Chapter 5

Active audiences

☐ Text and social subjects

When audiences are understood as textual subjects, as in MacCabe's work, they are seen as relatively powerless and inactive and MacCabe and others such as Heath developed this view into the orthodoxy of screen theory. But a few dissenting notes were struck in the pages of *Screen* and a number of writers such as Morley (1980b), Willeman (1978), and Neale (1977) began to challenge this view of the subject, particularly by insisting on the difference between the socially and the textually produced subjects. The social subject has a history, lives in a particular social formation (a mix of class, gender, age, region, etc.), and is constituted by a complex cultural history that is both social and textual. The subjectivity results from "real" social experience and from mediated or textual experience. The actual television viewer is a primarily social subject. This social subjectivity is more influential in the construction of meanings than the textually produced subjectivity which exists only at the moment of reading.

Willeman (1978) writes:

There remains an unbridgeable gap between "real" readers/authors and "inscribed" ones, constructed and marked in and by the text. Real readers are subjects in history, living in social formations, rather than mere subjects of a single text. The two types of subject are not commensurate. But for the purposes of formalism, real readers are supposed to coincide with the constructed readers.

(p. 48, quoted in Morley 1980a: 159)

Morley (1980a) went on to investigate empirically this difference. He took the issue of *Nationwide* that Brunsdon and he (1978) had analyzed and showed it to groups of between five and ten viewers. He also showed a later issue to another group. The groups were defined primarily by occupation, though he also noted their gender and race. The occupations included apprentices, bank managers, teacher-training students, arts students, black girls, trade unionists, and so on. The screening of the programs was followed

by an open discussion, usually of about thirty minutes: recordings of these discussions are the prime data with which he worked.

He chose groups because he wanted to trace the responses of socially produced subjects, and the social dimension would emerge from what groups had in common. Occupation was the prime definer of the group because it is a prime definer of class, and class, according to Parkin (1972) and Hall (1980a), is the most important factor in producing socially motivated differences of reading.

What Morley found was that Hall, in following Parkin (1972), had overemphasized the role of class in producing different readings and had underestimated the variety of determinants of readings. Thus the readings showed some interesting and unexpected cross-class similarities: bank managers and apprentices, for example, produced broadly similar readings despite their class differences; so, too, did some university students and trade unionists. We could explain these apparent anomalies by suggesting that the apprentices and bank managers were similarly constructed as subjects of a capitalist ideology in that they were both inserting themselves into the dominant system (albeit at different points) and thus had a shared interest in its survival and success. University students and trade unionists, however, were in institutions that provided them with ways of criticizing the dominant system and they thus produced similar and more oppositional readings.

This work of Morley helped to establish ethnography as a valid method of studying television and its viewers. The object of ethnographic study is the way that people live their culture. Its value for us lies in its shift of emphasis away from the textual and ideological construction of the subject to socially and historically situated people. It reminds us that actual people in actual situations watch and enjoy actual television programs. It acknowledges the differences between people despite their social construction, and pluralizes the meanings and pleasures that they find in television. It thus contradicts theories that stress the singularity of television's meanings and its reading subjects. It enables us to account for diversity both within the social formation and within the processes of culture. Ethnographic study may take the observational form of Hobson's (1980, 1982) work in which she went into homes to see how women integrated television into their domestic and family lives. Or like Morley's (1980a, 1986) or Ang's (1985) work, it may use viewers' verbalizations of their responses to television, in which case it moves to an ethnography of discourse. Of course, Hobson talked with her subjects, too, and their discourses about the media in their lives are an important part of her data. Palmer (1986) combined observations of children viewing in their homes with interviews and questionnaires. All these studies, in one way or another, trace differences amongst viewers, modes of viewing, and the meanings or pleasures produced. This revaluation of the viewer requires a

similar revaluation of the text. Textual studies of television now have to stop treating it as a closed text, that is, as one where the dominant ideology exerts considerable, if not total, influence over its ideological structure and therefore over its reader. Analysis has to pay less attention to the textual strategies of preference or closure and more to the gaps and spaces that open television up to meanings not preferred by the textual structure, but that result from the social experience of the reader.

Hall's (1980a) preferred reading theory was an early attempt to account for this theoretically. Briefly, he argued that viewers whose social situation, particularly their class, aligned them comfortably with the dominant ideology would produce dominant readings of a text; that is, they would accept its preferred meanings and their close fit with the dominant ideology. Other viewers, whose social situation placed them in opposition to the dominant ideology, would oppose its meanings in the text and would produce oppositional readings. The majority of viewers, however, are probably situated not in positions of conformity or opposition to the dominant ideology, but in ones that conform to it in some ways, but not others; they accept the dominant ideology in general, but modify or inflect it to meet the needs of their specific situation. These viewers would, Hall argued, produce negotiated readings of the text; these are readings that inflect the meanings preferred by the dominant ideology, to take into account the social differences of different viewers.

Thus a dominant reading of the *Hart to Hart* segment in chapter 1 would be made by a white, middle-class, urban, northern male, and would conform to the dominant ideology as it is encoded in the text. An oppositional reading might be made by a Hispanic member of the working classes, who would reject the dominant meanings and pleasures offered by the program because they opposed his interests; he might support the crimes of the Hispanic villain as revolutionary acts against white capitalism. A woman, however, might produce a negotiated reading, which accepted the ideological framework of the narrative, but negotiated within it a special significance for the heroine, her actions, and the values she embodies. She would thus see the heroine's capitalization on her looks and her jewelry as means of exercising female power within, but not against, patriarchy.

The limitations of this theory are that it overemphasizes class in relation to other social factors and that it implies that the three types of reading are roughly equal. In practice, there are very few perfectly dominant or purely oppositional readings, and consequently viewing television is typically a process of negotiation between the text and its variously socially situated readers. The value of the theory lies in its freeing the text from complete ideological closure, and in its shift away from the text and towards the reader as the site of meaning.

Just how far this shift goes is, of course, a matter of debate. Hall argues that while television programs allow a variety of negotiated or oppositional meanings, their structure always prefers a meaning that generally promotes the dominant ideology. It is the ideology in this meaning that is negotiated with or opposed. It is more productive to think not so much of a singular preferred meaning, but of structures of preference in the text that seek to prefer some meanings and close others off. This is an elaboration of Hall's model, not a rejection of it, for it still sees the text as a structured polysemy, as a potential of unequal meanings, some of which are preferred over, or proffered more strongly than, others, and which can only be activated by socially situated viewers in a process of negotiation between the text and their social situation.

Eco's (1972) theory of aberrant decoding is essentially similar. In this Eco argues that whenever there are significant social differences between the encoders and decoders of a text, then decoding will necessarily be "aberrant." By this he means that the text will be decoded by a different set of codes and conventions from those operating during its encoding or production, and the resulting meanings will thus be determined more by the social situation of the decoder than by that of the encoder. He concludes that for mass communication, whose texts by definition are decoded by a wide variety of social groups, aberrant decodings are, paradoxically, the norm.

In the rest of this chapter I shall detail some recent ethnographic studies of television viewers, and the evidence they provide of the viewers' ability to make their own socially pertinent meanings out of the semiotic resources provided by television. These studies make this chapter a pivotal one in the book. The preceding chapters have analyzed television's power to construct its preferred readings and readers. Subsequent ones will explore television's openness, its invitations to its viewers to construct their meanings out of its texts, and will thus require us to reevaluate the relative power of texts and viewers in the production of meaning and pleasure.

☐ **Making meanings**

Morley (1980a) was the first to put this semiotic and cultural theory through an empirical investigation. His work calls into question key aspects of the screen theory of classic realism, and its view of the relationship between the text and the reading subject, for it refutes the argument that the ideology in the structure of the text works almost irresistibly to position and construct the subjectivity of the reader as a subject in ideology. Bank managers and apprentices are *already* positioned towards the dominant ideology, so too are students and trade unionists. Reading the television text is a process of

negotiation between this existing subject position and the one proposed by the text itself, and in this negotiation the balance of power lies with the reader. The meanings found in the text shift towards the subject position of the reader more than the reader's subjectivity is subjected to the ideological power of the text.

To be popular, the television text has to be read and enjoyed by a diversity of social groups, so its meanings must be capable of being inflected in a number of different ways. The television text is therefore more polysemic and more open than earlier theorists allowed for. As Hobson (1982) puts it: "The message is not solely in the "text", but can be changed or "worked on" by the audience as they make their own interpretation of a programme" (p. 106).

This means that reading is not a garnering of meanings from the text but is a dialogue (Volosinov 1973) between text and the socially situated reader. As Morley (1980a) says:

> Thus the meaning of the text must be thought in terms of which set of discourses it encounters in any particular set of circumstances, and how this encounter may re-structure both the meaning of the text and the discourses which it meets. The meaning of the text will be constructed differently according to the discourses (knowledges, prejudices, resistances, etc.) brought to bear on the text by the reader and the crucial factor in the encounter of audience/subject and text will be the range of discourses at the disposal of the audience. (p. 18)

The *Hart to Hart* extract in chapter 1 provides us with an example of a discourse in a text that can be read differently by the discursive practices of different readers. The window/porthole/laundromat joke occurs within the discourse of gender. Its social domain is gender difference, its location is the masculine position. It says that women can only make sense of the technical world by reducing it to the domestic. It therefore makes sense of the feminine in a way that serves the interests of the masculine, because it reserves competence in the technical, public world for men. It is therefore a bearer and producer of a patriarchal ideology. But it may meet a nonpatriarchal subject, and must be capable of being read from this subject position.

One way of understanding our subjectivity is that it is composed of the variety of discourses that we use to make sense of the social domains that constitute our social experience. Because our social experience has varied, and does vary, so much, our subjectivities are likely to be composed of a number of different, possibly contradictory discourses, each bearing traces of a different specific ideology. (A discourse bears a specific ideology and through that relates to the dominant ideology or ideology in general.) Stuart

Hall (1983) argues persuasively for the contradictoriness of the specific ideologies and discourses that comprise our subjectivity, which requires us to see the subjectivity as disunited, as a site of struggle, not as a unified site of ideological reconciliation:

> As Gramsci said again, our personalities are not at all as we imagine them, as sort of unified boxes, but are full of very contradictory elements — progressive elements and stone-age elements. There is a true domestic woman inside the woman who is struggling to be a liberated feminist, there is the religious trace inside those of us who think we are fully secularized modern citizens, we are full of the rag-bag and debris of ancient ideologies which have lost their systematic form, but still hang about. Even when we don't think with these bits, we feel with them, which is one of the reasons why people in the modern world, who know that, for instance, sexual jealousy is one of the most extraordinary ways of dispensing with emotional energy . . . once it happens get into an absolutely primitive rage. . . . The notion that we are talking about a kind of rationally calculative system and figures of thought that just correspond to a rationally given economic interest does not describe the maelstrom of potential ideological subjects that we are.

The reader of the window/porthole/laundromat joke is not required to read it in the way preferred by the text. If the text's conservative patriarchal discourse of gender meets either a more liberal or more radical one in the reader, the joke will be decoded very differently (see chapter 6). But Hall implies that such a joke may be decoded in two ways simultaneously by the same viewer. A one-time sexist who is now liberated will be able to respond doubly according to both gender discourses which still exist, even if unequally, in his or her subjectivity.

Both the text and the subjectivity are discursive constructs and both contain similar competing or contradictory discourses. It is out of these contradictions that the polysemy of the text and the multiplicity of readings arise.

Hodge and Tripp (1986) provide good examples of multiple or contradictory readings made by viewers. They did not ask what effect television has on its audience, nor what use does the audience make of television; rather they asked how a particular television text, seen as a polysemic potential of meanings, connects with the social life of the viewer or group of viewers. They were concerned with how a television text is read, with how meanings are made by the active reading of an audience, and how this activity of reading can be explained in terms of a theory of culture, that is, the process of making common sense out of social experience. Their readers were school children and their work is based on an assumption about children that needs

spelling out, because it differs from that which underlies so much of the research in this area: Hodge and Tripp assume that children are not fools or passive dupes able to be affected against their will and against their interests by the wicked stepmother called television. Rather, they assume that children are engaged in a constant active struggle to make sense out of their social experience, and that television plays an important role in that struggle.

Market research had found that one of the most popular programs with Australian school children was *Prisoner*, a soap opera set in a women's prison, and screened in the USA under the title *Prisoner: Cell Block H.* This appeared, on the face of it, to be a surprising choice for junior high school students.

Hodge and Tripp discovered that many of the children found, at varying levels of consciousness, and were able to articulate with varying degrees of explicitness, usefully significant parallels between the prison and the school. They perceived the following main similarities between prisoners and school students:

1. pupils are shut in;
2. pupils are separated from their friends;
3. pupils would not be there if they were not made to be;
4. pupils only work because they are punished if they do not, and it is less boring than doing nothing at all;
5. pupils have no rights: they can do nothing about an unfair teacher;
6. some teachers victimize their pupils;
7. there are gangs and leaders amongst the pupils;
8. there are silly rules which everyone tries to break. (p. 49)

In their discussions the children showed that they made meanings out of *Prisoner* that connected the program to their own social experience. A textual study revealed many parallels between prison and school. In both there were recognizable role types amongst staff and prisoners that formed recognizable and usable categories with which students could "think" their school experience – the hard-bitten old warden/teacher, the soft new one, the one you can take advantage of, the one you can't, and so on. Similarly there were prisoners who resisted the institution and fought it in all ways, those who played along with it and were the goody goodies, those who played along with it on the surface, but opposed it underneath, and so on. There were also strategies of resistance that applied to both: prisoners used a secret language, sometimes of special private words, but more often of nudges, winks, glances, and *doubles entendres* to communicate amongst themselves under the noses of and in resistance to the wardens/teachers. There was an oppositional subculture of the public areas of the prison, particularly the laundry where many of them worked, that paralleled the oppositional school

subculture of the lavatories, the locker rooms, and special corners of the yard. And in both institutions there was a consistent attempt by the official culture to colonize and control these areas, which was resisted and resented by the inmates who struggled to keep them within their own cultural control.

Palmer (1986) found a group of 11- and 12-year-old girls who regularly reenacted the previous night's episode of *Prisoner* in the schoolyard, sometimes even coopting a friendly teacher to play one of the wardens:

> ANNETTE (11): If we played *Prisoner*, well, Miss would be one of the officers, like, because she had the loudhailer and she used to scream at us through it.
>
> (p. 111)
>
> INTERVIEWER: Did she watch *Prisoner*?
>
> ANNETTE: I don't think so, but we'd tell her what to say.
>
> INTERVIEWER: Which warden did you make her into?
>
> ANNETTE: We made her one of the real bad ones, Officer Powell, she's a real baddie but she's all right now because there's a worse one than her, Miss Ferguson.

It is significant that the teacher, with her symbol of authority (the loudhailer), was cast as "a real baddie." The teacher's good-humored involvement in the game is a mark of her popularity, yet the girls' acceptance of this individual teacher coexisted with a resistance to the authority she represented. Palmer comments:

> From the girls' description, it seems there was much good humour generated on both sides by the teacher's participation in such a way. Both children and teacher were acknowledging the disparity in their own positions in the school by playing it out but they were also entering into a kind of friendly conspiracy to laugh about it.
>
> (p. 111)

Prisoner provided Australian school students with a language, a set of cultural categories complete with connotations, value systems, and ideological inflection with which to think through their experience of school from their own position, to make a kind of sense of school that suited *their* social interests in that it enabled them to articulate their powerlessness and offered them positive ways of understanding it. These included a range of categorized and therefore usable conceptual strategies to adopt in understanding institutional and social power relations, conceptual strategies which ranged from the oppositional, through degrees of accommodation, to modes of acceptance. The children inserted the meanings of the program into their social experience of school in a way that informed both – the meanings of school and the meanings of *Prisoner* were each influenced by the other, and the fit between them ensured that each validated the other.

Turnbull (1984) has found that young girl fans of the program find in it meanings that they can use to produce a sense of subcultural identity and esteem for themselves. Images of strong, active women fighting the system, gaining minor victories (although finally succumbing to it), give them pleasure (in the resistance) and a means of articulating a discourse of resistance to the dominant ideology that paralleled the discourse (often called rebelliousness) that they used to make sense of their social existence. The contradictions and struggle between authority and resistance to it existed in both the program and their subjectivities, and the meanings that were activated and the pleasures that were gained were the ones that made social sense to the subordinate and the powerless.

School children have found and used a potential discourse of resistance in the program and, interestingly, a number of teachers have complained to the producers that the program teaches insubordination. Similarly, Radway (1984) has found that some women readers of romances have been able to be more assertive towards their husbands as a result of their reading. This may have resulted from the act of reading itself – it was something they did for themselves, in opposition to their ideological role of constantly caring for others and the home – or it may have resulted from their readings of the texts themselves. These readings saw the progress of the narrative as one of the feminization of the hero: at the start he was cruel, unfeeling, remote (a feminine view of masculinity), but by the end he had become sensitized enough to the heroine's finer feminine sensibility for him to be fit for her to marry.

There is some evidence that finding a discourse in a text that makes sense of one's experience of social powerlessness in a positive way is the vital first step towards being able to do something to change that powerlessness.

Hodge and Tripp's (1986) study of the ways that Australian Aboriginal children made sense of television is of significance here. They found that the children constructed a cultural category that included American blacks, American Indians, and themselves. This cultural category, a tool to think with, conceptualized the political and narrative powerlessness of non-whites in white society, and was used in making sense both of television and of social experience. A particularly popular program among these children was *Diff'rent Strokes*, whose leading character, an American black child adopted by a white family, they saw as Aboriginal. One can imagine the sort of sense they made of his small size, his eternal childishness, and the consistency with which he is "misunderstood" and set right by his white "father" and "elder sister," particularly when we remember that American Indians are part of the same cultural category.

What the Aboriginal readers were demonstrating was the ability of a subculture to make its own sense out of a text that clearly bears the dominant

ideology. The discourses of powerlessness through which they lived their lives activated a set of meanings that resisted those preferred by the dominant ideology. When they supported and identified with American Indians in their fights against white cowboys, they knew both that their side was doomed to lose, and that they were being obtuse or awkward in reading a western in this way. Reading television in this way provided them with a means of articulating their experience of powerlessness in a white-dominated society and the ability to articulate one's experience is a necessary prerequisite for developing the will to change it.

Mattelart (1980), in his studies of the Third World reception of Hollywood television, comes to a similar conclusion:

The messages of mass culture can be neutralized by the dominated classes who can produce their own antidotes by creating the sometimes contradictory seeds of a new culture.
(p. 20)

Another example of the subcultural reading of a television program is provided by the way that *Dynasty* has become a cult show amongst gays in the USA (Schiff 1985). D&D parties (Dinner and *Dynasty*) are fashionable, and a gay bar in Los Angeles shows endless video-loops of catfights between Alexis and Krystle. The program's emphasis on high jinks, high fashion, and its portrayal of interpersonal relations as competitive point-scoring are all readily inserted by a gay subculture into the discourse of camp. The character of Alexis, played by Joan Collins, is "normally" seen as the apotheosis of the sexuality of the older woman, but gays may read her not as a representation of femininity, but rather as a destroyer of sexual difference: for this subculture, her style of dress with its broad shoulders and sometimes severe lines combines with her interpersonal aggression to deny traditional distinctions between masculinity and femininity, and her incorporation of masculine traits into a feminine body produces an inversion of the male gay that is equally subversive of dominant gender roles. This critical subversion of the ideology of the haute bourgeoisie which is a subtext to the preferred structure of the program provides the subculture with a means of articulating its own form of oppositional relationship to the dominant system.

Katz and Liebes (1984) found that different ethnic groups negotiated the interaction of *Dallas* with their own subcultures in ways that included misreadings of the text. A group of Arab viewers found it incompatible with their culture that Sue Ellen, having run away with her baby from her husband J. R., should go to her former lover's house, and instead they "read" into the program that she returned to her own father – an action more compatible with Arab culture. At other times the differences between the cultural values of *Dallas* and of the viewers were mobilized to support those of the viewers in opposition to the program's. A Moroccan Jew says:

I learned from this series to say "Happy is our lot, goodly is our fate" that we're Jewish. Everything about J. R. and his baby, who has maybe four or five fathers, who knows? The mother is Sue Ellen, of course, and the brother of Pam left, maybe he's the father ... I see they're almost all bastards.

(p. 31)

□ Modes of reception

The study of culture must not be confined to the readings of texts, for the conditions of a text's reception necessarily become part of the meanings and pleasures it offers the viewer. Television ethnographers have begun to study the ways in which television is integrated with the culture of the home.

For television is essentially a domestic medium, the routines of viewing are part of the domestic routines by which home life is organized. Hobson (1982) went into the homes of viewers of the early evening soap opera *Crossroads*, watched it with the women and their families, and talked with them about the role the program played in their lives. Her observations enable us to trace a number of ways in which the program, as an example of television in general, is integrated into the routines of the home. One problem facing the housewives who were Hobson's main subjects was that *Crossroads* was screened at about the time of the family tea, and the preparation and serving of this was, in the culture of the homes she visited, part of women's work, part of the definition of gender roles and the meanings of gender difference. In this culture, then, it was impossible for the man to prepare the tea while the woman watched television. Some women organized tea to come either before or after *Crossroads*, but for others the clash seemed inevitable. Sometimes this was the result of a recalcitrant husband who insisted that his tea be served at the time he found convenient, sometimes the woman appeared not to question the need of her family to have tea at this time, she accepted her ideologically given position as nurturer/servant whose needs always took second place to those of her husband and children. The women evolved two coping strategies; one was to listen to the television in the living room as they worked in the kitchen, and the other was to have a black and white set in the kitchen for them to watch while they worked. In both cases the colored television in the living room was the cultural center, the kitchen one was secondary; and the women used to nip into the living room if there was anything that the sound track or the black and white drew their attention to. For those with black and white sets, this was most frequently the color of someone's clothes or hat, for television is an important part of the culture of fashion, as the producers of shows like *Dynasty* well know.

For these women, however much they may have wished television to

occupy the primary place in their culture, it was, in fact, secondary, and its secondariness was part of the meaning of their subordinate position in the patriarchal family. For other women, however, such as those who lived alone, accommodating husbands, or those who lived alone, *Crossroads* was their primary cultural activity at its time of screening, and they watched it with undivided attention.

Palmer (1986) in her ethnographic study of how children interact with television reported similar findings. Children's reports on their television-watching showed how they integrated it into the household routine:

In the afternoon I watch *Simon Townsend's Wonder World* and after that I watch *Matchmates* and then I just go and do something, maybe homework or something, and when I come back I watch *Family Feud* and then *The New Price Is Right*, and I watch some news and in that case I have to do the washing up and I watch *Sons and Daughters* and on Monday at 7.30 I watch *Hart to Hart* and after that I watch *Prisoner* and then go to bed.

(p. 48)

She also found that children watched with a wide variety of modes of attention that varied from rapt, total absorption often with the child within a couple of feet of the screen, to a very loose "monitoring," when, for instance, a child would play cards with her/his back to the screen and would turn round to look only when something on the sound track (often laughter) caught his/her attention. Periods of rapt attention rarely lasted for more than ten minutes at a time, and the range of activities that children combined with their watching of television was remarkably wide. Palmer (1986: 63) lists twenty different common activities that range from doing homework, through building models or doing craft work, to singing, dancing, talking, jumping, and fighting. Watching with pets was very common, even the family goldfish which were repeatedly reported to share the children's viewing by swimming on the side of the tank nearest to the television set! While such studies do not tell us about the meanings that viewers make of television, they do show us how viewers incorporate television into their daily lives and are rarely dominated or controlled by it as so many of its critics would claim.

Television, to be popular, must not only contain meanings relevant to a wide variety of social groups, it must also be capable of being watched with different modes of attention, what Hartley (1984b) calls "regimes of watching." Viewers may watch television as a primary activity when they are "glued to the screen"; they may, like some of Hobson's housewives, reluctantly give it second place in their attention while they do something else; or they may have it on as background while they read the paper, converse, or do homework; it gains their full attention only when an item makes a strong and

successful bid for their interest. A 1985 study of British viewers by the IBA found that most people were doing something else while they were watching television – cuddling, knitting, talking to each other and to the television set, especially when alone in the room. Tulloch and Moran (1986) make the point well:

> To sit and watch a program like *A Country Practice* with a household is to be reminded what an intensely social activity television is. Viewers talk to each other while the program is in progress. They move in and out of the room in the course of doing household tasks or homework. The TV set and the program are just part of a general environment in which viewing occurs.
>
> (p. 236)

Some may listen to it rather than watch – McQuail, Blumler, and Brown (1972) found that many women alone in the house during the day had the television on because the sound of its voices made them feel less lonely and Tulloch and Moran (1986) and Hobson (1982) have both shown how important this companionship is for the elderly. The next chapter will explore the effects that this variety of regimes of watching has upon the nature of the television text: for the moment we need to note that television is not the dominating monster it is often thought to be; viewers have considerable control, not only over its meanings, but over the role that it plays in their lives.

This is another way in which television differs from film, which has to cater for only a single mode of watching and does not have to compete for the viewer's attention. Screen theory's emphasis on the power of the text over the reader is more justifiable for cinema than for television, and the cinema audience may well be relatively more powerless than the television audience. Television is normally viewed within the domestic familiarity of the living room, which contrasts significantly with the public, impersonal place of cinema. In going out to cinema we tend to submit to its terms, to become subject to its discourse, but television comes to us, enters our cultural space, and becomes subject to our discourses. The living room as cultural space bears different meanings for different members of the family – a fulltime houseparent may watch daytime television as part of the culture of domestic labor, and nighttime television as part of the culture of family relationships, whereas a fulltime wage earner may insert television viewing into the culture of leisure. These different meanings of the cultural space of viewing result in different social discourses being brought to bear upon television, and thus in different readings of it.

But television's significance is not confined to the way it is watched, nor to the meanings that are found within it. Sometimes the act of watching television and of choosing what is watched can itself play an important role in the

culture of the home, which is, as we have seen, generally patriarchal. The part that television plays within this culture can vary according to the viewer's position towards this ideology. Hobson (1982) has shown us how housewives who accept their subordination in patriarchy allow their television interests only a secondary role. But other of Hobson's housewives are aware of and sometimes kick against patriarchal domination, and television can become part of their resistance. Many women knew that their husbands despised *Crossroads* and disliked their watching it. Watching it became for them a (minor) act of defiance, a claiming of a piece of feminine cultural territory within the masculine hegemony. Like Radway's (1984) romance readers, this creation of their own cultural space enabled a self-generated sense of feminine identity: the program became a piece of popular cultural capital (see chapter 1) that women possessed, but men did not. The women's sense of cultural possession of the program, that it was *their* culture, was profoundly outraged by changes made to it by the producers in 1981. These included changing its slot in the schedule, reducing it from four to three episodes a week, and, most emphatically of all, deciding to write out the main female character. This outrage was consistently expressed in terms of what right had *they* got to do this to *us*? And the *they* was seen as men and authority in general acting against the interests of women. *Crossroads*, in opposition to the "facts" of its production, was made into women's culture, by the women viewers themselves.

The program and the watching of it (for the two are inseparable) can constitute a piece of cultural capital for women. Sometimes this women's culture was expressed in direct opposition to that of men: *Crossroads* was often contrasted with the news, which either preceded or followed it in the flow of early evening scheduling. The news, with its murders, muggings, politics, and sport, was seen as men's concern – a finding supported by earlier work by Hobson (1980) in which she found that women frequently felt it their duty to keep the children quiet while their fathers watched the news. Watching *Crossroads* in the face of masculine disapproval, and understanding it in terms of its opposition to the masculine culture of the news, became an assertion of the woman's right to contribute to the culture of the home and even to control a part of it.

"Television, then, plays a vital role in what Morley (1986) calls "the politics of the family." By this he refers to the patterns of power and resistance within the everyday culture of the home. The two main axes of this power are between parents and children, and men and women. Parents frequently use television as a means of discipline, particularly by depriving children of viewing as a means of punishment. Rogge (1987) records a typical instance which is met with an equally typical tactic of resistance. A single mother of three sometimes uses this form of discipline on her 6- and 11-year-old sons,

"but then neither of them will talk to me. They've really got me where they want me. They know I don't like being on my own. I nearly always give in."

Parents and schoolteachers frequently feel it is their responsibility and right to "guide" children's viewing preferences – such guidance typically consists of an attempt to impose adult cultural tastes upon children and to denigrate children's cultural tastes. Power all too often operates under the mask of responsibility, and is as frequently exercised through sarcasm and scorn as through direct control or prohibition.

Hodge and Tripp (1986) give a useful insight into this adult power. They found that children learned quickly to distinguish between the different modalities of television's modes of representation (modality is the apparent distance between the text and the real). Cartoons are a mode of low modality, formulaic narratives such as *The A-Team* are almost as low, whereas the news, with its foregrounded "truth," operates in a far higher level of modality. In grammatical terms, cartoons and *The A-Team* operate in the conditional mode of the world of the "as if." News, on the other hand, operates in the indicative mode, the world that "is." By the age of 8 or 9 children had learned to distinguish between modalities and thus were able to cope easily with violence in cartoons and *The A-Team*: what they found hardest to handle was violence on the news, yet it was the news that parents and teachers wanted them to watch. Children's pleasure in cartoons and formulaic narratives is a source of worry to many parents who denigrate these tastes with a vaguely defined criticism that they are "bad" for children.

Similarly, men denigrate women's tastes in television (especially for soap opera), women's mode of watching (diffused rather than concentrated) (see Morley 1986 summarized in chapter 11), and women's talk about their programs which men call "gossip" in opposition to their own talk about their programs which they typically refer to as "discussion." (Tulloch and Moran 1986). Some women have adopted this masculine value system and denigrate their own tastes ("Typical American trash, really, I love it" (Morley 1986: 72)) while others are more assertive of the value of their own cultural tastes. But whatever their orientation to this family power structure, the point remains that the meanings and pleasures that women find in soap operas and children in cartoons are inevitably inflected by their situation in the politics of the family, and part of the pleasure in viewing them lies in their felt defiance of the masculine or parental power.

Similarly, the male's preference for news, documentary, sport, and realistic or "muscle" drama becomes translated into the "natural" superiority of these genres, which, in turn, allows the male to impose his viewing tastes upon the household, not because he is more powerful, but because the programs he prefers are innately "better." This also gives him the right to impose his viewing habits, generally those of undistracted attention, upon the

rest of the household and to demand that the women and children refrain from talking while he is viewing (Morley 1986, Hobson 1980).

Television, with its already politicized pictures of the world, enters a context that is formed by, and subjected to, similar political lines of power and resistances. The intersection of its textual politics and the politics of its reception is a crucial point in its effectivities and functions in our culture.

□ **Gossip and oral culture**

The word gossip is clearly from a phallocentric discourse: its connotations are of triviality and femininity, and it is opposed, by implication, to serious male talk. But these negative connotations can only get in the way of our understanding its role in television culture. It is a form of "social cement" (Geraghty 1981) which binds together characters and narrative strands in soap opera, binds viewers to each other as they gossip about the show, and establishes an active relationship between viewer and program. It is patri-archally wrong to see women's gossip about soap operas as evidence of their inability to tell fact from fiction: it is, rather, an active engagement with the issues of the program and a desire to read them in a way that makes them relevant to the rest of their lives. As Katz and Liebes (1984) say, "it is clear from these examples that people are discussing and evaluating not only the issues of the Ewing family but the issues in their own lives" (p. 31). McQuail, Blumler, and Brown (1972) and others working with the uses and gratifica-tions approach have shown how common it is for television to be used as something to talk about, whether at the factory tea break, at the suburban coffee morning, or in the schoolyard. As one of Palmer's (1986) subjects put it:

You come back the next day and just say if you like it. "Oh, see when that happened" and so and so. You know, that's really the best part of it, about TV, kind of talking with your friends about it. Probably I think you probably enjoy it more then. (*Michael*, 12)

(pp. 92–3)

Uses and gratification theory and ethnography all too frequently assume that such a social use is in itself an adequate explanation, and they fail to ask further how gossip can be read back into the program, can activate certain of its meanings, and can become part of the critique of its values.

So much critical and theoretical attention has been devoted to the *mass* media in a *mass* society that we have tended to ignore the fact that our urbanized, institutionalized society facilitates oral communication at least as well as it does mass communication. We may have concentrated much of our

leisure and entertainment into the home (see Garnham 1987, Hartley and O'Regan, 1987) but we attend large schools and universities, many of us work in large organizations, and most belong to or attend some sort of club or social organization. And we live in neighborhoods or communities. And in all of these social organizations we talk. Much of this talk is about the mass media and its cultural commodities and much of it is performing a similar cultural function to those commodities – that is, it is representing aspects of our social experience in such a way as to make that experience meaningful and pleasurable to us. These meanings, these pleasures are instrumental in constructing social relations and thus our sense of social identity.

Feminists (e.g. Hobson 1982, Brown 1987a, Brown and Barwick 1986) have begun to revaluate gossip as part of women's oral culture and to argue that it can be both creative and resistive to patriarchy. Tulloch and Moran (1986) also find positive value for women in gossip:

arguably it is males' refusal to be open in their emotions, and to gossip, which is a major reason for their put down of soaps. They displace their own inadequacies onto the viewing habits of women. And in asserting the value of gossip and emotional release, women are insisting on their own adequacy, their own personal and social space, in the face of male dominated culture.

(pp. 247–8)

The fact that men consistently denigrate gossip is at least a symptom that they recognize it as a cultural form that is outside their control. The difficulty of controlling oral culture and its potential as a site and means of resistance was more formally recognized in the history of English imperialism over Scotland, Ireland, and Wales: one of the first acts of the English conquerors was to outlaw the native language for they well knew that political control required linguistic control, and conversely, that political resistance depended upon a language of the oppressed with which to think and talk that resistance.

Oral culture is responsive to and is part of its immediate community. It resists centralization and the ideological control that goes with it, and it promotes cultural diversity. Like mass culture, it is highly conventional – talk and gossip are as clearly formulaic as any TV crime-buster series – but the conventions of talk vary as widely as the social situations or social group within which that talk operates. Teenage girl talk differs from male worker talk, lounge room talk differs from public bar talk, and the differences are in the conventions. When this talk is about television it works to activate and circulate meanings of the text that resonate with the cultural needs of that particular talk community.

Katz and Liebes (1984, 1985) in their study of ethnic audiences of *Dallas* found that

during and after the programme, people discuss what they have seen, and come to collective understandings.... Viewers selectively perceive, interpret and evaluate the programme in terms of local cultures and personal experiences, selectively incorporating it into their minds and lives.

(1984:28)

This incorporation of the program into local culture is an active, oral process that denies any overwhelming precedence to the Hollywood culture. The audiences participate in the meanings of the program in a way that the Hollywood moguls can neither foresee nor control.

For oral culture is active, participatory. Because the conventions are so well known and so closely related to the social situation of the community, all members of that community can participate more or less equally in the production and circulation of meanings: talk does not distinguish between producers and consumers.

In its interface with mass culture, oral culture necessarily brings its activeness to that process by which the viewer becomes the producer of meanings. An important part of a mass-produced text's ability to appeal to a wide diversity of audiences is the ease with which its conventions can be made to interact productively with the conventions of the speech community within which it is circulating.

Thus Geraghty (1981), Brown (1987a), and others have shown how the conventions of daytime soap opera (its "nowness," its concern with relationships and reactions, the real-seemingness of its characters) enable it to interact fruitfully and creatively with women's gossip.

Katz and Liebes (1984, 1985) found that part of the appeal of *Dallas* to non-American audiences was the way that it was so easily incorporated, via gossip, into local, oral culture. They conclude that

the feeling of intimacy with the characters ... has a "gossipy" quality which seems to facilitate an easy transition to discussion of oneself and one's close associates. It is likely that the continuous and indeterminate flow of the programme, from week to week, in the family salon invites viewers to invest themselves in fantasy, thought and discussion.

(1984:32)

What Katz and Liebes (1985: 188) call "conversations with significant others" help viewers select "frames for interpreting the programme and, possibly, incorporating it into their lives" (1985: 188). Talk plays a crucial role in "the social dynamics of meaning-making" (Katz and Liebes 1984: 28). As Tulloch and Moran (1986) put it, "this process of watching aloud is important because it enables the viewer to go beyond his or her individuality and call on group reactions, group knowledge" (p. 244).

Hobson (1982) has shown how the viewers of *Crossroads* were overwhelmingly concerned with the program's realisticness: they had an internalized set of social norms that enabled them to evaluate how "real" an incident, a reaction, or a piece of dialogue appeared to be, and the more real, the better. The norms themselves and their application to the program were influenced by gossip. Talking about television is a process of bringing out the meanings that "work" for a particular audience group, which then, in turn, functions to activate those meanings in the next viewing. In this way solitary viewing can be experienced as group viewing, because the viewer knows well that other members of her/his group are viewing at the same time. Gossip works actively in two ways: it constructs audience-driven meanings and it constructs audience communities within which those meanings circulate.

The "trekkies" (the fans of *Star Trek*) are a particularly active and creative TV audience (see Jenkins 1986). They publish a number of newsletters in which fans imagine the continuing lives of the characters in the serial. Some of these imaginings have grown to novel length and there are even soft-porn novels of Spock and his sex life in circulation. Those privately produced and circulated publications are explicit and extreme manifestations of the audience activity in which viewers, particularly of serials, write future "scripts" in their heads and then check these scripts against the broadcast ones. They are also gossip which has had to revert to the typewriter in order to overcome the problems of a geographically dispersed audience community. Commercially published soap opera magazines serve a similar function: they promote and circulate gossip within a community that is defined not geographically but by a commonality of taste deriving from a shared social situation.

Children, too, have a dynamic oral culture that interacts with the culture of television. They frequently incorporate television into their games, songs, and slang, and, indeed, use television as the raw material out of which to create new games and new songs. All of this suggests that a folk, oral culture still lives despite the dislocations of mass society, and that television is not only readily incorporable into this, but that it is actually essential to its survival. For television provides a common symbolic experience and a common discourse, a set of shared formal conventions that are so important to a folk culture. And an oral or folk culture provides the television viewer with a set of reading relations that are essentially participatory and active, and that recognize only minimal differentiation between performer and audience or producer and consumer.

□ The social determinations of meanings

Meanings are determined socially: that is, they are constructed out of the conjuncture of the text with the socially situated reader. This does not mean

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that a reader's social position mechanistically produces meanings for him or her in a way that would parallel the authoritarian way that texts used to be thought to work. The word "determine" does not refer to such a mechanistic, singular, cause and effect process; rather it means to delimit or set the boundaries. It would be ridiculous to suggest that all members of the working class or all women would construct identical meanings that were determined directly by their social situation. However, it would be equally ridiculous to suggest that there is no such thing as a working-class reading or a feminine reading. The boundaries of working-class experience or of female experience leave plenty of room for different inflections, for any one person is subjected to a wide variety of social determinations. So, to take an example, a Catholic trade unionist working in a Detroit car plant will inflect working-class social experience quite differently from, say, a Protestant, "nonpolitical," agricultural worker in Wisconsin. The range of inflections of female social experience in a patriarchy is probably even wider, and in the last chapter we looked at some of the variety of social forces that work to develop a social subjectivity. The argument that people's subjectivities, their consciousness of self, and their social relations are produced socially rather than genetically or naturally, does not mean that all people are clones of each other, the mass products of an identical social mold. The social histories of people in societies as diverse as western capitalist democracies are constructed out of such a variety of social experiences and social forces as to provide for almost as much individual difference as any natural gene bank. A theory of social determination not only leaves room for individual and other differences, it emphasizes them: but it also emphasizes that the significant differences are produced socially rather then genetically, and that these differences exist within and against a framework of similarity.

This diversity of social histories necessarily involves contradictions within the subject. As Morley (1986) puts it:

the same man may be simultaneously a productive worker, a trade union member, a supporter of the Social Democratic Party, a consumer, a racist, a home owner, a wife beater and a Christian.

(p. 42).

Morley takes pains to point out that these contradictory subject positions are not all equivalently effective, but that some will be more powerful than others, and some dependent on others. His account of how these different social positions, intersecting in a historical (though hypothetical) viewer, can produce contradictory readings of the same program is so clear and exemplary that I can do no better than quote it at length:

Perhaps this issue can be made clearer if we take a hypothetical white male working-class shop steward (identified in the *Nationwide* project) and follow him home, and look at how he might react to another *Nationwide*

programme, this time in his home context. First, it would seem likely that in his domestic context, away from the supportive/regulative mores of the group of fellow shop stewards with whom he viewed the "News" tape in the *Nationwide* interview, the intensity of his "oppositional" readings will be likely to diminish. But let us also look at how he might respond to a few items in this hypothetical *Nationwide* on different topics. So, his working-class position has led him to be involved in trade union discourses and thus, despite the weaker frame supplied by the domestic context, he may well still produce an oppositional reading of the first item on the latest round of redundancies. However, his working-class position has also tied him to a particular form of housing in the inner city, which has, since the war, been transformed before his eyes culturally by Asian immigrants, and the National Front come closest to expressing his local chauvinist fears about the transformation of "his" area; so he is inclined to racism when he hears on the news of black youth street crimes – that is to say, he is getting close to a dominant reading at this point. But then again his own experience of life in an inner city area inclines him to believe the police are no angels. So when the next item on the programme turns out to be on the Brixton riots he produces a negotiated reading, suspicious both of black youth and also of the police. By now he tires of *Nationwide*, and switches over to a situation comedy in which the man and woman occupy traditional positions, and his insertion within a working-class culture of masculinity inclines him to make a dominant reading of the programme. (pp. 42–3)

The ability of what Grossberg (forthcoming) has called "the nomadic subjectivity" to produce meanings that span the whole range from the dominant to the oppositional is evidence of the activity of the viewer in producing meanings and of the social determinations that underlie this activity. Negotiating meanings with the television text is a discursive, and therefore social, process, and not an individualistic one, but it still allows the socially situated viewer an active, semi-controlling role in it. Morley comments on his hypothetical viewer:

He is indeed a "subject crossed by a number of discourses", but it is he, the particular person (who represents a specific combination of/intersection of such discourses), who makes the readings, not the discourses which "speak" to him in any simple sense. Rather, they provide him with the cultural repertoire of resources with which he works. (p.43)

The production of meaning from a text follows much the same process as the construction of subjectivity within society. The reader produces meanings that derive from the intersection of his/her social history with the social forces structured into the text. The moment of reading is when the discourses

of the reader meet the discourses of the text. When these discourses bear different interests reading becomes a reconciliation of this conflict. For MacCabe and early screen theorists, this reconciliation involved the surrender of the social interests of the reader to those of the text. For Hodge and Tripp (1986), however, exactly the opposite is the case. Their studies "constitute a compelling argument for the primacy of general social relations in developing a reading of television, rather than the other way about" (p. 158).

This is because social relationships carry "immediate rewards and sanctions" (p. 158) which make them much more powerful in their effectivity than any television program. Children, as well as adults, are aware of the gap between television's representations and reality, a gap that does not appear to exist in the experience of social relations. The effectivity of social relationships in the construction of subjectivity and meanings is greater than that of television to the extent that these social relationships appear more "real." "We must be prepared to find that non-television meanings are powerful enough to swamp television meanings" (Hodge and Tripp 1986: 144).

These "non-television meanings," that is, those that derive from the discourses of the reader rather than those of the text, are ones that are frequently promoted and circulated orally. If the television program fails to allow space for these non-television meanings to be generated from it, it is unlikely to be popular. Morley (1980a) found that black women, for example, simply rejected *Nationwide* because it held nothing for them: it failed to provoke them to produce meanings and failed to represent their social interests.

To be popular with a diversity of audiences television must both provoke its readers to the production of meanings and pleasures, and must provide the textual space for these meanings and pleasures to be articulated with the social interests of the readers. Readers will only produce meanings from, and find pleasures in, a television program if it allows for this articulation of their interests. The textual and intertextual characteristics by which this is achieved form the subject matter of the next two chapters.

Television Culture

John Fiske

To Lucy and Matthew

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