

Cultural Studies. I hope readers who have come across these articles will find that their development in this book will compensate for any sense of familiarity as they reread them.

And, importantly, I wish to thank those who contribute so much to my experience and enjoyment of television: my family, particularly Lucy and Matthew, my friends, all those who watch it with me, gossip about it with me and who are part, in one way or another, of the thorough implication of television into my everyday life. And not least of these are those who are so often cast as the scapegoats for the ills of capitalist societies, the producers and distributors of popular television. Without their products my leisure would be less fun, my teaching less stimulating, and this book impossible.

I apologize for the absence of illustrations to the transcripts of *Cagney and Lacey* and from *Miami Vice* in Figure 13.1: the fees demanded by the producers were beyond the scope of an academic book. I regret that their desire for additional profit overrode the value the illustrations would have had for students.

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Chapter 1

Some television, some topics, and some terminology

Any book about television culture is immediately faced with the problem of defining its object. What is television? And, equally problematically, what is culture? In this book I work with a definition of television as a bearer/provoker of meanings and pleasures, and of culture as the generation and circulation of this variety of meanings and pleasures within society. Television-as-culture is a crucial part of the social dynamics by which the social structure maintains itself in a constant process of production and reproduction: meanings, popular pleasures, and their circulation are therefore part and parcel of this social structure.

Television, its viewers, and the ways it functions in society, are so multifarious that no tightly focused theoretical perspective can provide us with adequate insight. The theoretical and methodological roots of this book lie in that loosely delineated area known as "cultural studies" which derives from particular inflections of Marxism, semiotics, post-structuralism, and ethnography. This area encompasses both textually inflected and socially inflected theories of culture, and requires theoretical, analytical, and empirical approaches to rub together in a mutually critical and productive relationship. The book will focus on the problem of how the textuality of television is made meaningful and pleasurable by its variously situated viewers, though it will also consider the relationship between this cultural dimension and television's status as a commodity in a capitalist economy.

But we start by considering television as a cultural agent, particularly as a provoker and circulator of meanings. How meanings are produced is one of the central problematics of the book, but a convenient place to start is with the simple notion that television broadcasts programs that are replete with potential meanings, and that it attempts to control and focus this meaningfulness into a more singular preferred meaning that performs the work of the dominant ideology. We shall need to interrogate this notion later, but I propose to start with a traditional semiotic account of how television makes, or attempts to make, meanings that serve the dominant interests in society, and how it circulates these meanings amongst the wide variety of social groups that constitute its audiences. I shall do this by analyzing a short

segment of two scenes from a typical, prime-time, long-running series, *Hart to Hart*, in order to demonstrate some basic critical methodology and to raise some more complex theoretical questions that will be addressed later on in the book.

The Harts are a wealthy, high-living husband and wife detective team. In this particular episode they are posing as passengers on a cruise ship on which there has been a jewel robbery. In scene 1 they are getting ready for a dance during which they plan to tempt the thief to rob them, and are discussing how the robbery may have been effected. In scene 2 we meet the villain and villainess, who have already noticed Jennifer Hart's ostentatiously displayed jewels.

□ Scene 1

HERO: He knew what he was doing to get into this safe.

HEROINE: Did you try the numbers that Granville gave you?

HERO: Yeh. I tried those earlier. They worked perfectly.

HEROINE: Well you said it was an inside job, maybe they had the combination all the time.

HERO: Just trying to eliminate all the possibilities. Can you check this out for me. (*He gestures to his bow tie.*)

HEROINE: Mm. Yes I can. (*He hugs her.*) Mm. Light fingers. Oh, Jonathon.

HERO: Just trying to keep my touch in shape.

HEROINE: What about the keys to the door.

HERO: Those keys can't be duplicated because of the code numbers. You have to have the right machines.

HEROINE: Well, that leaves the window.

HERO: The porthole.

HEROINE: Oh yes. The porthole. I know they are supposed to be charming, but they always remind me of a laundromat.

HERO: I took a peek out of there a while ago. It's about all you can do. It's thirty feet up to the deck even if you could make it down to the window, porthole. You'd have to be the thin man to squeeze through.

HEROINE: What do you think? (*She shows her jewelry.*) Enough honey to attract the bees?

HERO: Who knows? They may not be able to see the honey for the flowers.

HEROINE: Oh, that's the cutest thing you've ever said to me, sugar. Well, shall we? (*Gestures towards the door.*)

□ Scene 2

VILLAIN: I suppose you noticed some of the icing on Chamberlain's cup cake. I didn't have my jeweler's glass, but that bracelet's got to be worth at least fifty thousand. Wholesale.

VILLAINESS: Patrick, if you're thinking what I know you're thinking, forget it. We've made our quota one hit on each ship. We said we weren't going to get greedy, remember.

Television Culture

VILLAIN: But darling, it's you I'm thinking of. And I don't like you taking all those chances. But if we could get enough maybe we wouldn't have to go back to the Riviera circuit for years.

VILLAINESS: That's what you said when we were there.

VILLAIN: Well maybe a few good investments and we can pitch the whole bloody business. But we are going to need a bit more for our retirement fund.

□ The codes of television

Figure 1.1 shows the main codes that television uses and their relationship. A code is a rule-governed system of signs, whose rules and conventions are shared amongst members of a culture, and which is used to generate and circulate meanings in and for that culture. (For a fuller discussion of codes in semiotics see Fiske 1983 or O'Sullivan *et al.* 1983.) Codes are links between producers, texts, and audiences, and are the agents of intertextuality through which texts interrelate in a network of meanings that constitutes our cultural world. These codes work in a complex hierarchical structure that Figure 1.1 oversimplifies for the sake of clarity. In particular, the categories of codes are arbitrary and slippery, as is their classification into levels in the hierarchy; for instance, I have put speech as a social code, and dialogue (i.e. scripted speech) as a technical one, but in practice the two are almost indistinguishable: social psychologists such as Berne (1964) have shown us how dialogue in "real life" is frequently scripted for us by the interactional conventions of our culture. Similarly, I have called casting a conventional representational code, and appearance a social one, but the two differ only in intentionality and explicitness. People's appearance in "real life" is already encoded: in so far as we make sense of people by their appearance we do so according to conventional codes in our culture. The casting director is merely using these codes more consciously and more conventionally, which means more stereotypically.

The point is that "reality" is already encoded, or rather the only way we can perceive and make sense of reality is by the codes of our culture. There may be an objective, empiricist reality out there, but there is no universal,

Television, topics, and terminology

Figure 1.1 The codes of television

An event to be televised is already encoded by *social codes* such as those of:

Level one:
"REALITY"

appearance, dress, make-up, environment, behavior, speech, gesture, expression, sound, etc.

these are encoded electronically by *technical codes* such as those of:

Level two:
REPRESENTATION

camera, lighting, editing, music, sound

which transmit the *conventional representational codes*, which shape the representations of, for example: narrative, conflict, character, action, dialogue, setting, casting, etc.

Level three:
IDEOLOGY

which are organized into coherence and social acceptability by

the *ideological codes*, such as those of: individualism, patriarchy, race, class, materialism, capitalism, etc.

objective way of perceiving and making sense of it. What passes for reality in any culture is the product of that culture's codes, so "reality" is always already encoded, it is never "raw." If this piece of encoded reality is televised, the technical codes and representational conventions of the medium are brought to bear upon it so as to make it (a) transmittable technologically and (b) an appropriate cultural text for its audiences.

Some of the social codes which constitute our reality are relatively precisely definable in terms of the medium through which they are expressed – skin color, dress, hair, facial expression, and so on.

Others, such as those that make up a landscape, for example, may be less easy to specify systematically, but they are still present and working hard. Different sorts of trees have different connotative meanings encoded into them, so do rocks and birds. So a tree reflected in a lake, for example, is fully encoded even before it is photographed and turned into the setting for a romantic narrative.

Similarly the technical codes of television can be precisely identified and analyzed. The choices available to the camera person, for example, to give meaning to what is being photographed are limited and specifiable: they consist of framing, focus, distance, movement (of the camera or the lens), camera placing, or angle and lens choice. But the conventional and ideological codes and the relationship between them are much more elusive and much harder to specify, though it is the task of criticism to do just that. For instance, the conventions that govern the representation of speech as "realistic dialogue" in scene 1 (pp. 2-3) result in the heroine asking questions while the hero provides the answers. The representational convention by which women are shown to lack knowledge which men possess and give to them is an example of the ideological code of patriarchy. Similarly the conventional representation of crime as theft of personal property is an encoding of the ideology of capitalism. The "naturalness" with which the two fit together in the scene is evidence of how these ideological codes work to organize the other codes into producing a congruent and coherent set of meanings that constitute the *common sense* of a society. The process of making sense involves a constant movement up and down through the levels of the diagram, for sense can only be produced when "reality," representations, and ideology merge into a coherent, seemingly natural unity. Semiotic or cultural criticism deconstructs this unity and exposes its "naturalness" as a highly ideological construct.

A semiotic analysis attempts to reveal how these layers of encoded meanings are structured into television programs, even in as small a segment as the one we are working with. The small size of the segment encourages us to perform a detailed analytical reading of it, but prevents us talking about larger-scale codes, such as those of the narrative. But it does provide a good starting point for our work.

□ CAMERA WORK

The camera is used through angle and deep focus to give us a perfect view of the scene, and thus a complete understanding of it. Much of the pleasure of television realism comes from this sense of omniscience that it gives us. Chapter 2 develops this point in more detail. Camera distance is used to swing our sympathies away from the villain and villainess, and towards the

hero and heroine. The normal camera distance in television is mid-shot to close-up, which brings the viewer into an intimate, comfortable relationship with the characters on the screen. But the villain and villainess are also shown in extreme close-up (ECU). Throughout this whole episode of *Hart to Hart* there are only three scenes in which ECUs are used: they are used only to represent hero/ine and villain/ess, and of the twenty-one ECUs, eighteen are of the villain/ess and only three of the hero/ine. Extreme close-ups become a codified way for representing villainy.

This encoding convention is not confined to fictional television, where we might think that its work upon the alignment of our sympathies, and thus on our moral judgment, is justified. It is also used in news and current affairs programs which present themselves as bringing reality to us "objectively." The court action resulting from General Westmoreland's libel suit against the CBS in 1985 revealed these codes more questionably at work in television reporting. Alex Jones recounts their use in his report of the trial for the *New York Times*:

Among the more controversial techniques is placing an interviewee in partial shadow in order to lend drama to what is being said. Also debated is the use of extreme close-ups that tend to emphasize the tension felt by a person being interviewed; viewers may associate the appearance of tension with lying or guilt.

The extreme close-up can be especially damaging when an interview is carefully scripted and a cameraman is instructed to focus tightly on the person's face at the point when the toughest question is to be asked. Some documentary makers will not use such close-ups at all in interviews because they can be so misleading.

The CBS documentary contained both a shadowed interview of a friendly witness and "tight shots" of General Westmoreland. Such techniques have been used in documentaries by other networks as well.

Even the wariest viewer is likely to find it difficult to detect some other common techniques. "I can't imagine a general viewer getting so sophisticated with techniques that they could discount them," said Reuven Frank, a former president at NBC News who has been making documentaries for about 30 years.

(*NYT*, February 17, 1985: 8E)

There are two possible sources of the conventions that govern the meanings generated by this code of camera distance. One is the social code of interpersonal distance: in western cultures the space within about 24 inches (60 cm) of us is encoded as private. Anyone entering it is being either hostile, when the entry is unwelcome, or intimate, when it is invited. ECUs replicate

this, and are used for moments of televisual intimacy or hostility, and which meanings they convey depends on the other social and technical codes by which they are contextualized, and by the ideological codes brought to bear upon them. Here, they are used to convey hostility. The other source lies in the technical codes which imply that seeing closely means seeing better – the viewer can see *into* the villain, see *through* his words, and thus gains power over him, the power and the pleasure of “dominant specularity” (see chapter 2). These technical and social codes manifest the ideological encoding of villainy.

Most of the other technical codes can be dealt with more quickly, with only brief comments.

□ LIGHTING

The hero's cabin is lit in a soft, yellowish light, that of the villains in a harsh, whiter one. (I am reminded of Hogben's (1982) anecdote about the occasion when he was given a hostile treatment in a television interview. He did, however, manage to convince the interviewer that his point of view deserved more sympathy, whereupon the interviewer insisted they record the interview again, but this time without the greenish-white studio lighting.)

□ EDITING

The heroes are given more time (72 secs) than the villains (49), and more shots (10 as against 7), though both have an average shot length of 7 seconds. It is remarkable how consistent this is across different modes of television (see Fiske 1986b): it has become a conventional rhythm of television common to news, drama, and sport.

□ MUSIC

The music linking the two scenes started in a major key, and changed to minor as the scene changed to the villains.

□ CASTING

This technical code requires a little more discussion. The actors and actresses who are cast to play hero/ines, villainesses and supporting roles are real people whose appearance is already encoded by our social codes. But they are equally media people, who exist for the viewer intertextually, and whose meanings are also intertextual. They bring with them not only residues of the meanings of other roles that they have played, but also their meanings from

other texts such as fan magazines, showbiz gossip columns, and television criticism. Later on in the book we will discuss intertextuality and character portrayal in greater depth: here we need to note that these dimensions of meaning are vital in the code of casting, and that they are more important in the casting of hero/ines than of villain/esses.

Characters on television are not just representations of individual people but are encodings of ideology, “embodiments of ideological values” (Fiske 1987a). Gerbner's (1970) work showed that viewers were clear about the different characteristics of television heroes and villains on two dimensions only: heroes were more attractive and more successful than villains. Their attractiveness, or lack of it, is partly the result of the way they are encoded in the technical and social codes – camera work, lighting, setting, casting, etc., but the ideological codes are also important, for it is these that make sense out of the relationship between the technical code of casting and the social code of appearance, and that also relate their televisual use to their broader use in the culture at large. In his analysis of violence on television, Gerbner (1970) found that heroes and villains are equally likely to use violence and to initiate it, but that heroes were successful in their violence, whereas villains finally were not. Gerbner worked out a killers-to-killed ratio according to different categories of age, sex, class, and race. The killers category included heroes and villains, but the killed category included villains only. He found that a character who was white, male, middle class (or classless) and in the prime of life was very likely, if not certain, to be alive at the end of the program. Conversely characters who deviated from these norms were likely to be killed during the program in proportion to the extent of their deviance. We may use Gerbner's findings to theorize that heroes are socially central types who embody the dominant ideology, whereas villains and victims are members of deviant or subordinate subcultures who thus embody the dominant ideology less completely, and may, in the case of villains, embody ideologies that oppose it. The textual opposition between hero/ine and villain/ess, and the violence by which this opposition is commonly dramatized, become metaphors for power relationships in society and thus a material practice through which the dominant ideology works. (This theory is discussed more fully in Fiske and Hartley 1978 and in Fiske 1982.)

The villain in this segment has hints of non-Americaness; some viewers have classed his accent, manner, and speech as British, for others his appearance has seemed Hispanic. But the hero and heroine are both clearly middle-class, white Americans, at home among the WASPs (White Anglo-Saxon Protestants). The villainess is Aryan, blonde, pretty, and younger than the villain. Gerbner's work would lead us to predict that his chances of surviving the episode are slim, whereas hers are much better. The prediction is correct. She finally changes sides and helps the hero/ine, whereas he is killed; hints of

this are contained in her condemnation of the villain's greed, which positions her more centrally in the ideological discourse of economics (see below).

These technical codes of television transmit, and in some cases merge into, the social codes of level 1. Let us look at how some of them are working to generate meanings and how they embody the ideological codes of level 3.

☐ SETTING AND COSTUME

The hero/ine's cabin is larger than that of the villain/ess: it is humanized, made more attractive by drapes and flowers, whereas the other is all sharp angles and hard lines. The villain wears a uniform that places him as a servant or employee and the villainess's dress is less tasteful, less expensive than the heroine's. These physical differences in the social codes of setting and dress are also bearers of the ideological codes of class, of heroism and villainy, of morality, and of attractiveness. These abstract ideological codes are condensed into a set of material social ones, and the materiality of the differences of the social codes is used to guarantee the truth and naturalness of the ideological. We must note, too, how some ideological codes are more explicit than others: the codes of heroism, villainy, and attractiveness are working fairly openly and acceptably. But under them the codes of class, race, and morality are working less openly and more questionably: their ideological work is to naturalize the correlation of lower-class, non-American with the less attractive, less moral, and therefore villainous. Conversely, the middle-class and the white American is correlated with the more attractive, the more moral and the heroic. This displacement of morality onto class is a common feature of our popular culture: Dorfman and Mattelart (1975) have shown how Walt Disney cartoons consistently express villainy through characteristics of working-class appearance and manner; indeed they argue that the only time the working class appear in the middle-class world of Duckville it is as villains. Fiske (1984) has found the same textual strategy in the *Dr Who* television series.

☐ MAKE-UP

The same merging of the ideological codes of morality, attractiveness, and heroism/villainy, and their condensation into a material social code, can be seen in something as apparently insignificant as lipstick. The villainess has a number of signs that contradict her villainy (she is blonde, white American, pretty, and more moral than the villain). These predict her eventual conversion to the side of the hero and heroine, but she cannot look too like them at this early stage of the narrative, so her lips are made up to be thinner and less sexually attractive than the fuller lips of the heroine. The ideology of lipstick

may seem a stretched concept, but it is in the aggregate of apparently insignificant encodings that ideology works most effectively.

☐ ACTION

There are a number of significant similarities and differences between the actions of the hero/ine and the villain/ess. In both cabins the women are pretending themselves, the men are planning. This naturalizes the man's executive role (Goffman 1979) of instigating action and the woman's role as object of the male gaze – notice the mirror in each cabin which enables her to see herself as "bearer of her own image" (Berger 1972): the fact that this is common to both hero/ine and villain/ess puts it beyond the realm of conflict in the narrative and into the realm of everyday common sense within which the narrative is enacted. The other action common to both is the getting and keeping of wealth as a motive for action, and as a motor for the narrative: this also is not part of the conflict-to-be-resolved, but part of the ideological framework through which that conflict is viewed and made sense of.

A difference between the two is that of cooperation and closeness. The hero and heroine co-operate and come physically closer together, the villain and villainess, on the other hand, disagree and pull apart physically. In a society that places a high value on a man and woman being a close couple this is another bearer of the dominant ideology.

☐ DIALOGUE

The dialogue also is used to affect our sympathy. That of the villain and villainess is restricted to their nefarious plans and their mutual disagreement, whereas the hero and heroine are allowed a joke (window/porthole/laundromat), an extended metaphor (honey and the bees), and the narrative time to establish a warm, co-operative relationship. Both the hero/ine and villain/ess are allowed irony, the use of which will be theorized and analyzed in chapter 6.

☐ IDEOLOGICAL CODES

These codes and the televisual codes which bring them to the viewer are both deeply embedded in the ideological codes of which they are themselves the bearers. If we adopt the same ideological practice in the decoding as the encoding we are drawn into the position of a white, male, middle-class American (or westerner) of conventional morality. The reading position is the social point at which the mix of televisual, social, and ideological codes

comes together to make coherent, unified sense: in making sense of the program in this way we are indulging in an ideological practice ourselves, we are maintaining and legitimating the dominant ideology, and our reward for this is the easy pleasure of the recognition of the familiar and of its adequacy. We have already become a "reading subject" constructed by the text, and, according to Althusser (1971), the construction of subjects-in-ideology is the major ideological practice in capitalist societies.

This ideological practice is working at its hardest in three narrative devices in this segment. The first is the window/porthole/laundromat joke, which, as we have seen, is used to marshal the viewer's affective sympathy on the side of the hero/ine. But it does more than that. Freud tells us that jokes are used to relieve the anxiety caused by repressed, unwelcome, or taboo meanings. This joke revolves around the "feminine" (as defined by our dominant culture) inability to understand or use technical language, and the equally "feminine" tendency to make sense of everything through a domestic discourse. "Porthole" is technical discourse – masculine; "window-laundromat" is domestic-nurturing discourse – feminine. The anxiety that the joke relieves is that caused by the fact that the heroine is a detective, is involved in the catching of criminals – activities that are part of the technical world of men in patriarchy. The joke is used to recuperate contradictory signs back into the dominant system, and to smooth over any contradictions that might disrupt the ideological homogeneity of the narrative. The attractiveness of the heroine must not be put at risk by allowing her challenge to patriarchy to be too stark – for attractiveness is always ideological, never merely physical or natural.

The metaphor that expresses the sexual attractiveness of women for men in terms of the attraction of honey and flowers for the bees works in a similar way. It naturalizes this attraction, masking its ideological dimension, and then extends this naturalness to its explanation of the attractiveness of other people's jewelry for lower-class non-American villains! The metaphor is working to naturalize cultural constructions of gender, class, and race.

The third device is that of jewelry itself. As we have seen, the getting and keeping of wealth is the major motor of the narrative, and jewelry is its material signifier. Three ideological codes intersect in the use of jewelry in this narrative: they are the codes of economics, gender, and class.

In the code of economics, the villain and villainess stress the jewelry's investment/exchange function: it is "worth at least fifty thousand wholesale," it forms "a retirement fund." For the hero and heroine and for the class they represent this function is left unstated: jewelry, if it is an investment, is one to hold, not cash in. It is used rather as a sign of class, of wealth, and of aesthetic taste.

The aesthetic sense, or good taste, is typically used as a bearer and

naturalizer of class differences. The heroine deliberately overdoes the jewelry, making it vulgar and tasteless in order to attract the lower-class villain and villainess. They, in their turn, show their debased taste, their aesthetic insensitivity, by likening it to the icing on a cupcake. As Bourdieu (1968) has shown us, the function of aesthetics in our society is to make class-based and culture-specific differences of taste appear universal and therefore natural. The taste of the dominant classes is universalized by aesthetic theory out of its class origin; the metaphor of "taste" works in a similar way by displacing class differences onto the physical, and therefore natural, senses of the body.

The meaning of jewelry in the code of gender is clear. Jewels are the coins by which the female-as-patriarchal-commodity is bought, and wearing them is the sign both of her possession by a man, and of his economic and social status. Interestingly, in the code of gender, there is no class difference between hero/ine and villain/ess: the economics of patriarchy are the same for all classes, thus making it appear universal and natural that man provides for his woman.

This analysis has not only revealed the complexity of meanings encoded in what is frequently taken to be shallow and superficial, but it also implies that this complexity and subtlety has a powerful effect upon the audience. It implies that the wide variety of codes all cohere to present a unified set of meanings that work to maintain, legitimate, and naturalize the dominant ideology of patriarchal capitalism. Their ideological effectivity appears irresistible. The resistibility of ideology is one of the themes that runs through this book, and later on, in chapters 5 and 6, we will return to this analysis, complicate it, and contradict its main implications. For the moment, however, it serves to demonstrate that popular television is both complex and deeply infused with ideology.

☐ Some terminology

This book is not concerned with television as an industrial practice or as a profit-making producer of commodities, though it is obviously both of these, but attempts to understand it from the perspective of its audiences. For our purposes, then, television consists of the programs that are transmitted, the meanings and pleasures that are produced from them, and, to a lesser extent, the way it is incorporated into the daily routine of its audiences. We will concentrate on "typical" television – the most popular, mainstream, internationally distributed programs, for these are the ones of greatest significance in popular culture.

To understand television in this way we need to see it and its programs as

potentials of meaning rather than as commodities. A program is a clearly defined and labeled fragment of television's output. It has clear boundaries, both temporal and formal, and it relates to other programs in terms of generic similarity and, more essentially, of difference. We know that an ad is not part of a program, we know when one program finishes and another starts. Programs are stable, fixed entities, produced and sold as commodities, and organized by schedulers into distribution packages. *Dallas* is the same program whether it is broadcast in the USA, North Africa, or Australia.

A text is a different matter altogether. Programs are produced, distributed, and defined by the industry: texts are the product of their readers. So a program becomes a text at the moment of reading, that is, when its interaction with one of its many audiences activates some of the meanings/pleasures that it is capable of provoking. So one program can stimulate the production of many texts according to the social conditions of its reception. *Dallas* is a different text in the USA, in North Africa, and in Australia, indeed, it is many different texts in the USA alone. Texts are the site of conflict between their forces of production and modes of reception. The analysis we have just performed shows how the dominant ideology is structured into popular texts by the discourses and conventions that inform the practices of production and that are a part of their reception. But what it has not shown is how other discourses, other conventions can be brought to bear upon it that may conflict with the dominant ones structured into it. A text is the site of struggles for meaning that reproduce the conflicts of interest between the producers and consumers of the cultural commodity. A program is produced by the industry, a text by its readers.

To understand both the production of programs and the production of meanings from them, we need to understand the workings of discourse. This is, in itself, a multidiscursive term; that is, its usage varies according to the discourse in which it is situated. At its simplest, discourse is the organization of language above the level of the sentence: it is thus an extensive use of language. By extension it can cover nonverbal languages so that one can talk of the discourse of the camera or of lighting. This formalistic use does not get us very far, for it ignores the social and ideological dimension. Discourse is a language or system of representation that has developed socially in order to make and circulate a coherent set of meanings about an important topic area. These meanings serve the interests of that section of society within which the discourse originates and which works ideologically to naturalize those meanings into common sense. "Discourses are power relations" (O'Sullivan *et al.* 1983: 74). Discourse is thus a social act which may promote or oppose the dominant ideology, and is thus often referred to as a "discursive practice." Any account of a discourse or a discursive practice must include its topic area, its social origin, and its ideological work: we should not, therefore,

think about a discourse of economics, or of gender, but of a capitalist (or socialist) discourse of economics, or the patriarchal (or feminist) discourse of gender. Such discourses frequently become institutionalized, particularly by the media industries, in so far as they are structured by a socially produced set of conventions that are tacitly accepted by both industry and consumers. In this sense we can talk about the discourse of news, or of advertising: these discourses still exhibit our three defining characteristics – a topic area, a social location, and the promotion of the interests of a particular social group.

Discourses function not only in the production and reading of texts, but also in making sense of social experience. A particular discourse of gender, for example, works not only to make sense of a television program such as *Charlie's Angels*, but also to make a particular pattern of sense of gender in the family, in the workplace, in school, in social clubs – in fact, in our general social relations. Social experience is much like a text: its meanings depend upon the discourses that are brought to bear upon it. Just as two differently socially situated people may make a different sense of the same text, so they may make a different sense of the same social experience.

This brings us to another characteristic of discourse: discourses are not produced by the individual speaker or author, they are socially produced, the meanings that they bear preexist their use in any one discursive practice. It is often said, somewhat enigmatically, that we do not speak our discourse but our discourse speaks us. This means that discourse not only makes sense of its topic area, it also constructs a sense, or social identity, of us as we speak it. We all of us have an extensive repertoire of discourses that we need in order to make sense of the variety of texts and social experiences that constitute our culture. The analysis of a program can identify the main discourses out of which it is structured, but it cannot of itself identify the discourses that the viewer will bring to bear upon it to make it into a text that bears meanings for him or her. The discourses of the program attempt to control and confine its potential meanings: the discourse of the reader may resist this control.

So texts are unstable, unconfined. The ad and the program may be part of the same text in their interaction in the production of meaning and pleasure. Meanings are not confined by producers' boundaries between programs, but are part of the "flow" of television as experienced by its audiences. Neither is the television text confined by the boundaries of its medium: reading and talking about television are part of the process of making a text out of it and are determinants of what text is actually made. So, too, is our experience of other cultural media – books, films, newspapers, songs, and so on. The textuality of television is essentially intertextual.

An essential characteristic of television is its polysemy, or multiplicity of meanings. A program provides a potential of meanings which may be realized, or made into actually experienced meanings, by socially situated

viewers in the process of reading. This polysemic potential is neither boundless nor structureless: the text delineates the terrain within which meanings may be made and proffers some meanings more vigorously than others. The analysis of the *Hart to Hart* segment has shown how the conventional use of televisual codes has preferred a set of meanings that, and this is typical, fit well with the values of the dominant ideology. But other meanings may be made (see chapter 6): the text's polysemy or meaning potential may be realized differently. A white woman, for example, may find the window/porthole/laundromat joke offensive, and may read the heroine's concern for her appearance as evidence of her cleverness in being able to outwit the villain and villainess. The point to make here is that the motivation to exploit the polysemy of the program is social: the polysemy of the text is necessary if it is to be popular amongst viewers who occupy a variety of situations within the social structure. This variety of social situations is no harmonious relationship of roughly equal groups as modeled by liberal pluralism, but must always be understood in terms of domination and subjugation. The unequal distribution of power in society is the central structuring principle in understanding the relationship of any one group to others, or to the social system as a whole. As social groups are neither autonomous nor equal, so too the meanings they produce from the text are neither self-contained nor equal. The more positive, feminine reading of the heroine's efforts to increase her attractiveness is not a self-contained, self-sufficient one: an essential part of its meaning is its relationship with, and difference from, the dominant meanings of female attractiveness in patriarchy. As the woman reader is socially positioned in a power relationship with patriarchy, so her readings of a text enter a power relationship with those preferred by the ideological structure of the codes that comprise it. Polysemy is always bounded and structured, for polysemy is the textual equivalent of social difference and diversity.

A textual study of television, then, involves three foci: the formal qualities of television programs and their flow; the intertextual relations of television within itself, with other media, and with conversation; and the study of socially situated readers and the process of reading.

The term "readers" may seem inappropriate for the watchers of television, but it is the term I use most frequently in this book. I also use the related terms of "viewers," "audiences," and "audience" to refer in different ways to the people who watch television. "Audience," in the singular, is the easiest term to understand – and dismiss. It implies that television reaches a homogeneous mass of people who are all essentially identical, who receive the same messages, meanings, and ideologies from the same programs and who are essentially passive. The inability of the term "audience" to account for social differences and consequent differences of meanings means that it ascribes

great centralizing, homogenizing power to television and its producers. Consequently it sees the audience as relatively powerless and undiscriminating, at the mercy of the barons of the industry. It sees viewers, in Stuart Hall's (1982) productive phrase, as "cultural dopes" who are unable to perceive the difference between their interests and those of the producers. Such a view of the television audience is surprisingly widely held, often by people who, on other topics, are capable of thinking quite clearly.

Pluralizing the term into "audiences" at least recognizes that there are differences between the viewers of any one program that must be taken into account. It recognizes that we are not a homogeneous society, but that our social system is crisscrossed by axes of class, gender, race, age, nationality, region, politics, religion, and so on, all of which produce more or less strongly marked differences, and that these social differences relate among each other in a complexity of ways that always involves the dimension of power. Social power is unequally distributed in society, so any set of social relations necessarily involves power and resistance, domination and subordination. The term "audiences" recognizes the heterogeneity of society and allows for that heterogeneity to be understood in terms of power relations.

The terms "viewer" and "reader" are more active than either "audience" or "audiences"; I use them with a considerable overlap of meaning, and thus, at times, interchangeably. But there are differences of emphasis between them. A "viewer" is someone watching television, making meanings and pleasures from it, in a social situation. This social situation is compounded of both the social relations/experience of the viewer (class, gender, etc.) and of the material, usually domestic, situation (which is also a product of his/her social relations) within which television is watched. The television viewer experiences a far greater variety of modes of watching than does the cinema spectator. "Viewing," then, is an active process that brings to television the social relations of the viewer (her/his point of view) and the material situation: viewing television news will be quite different for the woman who is cooking the family meal than for the man slumped in an armchair in front of the set. A viewer is engaged with the screen more variously, actively, and selectively than is a spectator.

"Viewing" is specific to television, "reading" is common to all texts. So the term "reader" means "the producer of texts, the maker of meanings and pleasures." This productive ability is the result of social experience or training, whether formal or informal. It is not an innate gift, but an acquired ability. It is a social practice, is ideological, and is the means by which sociocultural experience, the text in question, and its intertextual relationships, are brought together in a productive moment of interaction. The "reader" is less concretely situated than the "viewer" and is rather the embodiment of that central cultural process – the production of meaning.

Cultural processes are often referred to metaphorically as though they were economic ones. Bourdieu's (1980) metaphor of cultural capital is typical. By this he means that a society's culture is as unequally distributed as its material wealth and that, like material wealth, it serves to identify class interests and to promote and naturalize class differences. Thus, those cultural forms which a society considers to be "high," for example, classical music, fine art, literature, or ballet, coincide with the tastes of those with social power, whereas lowbrow or mass cultural forms appeal to those ranked low on the social structure. The point of this is that culture and class are closely interrelated but the discourse of culture disguises its connection with class. By using words like "taste," and "discrimination," and by appealing to apparently universal values such as those of aesthetics, the discourse of culture grounds cultural differences in universal human nature or in universal value systems. It pretends that culture is equally available to all, as democratic capitalism pretends that wealth is equally available to all. The fact that few acquire either culture or wealth is explained by reference to natural differences between individuals, which are expressed as differences in their natural talents or taste; this explanation hides the role of social class. The upshot of this is that naturally "better" people (i.e. those with "better" taste) appreciate "better" art (i.e. that which is "inherently" more universal, aesthetic) and therefore the value system that validates "high" art and denigrates "low" art is based in nature, and not in the unequal distribution of power in a class-divided society. Bourdieu's account of cultural capital reveals the attempt of the dominant classes to control culture for their own interests as effectively as they control the circulation of wealth. The consistent denigration of popular culture, such as television, as bad for people individually and bad for society in general is central to the strategy.

This theory of cultural capital explains the social function of culture as the provision of a system of meanings and pleasures that underwrites the social system structured around economic, class, and other forms of social power. Cultural capital underwrites economic capital. But the metaphor of the cultural economy must not be confined to its similarities with the material economy. The circulation of meanings and pleasures in a society is not, finally, the same as the circulation of wealth. Meanings and pleasures are much harder to possess exclusively and much harder to control: power is less effectively exerted in the cultural economy than it is in the material.

We need to extend the metaphor of cultural capital to include that of a popular cultural capital that has no equivalent in the material economy. Popular cultural capital is an accumulation of meanings and pleasures that serves the interests of the subordinated and powerless, or rather the disempowered, for few social groups are utterly without power. Popular cultural capital consists of the meanings of social subordination and of the strategies

(such as those of accommodation, resistance, opposition, or evasion) by which people respond to it. These meanings of subordination are not made according to the dominant value system, they are not ones that make a comfortable sense of subordination and thus work to make people content with their social situation. Rather they are meanings made by a value system that opposes or evades the dominant ideology: they are meanings that validate the social experience of the subordinate but not their subordination.

This popular cultural capital requires a set of cultural competencies to "read" it. Brunsdon (1981), for example, argues that women fans of soap opera are highly "competent" readers. Cultural competence involves a critical understanding of the text and the conventions by which it is constructed, it involves the bringing of both textual and social experience to bear upon the program at the moment of reading, and it involves a constant and subtle negotiation and renegotiation of the relationship between the textual and the social. Cultural capital and cultural competence are both central to people's ability to make socially pertinent and pleasurable meanings from the semiotic resources of the text.

Pleasure results from a particular relationship between meanings and power. Pleasure for the subordinate is produced by the assertion of one's social identity in resistance to, in independence of, or in negotiation with, the structure of domination. There is no pleasure in being a "cultural dope"; there is, however, real pleasure to be found in, for example, soap operas that assert the legitimacy of feminine meanings and identities within and against patriarchy. Pleasure results from the production of meanings of the world and of self that are felt to serve the interests of the reader rather than those of the dominant. The subordinate may be disempowered, but they are not powerless. There is a power in resisting power, there is a power in maintaining one's social identity in opposition to that proposed by the dominant ideology, there is a power in asserting one's own subcultural values against the dominant ones. There is, in short, a power in being different. These exertions of power are all available to the subordinate and as such are all potential sources of popular pleasure. Pleasure requires a sense of control over meanings and an active participation in the cultural process. One of the central arguments of this book is that television is so popular, that is, it is capable of offering such a variety of pleasures to such a heterogeneity of viewers, because the characteristics of its texts and of its modes of reception enable an active participation in that sense-making process which we call "culture."

Television and its programs do not have an "effect" on people. Viewers and television interact. So in this book I shall not talk about television's "effect," though I shall refer to its "effectivity." This rather ugly form of the word makes it more diffused and generalized, less specific. In particular it takes it

out of any direct relationship with a "cause." Television does not "cause" identifiable effects in individuals; it does, however, work ideologically to promote and prefer certain meanings of the world, to circulate some meanings rather than others, and to serve some social interests better than others. This ideological work may be more or less effective, according to many social factors, but it is always there, and we need to think of it in terms of its effectivity in society at large, not of its effects upon specific individuals or groups. "Effectivity" is a socio-ideological term, "effect" an individual-behavioristic one.

And finally, in this preview of some of the terms used in this book, we come to that most important and slippery concept of all – "culture." Culture is concerned with meanings and pleasures: our culture consists of the meanings we make of our social experience and of our social relations, and therefore the sense we have of our "selves." It also situates those meanings within the social system, for a social system can only be held in place by the meanings that people make of it. Culture is deeply inscribed in the differential distribution of power within a society, for power relations can only be stabilized or destabilized by the meanings that people make of them. Culture is a struggle for meanings as society is a struggle for power.

This book is structured into two unequal sections. The next two chapters, like the first half of this one, investigate the forces of cultural domination. They explain how the dominant ideology and the social groups that it favors have their political and cultural interests promoted by television. The rest of the book explores the ways in which television can serve the interests of the subordinated and oppressed groups. For television is a complex cultural medium that is full of contradictory impulses which enable it, on the one hand, to make profits for, and promote the ideology of, the few, but, on the other hand, to promote an oppositional, intransigent, or, at least, *different* cultural capital for the subordinated groups that constitute the majority of our divided society.

Chapter 2

Realism

The *Hart to Hart* segment is "realistic," not because it reproduces reality, which it clearly does not, but because it reproduces the dominant sense of reality. We can thus call television an essentially realistic medium because of its ability to carry a socially convincing sense of the real. Realism is not a matter of any fidelity to an empirical reality, but of the discursive conventions by which and for which a sense of reality is constructed.

The most obvious is that it presents itself as an unmediated picture of external reality. This view of television realism is often expressed by the metaphors of transparency or reflection – television is seen either as a transparent window on the world or as a mirror reflecting our own reality back to us. It is significant that both these metaphors invoke a sheet of glass as an impersonal, noncultural medium of reproduction – the human or cultural agency in the process is masked: this means that the finished representation is naturalized, that it is made to appear the result of natural rather than cultural processes, it is taken away from the realm of history and culture and moved towards that of universal truth. Taking the metaphors to their logical extreme like this reveals their obvious inadequacy to explain the way that television gives us representations of the world, but some professionals still cling to what media theorists call "the transparency fallacy" (the first of our metaphors), and the use of the reflection one is quite common even in relatively thoughtful discussions of the medium. The way that I phrased it at the beginning of this paragraph does allow it some validity, for it does assume that it is *our* reality, not *the* reality, that is reflected; in other words it admits that reality is the product of people, and not a universal object that people merely observe from the outside. What I wish to do in this chapter is to study the ways by which television produces "reality" rather than reflects it.

Realism can be defined in a number of ways, for it is actually a fairly slippery concept capable of a variety of inflections. Ian Watt (1957) and Raymond Williams (1977) tend to define it by its content. Watt traces its origins to the rise of the novel in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Realism developed alongside empiricism, individualism, humanism, and the bourgeoisie, so it is not surprising that it should share characteristics with all

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