mean and how are those meanings produced? One cannot deal with this question without an analysis of the way in which televisual discourse as a complex whole of representations is organized and structured, as it is through this discourse that a relationship between television and its audiences is mediated and constructed. In other words, here too an articulation of the 'semiological' and the 'sociological' perspectives will be necessary.

In this chapter I would like to propose that different conceptions of the social meaning of watching television as a cultural practice are at play, and that these differences are related to the structuring of televisual discourse, with its heterogeneity of representations and modes of address. In doing this, I would like to stress the specific position of popular audiences as an effective category in organizing the 'television apparatus'. First, I shall