

Realism, in this view, is a reactionary mode of representation that promotes and naturalizes the dominant ideology. It works by making everything appear "realistic," and "realisticness" is the process by which ideology is made to appear the product of reality or nature, and not of a specific society and its culture. Thus, if the Hispanic villain in *Hart to Hart* had triumphed over the white hero, it would, in our society, have appeared "unrealistic." Similarly, though differently, if the ship's cabin had had square windows instead of portholes it would have appeared "unrealistic." Realism involves a fidelity both to the physical, sensually perceived details of the external world, and to the values of the dominant ideology. In this way ideology is mapped onto the objective world of "reality," and the accuracy of realism's representation of the details of this "real" world becomes the validation of the ideology it has been made to bear – and I use the term "made to" in both its senses of "constructed in order to" and "required to." Realism's desire to "get the details right" is an ideological practice, for the believability of its fidelity to "the real" is transferred to the ideology it embodies. The conventions of the realism have developed in order to disguise the constructedness of the "reality" it offers, and therefore of the arbitrariness of the ideology that is mapped onto it. Grounding ideology in reality is a way of making it appear unchallengeable and unchangeable, and thus is a reactionary political strategy.

## Chapter 3

# Realism and ideology

### □ Popularity

There are a number of questions raised by the previous chapter's discussion of realism and the construction of the viewing subject, particularly ones about its pertinence to television. For its origin is in film theory, and although film and television share many characteristics, they also have crucial differences. The most important of these cluster around the different conditions of viewing, but there are also related differences in the nature of the text, and in the conditions of production. These form the substance of later chapters in this book. For the moment I wish to discuss the relevance of the concept of a radical text to mainstream broadcast television.

Television is, above all else, a popular cultural medium. The economics that determine its production and distribution demand that it reaches a mass audience, and a mass audience in western industrialized societies is composed of numerous subcultures, or subaudiences, with a wide variety of social relations, a variety of sociocultural experience and therefore a variety of discourses that they will bring to bear upon the program in order to understand and enjoy it. For its own purposes television attempts to homogenize this variety so that the one program can reach as many different audiences as possible. It tries to work within what these different audiences have in common, but it also has to leave a space for their differences to come into play in their readings of the program. We will go into this more fully in chapter 5, but for the moment we should note that the way that MacCabe gives the text almost total power to position the viewing subject denies the differences between different audiences and between the meanings they can, and do, construct from the same program.

But these differences operate in a constant tension with cultural homogeneity. This common ground is to be found firstly in a shared dominant ideology and secondly in a set of textual conventions that producers and readers share because they are part of a common history and experience. Television is a conventional medium – its conventions suit both the audiences with their needs for familiarity and routinization and the producers, for

established conventions not only keep the costs of production down, they also minimize the risks in the marketplace. The economic dimension of television gives it a conventional form, even when its content is more progressive.

Thus *Cagney and Lacey* can represent the social world from a feminine or even feminist point of view in a form (the conventional police series) which is conventionally masculine in its ideology. Admittedly this masculine form is tempered with elements from the more feminine form of the soap opera, but the prime conventions, and therefore the dominant ideology, are those of the patriarchal bourgeois form of the police series.

As we have seen, the effect of putting a socially interrogative view of the world into a conventional form is debatable. MacCabe also argues that the conventionality of the form will always, finally, defuse any radicalism. For him, the unwritten discourse at the top of the hierarchy, the metadiscourse, makes such perfect and comfortable sense that it denies the need for any further interrogation on the part of the viewer by producing a frame of mind, that of omniscience, that makes further social interrogation not just unnecessary, but actually impossible.

This argument ends in a similar place, although it gets there by a very different route, to that of the pessimistic Marxism of the Frankfurt School. Their view was that the culture industry of capitalism homogenized people into a mass, and deindividualized them by debasing their taste into that of the lowest common denominator. The combination of economics and ideology was so powerful that any oppositional or radical movement was immediately swallowed up or incorporated into the dominant ideology. Thus a show like *Charlie's Angels*, popular in the late 1970s, could be said to have an element of radicalism in that it showed three female detectives in roles that were normally confined to men. But the fact that they were cast and photographed to foreground their sexual attractiveness could be seen as a device of incorporation; that is, their radicalism was incorporated into the dominant sexist ideology through the form of their representation in such a way as to show that patriarchy can accommodate "the new woman" into its view of the world without having to make any adjustments of principle, only minor ones of detail. Similarly, the female window/porthole/laundromat joke in our *Hart to Hart* segment can be seen as an incorporating device.

In both cases the effect of incorporating signs of "the new woman" into patriarchy is to defuse any threat it might contain and to demonstrate patriarchy's ability to accommodate potentially radical movements within the existing power structure. In this way its grip on our social meanings of gender is actually strengthened.

One of the effects of incorporation that is relevant here is its ability to rob the radical of its voice and thus of its means of expressing its opposition. When the iconography of the punk style of dress was incorporated into

"fashion" by the industry, the punk subculture was robbed of one of its main means of expressing its opposition to the dominant order. So, too, the incorporation of a left-wing or feminine discourse into bourgeois patriarchy can rob these discourses of their radical qualities. Incorporation is a powerful ideological defense mechanism.

Barthes (1973) uses the metaphor of inoculation to explain a similar ideological process:

One immunizes the contents of the collective imagination by means of a small inoculation of acknowledged evil; one thus protects it against the risk of a generalized subversion. (p. 150)

Thus television news will often include radical voices, spokespeople from trade unions, from peace demonstrators, or from environmentalists, but these will be controlled doses whose extent and positioning in the news story will be chosen by the agents of the dominant ideology. Similarly, bourgeois realism can contain radical and subversive discourses, but it places them low down in the hierarchy of discourses and thus enables them to "inoculate" the dominant ideology against the radicalism which it is apparently allowing to speak. The implication of this metaphor is that the dominant ideology strengthens its resistance to anything radical by injecting itself with controlled doses of the "disease." The incorporation theory of the Frankfurt School works the same way – capitalism is strengthened by the elements it incorporates from the oppositional, and by the voices it has robbed from the radical.

This position ends up by implying that all popular culture inevitably serves the interests of the dominant ideology, for it is this that provides the common ground between producers and audience-seen-as-consumers, and between different audience groups whose differences are thus minimized. It then produces the conventional form of the popular work of art which performs its work of positioning the viewer as a subject of and in the dominant ideology so effectively that any radicalism of the content is necessarily defused by the conventionality of the form.

This opens up the question of the nature of the viewing process by which sense is made of both the program and the viewer. This forms the substance of the next chapter; here I simply wish to point to one implication of McArthur's position that MacCabe denies – this is the ability and freedom of the viewer to bring extra-textual experience and attitudes to bear upon the reading of the program. Thus women have told me how much they enjoyed *Charlie's Angels* when it appeared on their screens in the 1970s, and that their pleasure in seeing women taking active, controlling roles was so great that it overrode the incorporating devices that worked to recuperate the feminist elements in its content back into patriarchy. The ideological tension between

patriarchy and feminism was not resolved as clearly or completely as the theory of the hierarchy of discourses would have us believe; while the hierarchy is undoubtedly there in the program, it may well be that its ideological effectivity was confined to those viewers who lived their lives through the dominant ideological practice, or a close inflection of it, whereas those who found that the dominant ideology did not enable them to make adequate sense of their social experience, and who thus turned to an oppositional or alternative one, were able to bring this different ideological frame to bear upon the program and still make a sense out of it and find a pleasure in it that was *their* sense, *their* pleasure, not the one proposed by the program. In other words, the program can mean different things to different people – a male reading may differ from a female, female pleasure from male pleasure. In later chapters we will explore the implications of this more fully. For the moment we need to note that there is some evidence that the television program is a relatively open text (that is, a variety of meanings can be, and are, made from it), that these meanings may be socially determined rather than textually determined, and that it is through this openness and polysemy that the same program can be popular with a variety of audiences.

The final inability of the text to impose its "meaning" upon its readers requires us to reconsider the extent of the power that Althusser grants to ideology. This power to constitute people as subjects-in-ideology appears to be so great that resistance is almost impossible, yet without resistance to ideology, resisting or oppositional readings of texts would be unlikely, if not impossible. Gramsci's theory of hegemony grants resistance a far more important role than does Althusser's theory of ideology. Briefly, hegemony may be defined as that process whereby the subordinate are led to consent to the system that subordinates them. This is achieved when they "consent" to view the social system and its everyday embodiments as "common sense," the self-evidently natural. Gitlin's (1982) seminal account of the hegemony of television forms gives due stress to the role of resistance, but his analysis appears to demonstrate that this hegemony is almost irresistible. However, he does cite Blum's (1964) findings that black audiences frequently put down television programs while watching them as evidence that the consent of the subordinate is never completely nor finally achieved.

Mercer (1986a) argues that this question of consent is one that has been inadequately investigated. Consent has been assumed to take one of two forms: either this consent is – paradoxically – *forced* by means of a legitimising "dominant culture" or the force is *consented* to via a liberal conception which holds that the mainspring of consent resides in the sovereign and legal category of the individual. Either way the site of consent is reduced to a vacuous timidity and its cousins "pleasure" and the "popular" are similarly assimilated to either ideological effects or personal preferences. (p. 50)

Mercer argues that such simplistic notions of consent fail to locate it within a complex, elaborated culture such as those of industrialized societies. Consent can take as many different forms as there are different social and historical moments of its negotiation. And consent can only be negotiated within structures of domination, subordination, and resistance.

Hegemony is a constant struggle against a multitude of resistances to ideological domination, and any balance of forces that it achieves is always precarious, always in need of re-achievement. Hegemony's "victories" are never final, and any society will evidence numerous points where subordinate groups have resisted the total domination that is hegemony's aim, and have withheld their consent to the system.

Said (1984) links Gramsci's notion of hegemony to that of elaboration: "elaboration is the ensemble of patterns making it feasible for society to maintain itself" (p. 171). An elaborated culture is dense, complex, and above all diverse: "the real depth in the strength of the modern Western state is the strength and depth of its culture, and culture's strength is its variety, its heterogeneous plurality" (p. 171). An elaborated culture is one that is structurally opposed to the homogenizing force of the dominant conception of what a society and its subjects ought to be like, and its elaboration consists of a wide diversity of forms of resistance.

Gramsci's insight is to have recognized that subordination, fracturing, diffusion, reproducing, as much as producing, creating, forcing, guiding, are all necessary aspects of elaboration. (Said 1984: 171, cited in Mercer 1985: 51)

Hegemony characterizes social relations as a series of struggles for power. Cultural studies view texts similarly, as the site of a series of struggles for meaning. The dominant ideology, working through the form of the text, can be resisted, evaded, or negotiated with, in varying degrees by differently socially situated readers.

#### □ Realism and discourse

Realism shares many of the characteristics that Barthes (1973) ascribes to myth (see chapter 8), and these all stem from its being a discourse (or, as Barthes calls it, a language) that hides its discursive nature and presents itself as natural rather than cultural, that is, as an unmediated product of, or reflection of, an innocent reality. When O'Sullivan *et al.* (1983) define reality as a product of discourse they are, albeit somewhat mischievously, contradicting head-on the belief in an objective reality, accessible to all on equal terms and representable objectively or transparently. Structuralism and post-



structuralism do not deny the existence of reality: what they question is its objectivity, its accessibility, its representability, and, therefore, its naturalness. Reality, the argument goes, is only accessible through the discourses we have available to make sense of it. Perception is a process of making sense, and sense is a product of discourse. Nature, or objective reality, does not "make sense" on its own – we have only to look at the vastly different interpretations different cultures make of universal nature to see evidence for this assertion. Discourse, as we have seen, is not only a product of culture, it is also, in industrialized societies at least, the product of society, and the power of political relations within that society. A discourse will always stem from a socially (politically) identifiable point and will serve the interests of the groups around that point by making their sense of the real appear *common* sense: and common sense is, as Barthes (1973) says, "truth when it stops on the arbitrary order of him who speaks it" (p. 150). So, as critics, we must never be content with asking and revealing what view of the world is being presented, but must recognize that someone's view of the world is implicitly or explicitly, obviously or subtly, inscribed within it. Revealing the *who* within the *what* is possibly the most important task of criticism.

This is important, because in industrial societies resources and social power are distributed unequally. This may be obvious in the domain of economics, but it is equally true, if less obvious, in the related domains of culture and language: indeed it is one of the great myths of bourgeois capitalism, centrally inscribed into, and assiduously promulgated by, the educational system, that a nation's cultural and linguistic resources are freely and equally available to all. Stuart Hall (1982) briskly opposes this:

Of course a native language is not equally distributed amongst all native speakers, regardless of class, socio-economic position, gender, education and culture: nor is competence to perform in language randomly distributed. Linguistic performance and competence is socially distributed, not only by class but also by gender.

(p. 79, quoted by Hartley 1984a)

Discursive power, that is, the power to make common sense of a class-based sense of the real, is held by the same social groups who exercise economic power. But the difference between the exercise of power in these domains is crucial: economic power is open and obvious, discursive power is hidden, and it is its hiddenness, its "repression of its own operations," that enables it to present itself as common sense, as an objective, innocent reflection of the real.

Barthes (1973) calls this self-disguising process "exnomination":

Now a remarkable phenomenon occurs in the matter of naming this regime: as an economic fact, the bourgeoisie is *named* without any difficulty: capitalism is openly professed. As a political fact, the bourgeoisie has some difficulty in acknowledging itself: there are no "bourgeois" parties in the Chamber. As an ideological fact, it completely disappears: the bourgeoisie has obliterated its name in passing from reality to representation, from economic man to mental man. It comes to an agreement with the facts, but does not compromise about values, it makes its status undergo a real *ex-nominating* operation: the bourgeoisie is defined as *the social class which does not want to be named*. (p. 138)

Exnomination masks the political origin of discourse, and thus masks class, gender, racial, and other differences in society. It establishes *its* sense of the real as the *common* sense and, when it achieves this, invites (Barthes and MacCabe would say "requires") the subordinate subcultures to make sense of the world, of themselves, and of their social relations, through the dominant, exnominated discourse, and thus, according to Barthes, to identify ideologically with their oppressor:

By spreading its representations over a whole catalogue of collective images for petit-bourgeois use, the bourgeoisie countenances the illusory lack of differentiation of the social classes: it is as from the moment when a typist earning twenty pounds a month *recognizes herself* in the big wedding of the bourgeoisie that bourgeois ex-nomination achieves its full effect. (p. 141)

In precisely the same way, realism invites (or requires) groups subordinated by class, gender, and race to (mis)recognize themselves in the exnominated metadiscourse of the *Hart to Hart* segment. Discourses lower down the hierarchy can be named, and this in itself becomes a sign of their lower discursive status. To name a discourse, say, "feminist" or "Marxist" is to imply that other discourses, other points of view, are possible. Only that which is not named appears to have no alternative, only that which is not named can achieve the status of the natural, of common sense. In MacCabe's theory, the "unwritten" metadiscourse works so well because it is "ex-nominated." It has been one of the achievements of Marxist cultural criticism in the thirty years since Barthes first proposed this theory that capitalism can be named in the cultural and discursive domains as well as in the economic: feminism has achieved the naming of patriarchy in a very much shorter period.

The repression of the role of discourse in defining the real leads to tautology – the real is what is real, not the real is what I say is real. Television realism articulates "a classic relation between narrative and vision in which

what we see is true and this truth confirms what we see" (MacCabe 1981c: 315). Barthes (1973) describes tautology at work in more detail:

Tautology is the indignant "representation" of the *rights* of reality over and above language. Since it is magical, it can of course only take refuge behind the argument of authority: thus parents at the end of their tether reply to the child who keeps on asking questions: *because that's how it is*. (p. 153)

Those groups with authority (those that constitute what Barthes calls the bourgeoisie) try to prevent a struggle over meaning by naturalizing *their* meaning – their economic and social power is mobilized discursively, ideologically, and culturally to exnominate itself beyond the realm of potential opposition. MacCabe's account of the operation of the meta-discourse in realism is identical. As those with social power are, amongst other things, white, male, middle-class, of conservative religion, middle-aged, and living in an economically and politically powerful region, we may expect the metadiscourse of television realism to originate from that social point where these discourses intersect, and therefore to naturalize that point of view and to work towards establishing it as the common-sense consensus of the nation. It denies the subordinate (those groups that Barthes calls the oppressed) the means of articulating and understanding their subordination by denying them a discourse with which to speak and think their opposition. As Barthes (1973) puts it:

The oppressed is nothing, he has only one language, that of his emancipation; the oppressor is everything, his language is rich, multiform, supple, with all the possible degrees of dignity at its disposal; he has an exclusive right to meta-language. The oppressed *makes* the world, he has only an active, transitive (political) language; the oppressor conserves it, his language is plenary, intransitive, gestural, theatrical: it is Myth. The language of the former aims at transforming, of the latter at eternalizing. (p. 149)

What is important here is Barthes's suggestion that the oppressed must have one discourse that derives from their material social existence, the discourse of emancipation that aims at transforming the world, which no amount of social, economic, or cultural power can deny them. There is thus always a point from which hegemony can be resisted and social change motivated. MacCabe seems to deny the possibility of this point preserving its existence within or in spite of the structures of power and domination ranged against it.

## □ Television and social change

The arguments that television is always an agent of the status quo are convincing, but not totally so. Social change does occur, ideological values do shift, and television is part of this movement. It is wrong to see it as an originator of social change, or even to claim that it ought to be so, for social change must have its roots in material social existence; but television can be, must be, part of that change, and its effectivity will either hasten or delay it. Thus series like *Charlie's Angels* and *Police Woman* in the 1970s, despite their numerous incorporating devices, were part of the changing status of women in our society, and could not have been popular in a period when women were firmly confined to domestic and traditional female roles. The tension in the programs between the portrayal of the liberated, active, strong woman and the incorporating devices of patriarchy was never wholly resolved to patriarchy's advantage, however much textual theorists might point to textual evidence that "demonstrates" that it was. Not all viewers read television programs according to the textual strategies encoded in them. The problem with much traditional textual analysis, whether its impulse has been ideological or aesthetic, is that it has tended to produce an authoritarian, even "correct," reading of a text, and has tended to ascribe to the text the power to impose this reading on the viewer. We are only just beginning to produce a theory of the text and consequent methods of analysis that can cater for the activity of the variety of viewers to make a variety of meanings out of the same text.

A similar problem confronts theorists, like MacCabe and Kaplan, who call for a radical text. Kaplan (1983a), who is primarily concerned with gender politics rather than class politics, finds four main characteristics in radical feminist films: her list summarizes the strategies that radical theorists in general call for to defeat realism as the dominant mode of patriarchal capitalism, and as such is easily adapted to apply to television and film in general, rather than to feminist film specifically. The first of her four features of radical texts is:

1. They focus on the mode of representation, on film or television as a machine producing illusions of the real, they draw attention to the (televisual) process and use techniques to break the illusion that we are not watching television, but "reality" (p. 138).

This echoes MacCabe's claim that part of the subject matter of any radical film or television program must be the process of making the program. Claire Johnston (1973), quoted by Kaplan, makes a similar point in her call for a radical feminist cinema:

Any revolutionary must challenge the depiction of reality; it is not enough to discuss the oppression of women within the text of the film: the language of the cinema/depiction of reality must also be interrogated, so that a break between ideology and text is effected. (p. 28)

Similarly, Caughie's (1981) "documentary look" at least calls attention to the role and presence of the camera – it reminds us that we are watching a representation of the real. Against this, we must note that it does not make explicit the social point of origin of its metadiscourse, but instead presents this metadiscourse as one of objective facticity, of the "truth." This may be why its techniques appear to be more suited to progressive social realism than to radicalism.

Kaplan's other features of radical texts are:

2. They refuse to construct a fixed spectator, but position the spectator so that s/he has to be involved in the processes of the film, rather than passively being captured by it. Distanciation techniques ensure the divorce of spectator from text.
3. They rather deliberately refuse the pleasure that usually comes from the manipulation of our emotions.... They try to replace pleasure in recognition with pleasure in learning – with cognitive processes, as against emotional ones.
4. All mix documentary and fiction either (a) as part of the belief that the two cannot ultimately be distinguished as filmic models or (b) to create a certain tension between the social formation, subjectivity, and representation. (p. 138)

This sort of implied call to action on the part of the producers derives from a belief in the power of the text to produce a radical frame of mind in the spectator and thus to effect, if not originate, social change. This seems to me to overestimate the power of the text, to misplace the origins of radicalism and of social change, and to underestimate the role of the reader in the construction of meaning. In the rest of this book I shall argue that television inherently has the first two of Kaplan's characteristics of a radical text, and that their coexistence with the opposing characteristics of a reactionary realist text is the reason why television can be popular without being totally reactionary. Kaplan and MacCabe both have doubts about whether the sort of radical film or television program they want would be popular, but neither of them addresses the problem of popularity and its relationship to radicalism or progressiveness. The radical text, in its rejection of the dominant conventions for representing reality, tries to exclude the dominant ideology from any role in the production of meanings from the text. But in a mass-industrialized society, where our cultural life is dominated by the products of

industrialized cultural production and distribution, the conventions of that culture industry, with their necessarily close relationship to the dominant ideology, have become the agents of popularity, accessibility, and understandability, and thus have to be taken into account in a theory of popular meanings within a mass culture.

Social change in industrial democracies rarely occurs through revolution, which is the sociopolitical equivalent of the radical text. Rather it occurs as a result of a constant tension between those with social power, and subordinate groups trying to gain more power so as to shift social values towards their own interests. The textual equivalent of this is the progressive text, where the discourses of social change are articulated in relationship with the metadiscourse of the dominant ideology. *Cagney and Lacey* is a progressive text because the discourses of feminism are articulated in a constant tension with those of the dominant ideology of patriarchy. The presence of the dominant ideology and the conventional form of realism through which it works are necessary to ensure the program's popularity and accessibility, but do not necessarily deny the progressive, oppositional discourses a space for themselves. Rather they provide a frame within which such oppositional discourses can be heard and their oppositionality made part of the substance of the drama.

The ability of the realistic form to contain oppositional discourses without defusing them completely is predicated on the ability of the viewer to read radically, and to give these discourses semiotic priority over the dominant ideological framework. This is the concern of chapter 5; I wish to close this one on a note of doubt that realistic television is necessarily reactionary.

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# Television Culture

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*John Fiske*

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