
Chapter 3

Critical Perspectives within Audience Research

Problems in Interpretation, Agency,
Structure and Ideology

The Emergence of Critical Audience Studies

Basically two kinds of audience research are currently being undertaken. The first and most widely circulated form of knowledge about the audience is gathered by large-scale communication institutions. This form of investigation is made necessary as television, radio, cinema and print production need to attract viewers, listeners and readers. In order to capture an audience modern institutions require knowledge about the 'public's' habits, tastes and dispositions. This enables media corporations to target certain audience segments with a programme or textual strategy. The desire to know who is in the audience at any one time provides useful knowledge that attracts advertisers, and gives broadcasters certain impressions of who they are addressing.

Some critics have suggested that the new cable technology will be able to calculate how many people in a particular area of the city watched last night's Hollywood blockbuster. This increasingly individualised knowledge base dispenses with the problem of existing networks of communication where the majority of advertisements might be watched by an underclass too poor to purchase the goods on offer. Yet the belief that new technology will deliver a streamlined consumer-hungry audience to advertisers sounds like an advanced form of capitalist wish fulfilment. This might be the strategy behind a number of investments in new communications technologies, but its realisation is a different matter. Audiences have

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devised ways of avoiding semiotic capitalism's attempts to make them sit through obligatory periods of advertising. This is achieved by watching another channel, making a cup of tea during the commercial break, or pressing the fast-forward button on the video. In response, commercial culture has sought to integrate advertising into the programmes themselves. Although this makes some form of engagement with consumer products unavoidable, the audience has not been rendered passive. During the 1994 World Cup, American viewers keen to avoid a variety of commercial strategies that had been integrated into the commentary switched to Spanish-language cable television stations. These provided better coverage, as the advertising was not as intrusive, although it is unlikely that many of the viewers would have understood the linguistic framing of the event. This example points to a situation where the capitalisation and proliferation of different networks make it easier for the audience to escape 'particular' media strategies for their attention. The channel-hopping viewing patterns fostered by these conditions will again make it more difficult to calculate audience share.

But, as Ien Ang (1991) has argued, the practice of making the audience statistically knowable has the consequence of reifying its actual social practices. We may know that 20 per cent of women health workers watched last night's episode of *Ally McBeal*, but this actually tells us very little about their viewing context, or indeed the meaning that was constructed from the programme by the women. The form of quantifiable knowledge required by commercial and state institutions is continually disrupted by the everyday practice of the audience. For Ang, and others, the members of the audience remain slightly anarchistic. Our health worker settling down to watch *Ally McBeal* might also be zapping over to another channel to watch the new Prince video, or indeed she could be interrupted by a work-related telephone call. In such a context it would be difficult to decide what actually counts as 'watching'. It is the so-called ordinary practices and pleasures of viewing, listening and reading that constitute the second paradigm of mass communication research. This strand of audience watching has been developed by interpretative approaches to sociology and media studies. Against the more instrumental concerns of commercial organisations these studies have sought to address the life – world contexts of media audiences. Here the concerns of audience research are focused on offered interpretations and the social relations of reception.

Contemporary interest in the interpretative activity of the audience usually contains a strong critique of the cultural pessimism of certain members of the early Frankfurt school, and an indebtedness to the so-called uses and gratifications approach. As we saw earlier, certain members of the Frankfurt school tended to view popular culture through a specific attachment to modernist art. This particular cultural disposition meant that they did not problematise the reading activities of a socially situated audience. It is a disposition evident in literary approaches to the media, like that of Raymond Williams, and Fredric Jameson, whose readings of

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culture are intended to both mirror and replace those of absent social subjects. Uses and gratifications research, on the other hand, sought to substitute the idea of what measurable 'effects' the media have on the audience with an analysis of the ways in which people use the media. This research, mostly pioneered by post-war social psychology, brought to the fore the notion that the audience's perceptions of messages could be radically different from the meanings intended by their producer(s). While there remains some dispute as to the debt current audience research owes to this perspective, it is not our concern here (Curran, 1990; Morley, 1992). Instead, a word or two needs to be said, by way of an introduction, on the intellectual roots of the renewed concern with the audience. The strands of cultural theory I want to address have all grown out of the questioning of the assumption that the meaning of an action can simply be taken for granted. That is, the subjectivity of the audience is constructed through its interaction with certain material conditions of existence and a variety of symbolic forms. These concerns are usually connected with a symbolic conception of culture.

The writing of the anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973) has been particularly vital in helping shape a *symbolic* approach to cultural studies. Geertz argues that what we call culture is the web of signification that has been spun by meaningful actions, objects and expressions. In this sense, culture is neither objective nor subjective. The empiricist claim that the production of hard objective data (such as that produced by viewing figures) can provide a secure anchoring for the social sciences is dismissed by this approach. Such objectivistic claims seem to hold out the possibility of breaking out of the circle of interpretation altogether. Geertz's stress on the symbolic nature of culture retains an openness to further interpretations by the lay actors themselves or the investigative sociologists. Here there is a need to distinguish between first- and second-order interpretations: a separation needs to be made between the intersubjective meanings produced by the agents themselves, and the sense social scientists make of these interpretations. Cultural expressions are meaningful for social agents as well as for the researchers that study them. Further, if we can agree that meaning is a public and intersubjective property, this entails that it is not somehow held inside people's heads. In short, a good interpretation of a particular linguistic community is not governed by the author's cleverness, but by his or her ability to take the reader to the 'heart' of the symbolically produced common meanings.

James Carey (1989), commenting on the recent 'interpretative turn' within media sociology, argues that there has been a corresponding move away from functional approaches. By functional analysis he means research that concentrates upon whether or not the mass media confirm or disrupt the status quo. A more symbolic approach to cultural forms, he suggests, would seek to examine the interaction of symbolic meanings within communication. And yet while this is a legitimate area of inquiry, there remains a fundamental difficulty with this kind of

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approach to mass communication studies. To put it bluntly, some of the studies that have utilised this particular understanding of culture remain under-appreciative of the operation of power and social structure in the production and reception of symbolic forms. Following on from the previous two chapters, I shall argue that the production of meaning should be related to the operation of institutions and power. Further, that the symbolic celebration of the interpretative capacity of the audience, in certain instances, has been allowed to replace a more critical and normative social theory. However, within such an analysis, we need to be particularly careful that notions of power apply to both public and private domains, and that we recognise that audience studies is a key development within the study of media and culture.

Though there are many approaches to audience research that might have been examined, I shall focus on three main areas of debate, defined as follows: (1) building upon Stuart Hall's encoding and decoding essay, David Morley has offered a provocative analysis of the interpretative capacity and viewing contexts of the television audience; (2) John Fiske's writing has drawn upon a range of cultural theory to argue that the guerrilla activity of the audience offers a means of resistance to the dominant power bloc; (3) feminist theory has made its main contribution through an analysis of women's pleasurable and potentially utopian reading of popular romances and soap operas. While providing a critical commentary on each of these perspectives, I shall also seek to suggest how these contributions might be both improved and extended.

David Morley and the Television Audience: Encoding/Decoding Revisited

Like Stuart Hall, David Morley's specific contribution to cultural and media studies has grown out of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham. Between 1975 and 1979, while still at the centre, Morley applied Hall's (1980) famous encoding/decoding essay to the study of the popular current affairs programme *Nationwide* (Morley, 1980, 1992). To quickly recap, Hall's essay argues that there is a basic distinction between the social processes that encode and decode media texts. Cultural forms can be said to be encoded through a specific historical mix of institutional relations, professional norms and technical equipment. The decoding strategies employed by the audience are similarly dependent upon social structural relations, political and cultural dispositions and access to the relevant technology. While Hall's essay states the dual nature of textual production, it is most often remembered for the emphasis it places on three forms (preferred, negotiated and oppositional) of audience reading strategy. This model

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forms the backdrop to Morley's *Nationwide* study and subsequent studies in audience research.

Semiotics, Sociology and the Television Audience

In this section I aim to trace through the shifting contours of David Morley's concern to provide a theoretical perspective adequate to capture the cultural practices of the television audience. Let me begin by briefly outlining the main concerns of his *Nationwide* study, before moving on to his later contributions. Following Hall, the process of meaning generation, Morley argues, is dependent upon the internal structure of the television message (semiotics) and the cultural background of the viewer (sociology). The 'meaning' of *Nationwide* is the product of the preferred reading offered by the text and the cultural dispositions of the audience. At the level of the encoded text, one needs to address both the explicit content and the 'invisible', taken-for-granted meanings. The popular discourse of *Nationwide* was concerned with the arena of home, leisure and consumption while rendering silent the more public world of work. In order to understand how the horizons of the text are able to connect with the cultural presuppositions of the audience, Morley seeks to make explicit the text's mode of address. *Nationwide* addressed the audience as individual citizens who live in a specifically national political community. This is different, say, from the mode of address employed by game shows that usually 'speak to us' as though we are members of happy nuclear families. That is, any ideological analysis should seek to reveal the way in which popular texts produce certain subject positions. But it is central to Morley's argument that through different decoding strategies the preferred meaning of the text can be resisted by the culturally coded reading strategies of the audience. Thus *Nationwide* does not have a causal 'effect' on the audience but must be interpreted. This does not mean, however, that the audience is able to read any meaning into the text. The text acts as a structured polysemy that while never achieving 'total' ideological closure can open up certain meanings while closing down others. In this sense, Morley is sharply critical of those modes of cultural theory that reduce meaning either to the subject positions inscribed within the text, or to the subjective prejudices of the audience.

In his more recent writing, Morley (1992: 60) has again returned to the writing of Stuart Hall. Here, following Hall's critique of Lacan and Althusser, he has argued that any theory of interpretation needs to attend to the space between constituted subjects and specific discourses.¹ A theory of interpretation would have to encounter the constant interruption by discourses other than those embedded within the text. Hence, as we saw in the discussion of Hall and Laclau, modern identities are the heterogeneous construction of a multitude of discursive practices.

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For example, a white, male, working-class trade unionist would be capable, depending on the context, of offering either dominant hegemonic, negotiated or oppositional readings. To put the point more concretely, our trade unionist may be a Labour voter, a sexist and a racist all at once. The problem with Morley's *Nationwide* study, as he later realised, is that the audience's reading strategies are mainly understood through a class paradigm (Morley, 1981, 1992).

In the *Nationwide* study, Morley and his colleagues showed two editions of the programme to a culturally diverse number of groups. Then they decided to interview the subjects in clusters in order to investigate how talk became collectively constructed through discussion. In conversation with the various groupings, Morley was able to further refine the encoding/ decoding model. The bank managers' conversations, he discovered, hardly commented on the content of the programme as it seemed relatively uncontroversial. This meant that the subjectivity of the bank managers was closely aligned with the dominant reading position offered by the text, rendering the constructed nature of the text invisible. This reading sharply contrasts with a group of trade unionists who were able to render the ideological construction of the programme visible by identifying it as in the interests of middle management. But Morley also found that oppositional readings were not confined to subordinate groups. Print management trainees produced an oppositional reading based upon a rightist perspective. On the other hand, where the disjuncture between the audience and the text was too wide, the subjects often fell silent. This was the case with further education students drawn from inner city areas. Here there seemed to be little actual point of identification between the subjective prejudices of the group and the semiotically constructed text. These observations, for Morley, suggest certain problems with the original encoding/decoding model derived from Hall's writing. The difficulties experienced with this approach are defined as follows: (1) the idea of the preferred reading invokes the notion that the message content is governed by the conscious intentionality of the message sender; (2) the encoding/ decoding metaphor invokes a 'conveyor belt' of meaning, rather than the possibility of radical discontinuity between these levels; (3) decoding suggests that the audience attends to the text and produces meaning, whereas if the text has little resonance for the reader it could in fact be ignored; (4) preferred meanings are easier to detect within texts that have a single closed narrative. Other more open texts, such as soap operas, that rely upon a plurality of narratives and relatively unfixed subject positions, may resist a dominant hegemonic reading by the theorist. These criticisms provide a useful backdrop for an analysis of Morley's family television project (Morley, 1988).

The research on family television represents an advance on the *Nationwide* study in three main ways. First, Morley decided to conduct the interviews inside the subjects' homes, since one of the problems with the earlier research was that it was conducted in rather 'artificial' settings isolated from the normal viewing

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context. The oppositional reading of *Nationwide* produced by the male trade unionists, reasons Morley, would probably lose much of its intensity in a more familial context. Next, Morley argues that the *Nationwide* study left too little room for contradictory decodings. Here he begins to develop a more critical appreciation of the debate I mentioned earlier between Laclau and Hall. Morley accepts that the *Nationwide* study overly compressed the interpretations of the audience around a class paradigm. Here Laclau's writing is valuable in that the subject is represented as being constructed by a matrix of discourses. But Laclau, according to Morley, retains a tendency to reduce the subject to an 'effect' of discourse.² Although Morley does not develop the point in any great depth, he argues that discourses provide the cultural resources within which the interpretative subject makes its readings (Morley, 1988: 43). Resisting the Althusserian strain of Laclau's writing, Morley argues that it is difficult to predict the readings subjects will make by attending to the ways in which they have been constructed in discourse. Instead, as many writers critical of post-structuralism have claimed, the subject has the capacity for critical forms of reflexive thinking. To argue that the audience is more than the 'effect' of social practices and discourses is not to argue for the narcissistic return of the omnipotent subject. The fact that the subject remains decentred through social and unconscious processes, while being capable of acting creatively in the social world, is an important feature of the study. Thirdly, and most decisively, Morley's attention to the sociological setting places a greater emphasis upon the ways in which television is actually used in family contexts. This is indicative of his move away from semiotics to a more sociological concern with the power relations that shape viewing practices. This change of emphasis, according to Morley, highlights the way in which the activity of watching television is primarily a 'privatised' activity constituted through family relations. Despite this shift in Morley's concerns, he wisely in my view, aims to keep open the possibility that the preferred meaning is capable of reworking the subjective prejudices of the audience.

The family television project was based upon 18 white families (two adults with two or more children) who were interviewed in 1985. While Morley pays close attention to the viewing context (he interviews unemployed, working-class and middle-class families), his research finds a new focus in the importance of gender for television viewing. The gendered nature of social activity centred around television is evident in all the households and cuts across social class. Morley writes that 'investigating television viewing in the home is by definition investigating something which men are better placed to do wholeheartedly, and which women seem only able to do distractedly and guiltily, because of their continuing sense of their domestic responsibilities' (Morley, 1988: 147).

In most of the families interviewed it was the adult male of the household who had control over the viewing patterns of the other family members. The prominence of male dominance in the household extends to the operation of the

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television and the video recorder. Masculine control, however, is never absolute and is constantly being challenged by other family members. To offer a few examples. A member of the third family of the study (an unemployed father) describes his relationship to television as 'addicted – it's like a dope to me' (Morley, 1988: 68). Morley notes that within this household the television is rarely switched off and the father exhibits a masculine obsession with watching the television in uninterrupted silence. This was characteristic of men's preferred style of viewing generally, whereas women were much more likely to be involved in at least – one other social activity. It was also recognised, by both men and women, that men watched far more television than women. Again this is accounted for by Morley in terms of the gendered division of the household. For men, the home is experienced as a site of relaxation, but for women of all social classes the desire to enjoy television always has to be traded off against feelings of guilt and obligation. When the women were able to negotiate some space, usually when the husband was absent, they tended to watch entertaining programmes which were negatively valued, especially by their husbands, who stated a preference for more factual output. Indeed, such was men's control of the domestic setting that the unemployed father mentioned above exhibited a strong resistance towards attending events outside the household. As these activities were often free, Morley interprets the father's reluctance to go out as a means of fending off the potential loss of 'total power' (Morley, 1988: 70).

The mother of the tenth family of the study (working-class) displays an acute awareness of the role that soap operas often play in women's lives. Women's relative isolation from the public sphere means that they often have three main topics of conversation (children, housework and television) that provide the social 'glue' for community life. Morley notes that, according to his study, while it is men who consume the predominant amount of television, women, on the whole, are more likely to admit that they engage in talk about it. In Morley's (1992) later writing he interprets men's attachment to realist and factual programming as a mode of defence against getting involved in fantasy or emotion. Alternatively women's need to be 'doing something', while watching television, can be associated with the way 'in which gendered identities are constructed in patriarchal society. The reason that watching television remains a guilty pleasure in modern nuclear families is that women's gender role demands that they constantly subordinate their own needs, desires and pleasures to those of their male partners.

Ann Gray (1992) has followed up some of Morley's research with an investigation into women's relationship with domestic video technology. Like Morley, Gray argues that the 'effects' tradition in communications research denied the cultural competence of the subject. She adopts an approach which neatly complements that of Morley, in that she stresses the importance of the sociocultural context of women's interactions with video and video recorders. Her research

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highlights gender as the main determinant of the specific use of domestic technology. Gray found that most women, irrespective of social class, were in general not proficient in the operation of the video, and had particular difficulty with the time recorder function. Gray discounts the idea that women's lack of accomplishment in this area is connected to a general fear of technology. According to Gray, and deeply characteristic of the domestic division of labour, women show a mastery of kitchen technology that is absent in most men. But adult women, when compared to other members of the household, were at a distinct disadvantage when it came to organising their viewing via the video recorder. She found that the storing of visual information on videotapes was usually a male-defined activity. This said, the women interviewed in the study had a marked preference for viewing a particular production once only, as opposed to some of the men who displayed a tendency to view the same films over and over again. Here again, Gray shares with Morley the necessity of placing private domestic pleasures within a sociological context where gender relations are determinant.

Class, Power and Ideology in Domestic Leisure

The observations made by Morley on the sociological and semiotic nature of television viewing open up important perspectives in media research. The discussions in the previous chapters have concentrated upon the specifically public nature of modern mass communication systems. Morley, particularly in the family television project, moves against this trend by arguing that the gendered operation of power within 'ordinary' domestic settings is the crucial determinant of viewing patterns. These insights, by no means peculiar to Morley, share much with feminist schools of thought. The theoretical splitting of public and private contexts is characteristic of both liberal and Marxist approaches to the media of mass communications. In this context, the contributions of Williams and Habermas, amongst others, remain overly orientated around a masculinely defined public sphere. While an analysis of the public institutional settings of the operation of mass communication networks remains crucial, this should not be allowed to overshadow the importance of the private sphere. The unequal relations within familial settings has, according to Morley and Gray, a decisive impact on the decoding strategies adopted by the audience.

The problem remains, however, that research such as Morley's reproduces some of the gendered divisions between public and private outlined above. Morley's rather exclusive focus on family settings tends to isolate them from the way in which they are continually permeated by the operation of more public forms of money and power. As a consequence the structural importance of gender divisions retains a significance for public and private life. This omission is probably a

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consequence of certain shortcomings with the encoding/decoding model borrowed from Stuart Hall. As I indicated in Chapter 1, Hall's concern with meaning and semiotics distances the analysis from more material institutional frameworks of power. Notably, Morley has specifically developed the decoding rather than the encoding dimension of this model. While his later writing has gone some way towards correcting this bias, I believe his research to be inadequately reconstructed in this respect. My main difficulties with Morley's work on mass communication theory include the following:

1. Morley (1992: 275) has sought to defend himself against the charge that he neglects to analyse the intersection of macro and micro contexts. He claims to recognise that any study of the meanings and practices of the audience should involve both an analysis of the interconnection between symbolic and material resources, and the recognition that the audience is not completely 'powerless' despite its isolation from control over institutional processes. Morley argues that he treads a judicious path between the structuralist tradition that reduces the practices and interpretations of the audience to an effect of the text, and the uses and gratification approach, where the emphasis is placed upon certain atomised psychological responses, rather than an historical and sociological account of audience actions. In this respect, he argues, his research has much in common with Anthony Giddens's (1984) theory of structuration:

It is not a question, finally, of understanding simply television's ideological (or representational) role, or simply its ritual (or socially organising) function, or the process of its domestic (and more broadly social) consumption. It is a question of how to understand all these issues (or dimensions) in relation to each other. (Morley, 1992: 276)

Anthony Giddens's theory of structuration is designed to avoid the sort of polarisation Morley detects in opposing uses and gratifications research and structuralism. Giddens refuses to see action and structure as separate terms of analysis; instead he represents them theoretically in terms of what he calls a 'duality'. Agency is normally thought of as the capacity to do otherwise to that which one has done. What social theorists themselves need to do is to forgo the temptation of opposing this sense of agency to determining structures. Instead, as the term 'duality' suggests, agency and structure are best thought of as interdependent theoretical categories. Giddens writes:

Understood as rules and resources implicated in the 'form' of collectivities of social systems, reproduced across space and time, structure is the very medium of the 'human' element of human agency. At the same time, agency is the medium of structure, which individuals reproduce in the course of their activities. (Giddens, 1987a: 220–1)

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Giddens, for me at least, best illustrates his theory of structuration through a discussion of language use. The rules of language (*langue*) are drawn upon in the actual production of speech (*parole*). Hence one of the unintended consequences of language use is the reproduction of certain generative rules. These rules of language may of course also change, as a result of actual practice. Language, as a set of rules and resources, cannot be thought of as produced by or for any one agent; instead *langue* pre-exists *parole* and is a precondition of language use, not a direct product of it. Thus social structures can be conceptualised as sets of rules and resources, at once enabling and constraining action. At the same time, human agents, as a matter of routine, reflexively monitor their conduct and are able to provide reasons for their actions. This observation does not imply that agents will always be aware of the consequences of their actions, nor will they be equipped with a complete understanding of the conditions of their actions. Leaving aside the various criticisms that have been made of structuration theory, I would argue that Morley's writing on the media can only be superficially associated with Giddens's theoretical writing.

Giddens argues that the structuration of human activity takes place within institutional settings. Morley, in this context, barely mentions the unequal distribution of material and symbolic resources that are dependent upon class as well as gender. This can be illustrated by returning to the unemployed father of the family television project. Here the father's obsessive television viewing is explained as illustrating masculine forms of control evident within domestic contexts. This seems to be especially evident in the father's reluctance to attend cultural events outside the home, in that this would undermine his control over the household's cultural pursuits. Morley's interpretation ignores Golding's (1990) argument that a person's position within the class system will structure an agent's access to certain cultural goods. That is, just because the family has received free theatre tickets does not mean they will have access to the appropriate clothes, transport, or money for the childminder. In addition, as much of Bourdieu's (1984) research has shown, the cultural competencies necessary for the enjoyment of certain kinds of theatre are determined by family background and education. Thus through the operation of power certain dominant social groups restrict the range of material and symbolic options open to agents within public and private settings. Giddens would argue that while this power is never absolute, it does place restrictions on the autonomy of even the most patriarchal father. Yet again, while Morley (1992) has gone some way towards acknowledging these points, they are absent from both the *Nationwide* and family television projects.

Secondly, cultural goods are mostly produced by commercial institutions to be bought and sold in the market-place. As Marxist social theory has argued the *success* of a cultural commodity within a capitalist culture is determined by its ability to make a profit. In the earlier discussion of Raymond Williams's specific

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contribution to mass communication research, it was made clear that the need to return a profit seriously restricts the variety of cultural products that are made available. Consumers, following Giddens's model, are not passive in this process as they can refuse to buy specific products, but they do not have direct forms of control over the cultural forms that are made available. Hence the capitalist division of labour is a relatively durable set of rules and resources that 'bounds' consumer choices. Again, Morley's emphasis upon more microsocial contexts bypasses this important point.

2. Any analysis that involves the unequal distribution of power inevitably leads us to the terrain of ideology. The study of ideology can be usefully defined as 'the ways in which meaning (signification) serves to sustain relations of domination' (Thompson, 1984: 13~1). Such a concern presupposes an examination of the ways in which structures of domination are mystified, simultaneously reaffirming and obscuring relations of force. To address the mobilisation of meaning in the context of relations of domination, as Morley well understands, is to attend to the ways in which meaning is interpreted in everyday settings. Morley, despite his more focused attention on domestic contexts, wants to keep open the possibility that preferred readings of texts can reinforce certain dominant norms and values. Further, as the *Nationwide* study made clear, programmes that criticise power structures can also be resisted by the more openly ideological perspectives of the viewer. While there remain a number of problems with the way Morley formulates the problem of ideology, here I want to concentrate on the issues opened up by Greg Philo (1990).

The 1984 miners' strike was a long and bitter dispute that dominated British news coverage for its duration. Philo wants to argue that hegemonic operation of power and authority was able to manipulate the public's understanding of the strike. He demonstrates this by asking a wide cross-section of the audience to assemble from a series of photographs a news story representative of the strike. The aim of this exercise was to discover whether a photograph of a gun would be associated with the police, the working miners, or the striking miners. He found that the gun was overwhelmingly connected with the striking miners, even amongst those who were sympathetic to the aims of the strike. Philo interprets this as significant and relates it to the dominant ideological frames of news production that were present during the strike: that the picket lines were violent and that the main responsibility for this state of affairs lay with the striking miners. Yet Philo's research also reveals that, regardless of political perspective, those who had either been directly or indirectly involved with picket lines during the strike were less likely to believe they were mostly violent places. So those with 'personal experience' of picket lines did not readily accept the dominant perspectives offered by the media. The other major reason offered for doubting the television news was access to alternative perspectives, primarily through the quality press, and the local press

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and radio. The effective criminalisation of the strike by the state and the national broadcast media had the effect of minimising more public forms of solidarity with the miners. The state's manipulation of news reporting was most evident in the attention paid to the 'big return' at the end of the strike. Here the underlying theme of national news reporting became the number of people returning to work (the figures being supplied by the state-owned Coal Board) rather than the number who stayed out on strike. The ideological 'effect' of this discursive strategy was again to limit the solidarity of the strike by isolating those miners who had withdrawn their labour.

Philo's main concern with more 'micro' studies like Morley's is that they are unable to show the social processes by which certain meanings are generated by dominant social groups, and made to stick. This is a powerful charge. Although Philo's research comes close to stressing a modified version of the dominant ideology thesis, he does demonstrate the necessity of linking certain consciously held perspectives to the dominant social order. Interestingly, while Morley's later work wants to keep open the possibility of the preferred reading, he is unable to provide many examples of this process working through. Philo's more macro approach has the advantage of being able to demonstrate how the state and national media were able to provide the ideological framework within which debates about the miners' strike took place. Yet Morley's more specifically located writing, given the points made above, offers a corrective to Philo's grand ambitions. The blind spot of Philo's perspective, as Morley discovered in the *Nationwide* study, is that occupational group discussions artificially divorce meaning from context. Philo does not really address the ways in which linguistic meaning is dependent upon the socially situated interpretations of lay actors. Indeed he retains the Glasgow group's emphasis upon the ways in which a dominant ideology transmitted by the news media helps shape the legitimate discursive arena of political debate. For instance, the miners' strike could have been attributed different meanings at different periods of the strike (the interviews took place a year after the strike was over), and the strike could have been divergently interpreted depending on whether it was read in public or domestic settings. This argument could be taken further if we remember that the year-long miners' strike was an exceptional political event. As Morley's *Nationwide* study showed, the readings attributed to television content are more likely to produce a complex and divergent range of meanings than to hegemonically secure social consensus.

3. The communications media are often felt to be a powerful source for the distribution of ideas and concepts about the social world. Critical studies, particularly within the Western Marxist tradition, have tended to concentrate upon the ways media content has shaped conscious beliefs and practices. The traditional criticism of this perspective is that it overstates the cohesiveness of the messages transmitted by the media, and neglects to analyse the way differentially situated

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social agents interpret a range of information. Morley has further criticised this paradigm by arguing that notions of ideology should be expanded to look at how the media contribute to the temporal organisation of the day. Broadcasters are continually making assumptions about the way that audiences organise their day and, more importantly, who is watching. We regularly talk about morning newspapers, *breakfast* television and Radio 4's book at *bedtime*. The shared ritual of engaging with these cultural forms can be as important as the informational content.

These are important developments, as they demonstrate ways in which the media structure social life that go beyond actual consciously held beliefs. But Morley (and Philo for that matter) could still be criticised for mainly concentrating upon the way that ideology leaves its trace on conscious perspectives. Terry Eagleton (1991) has argued that the most politically important thing about spending large amounts of time watching television is not the ideological effect it has on the viewer. What is probably most crucial is that while people are watching television they are not engaging in more serious political activity. In Eagleton's terms television is more a form of social control than an ideological apparatus' (Eagleton, 1991: 35). This is an important point that has not been lost on repressive regimes that have sought to keep the populace entertained on a diet of cheap commercial television, which can be purchased on the world market. In contemporary Western societies the importance of television can be associated with the privatisation of leisure activities in the home (Phillips and Tomlinson, 1992). The ideological consequences of a more homecentred leisure culture is perhaps to be found in the atomisation of leisure practices and social forms of isolation from wider collectives. Indeed, as Lefebvre (1992) once argued, leisure time is expected to be a form of relaxation and therefore a break from the world of work. Thus the ideology of leisure is not to be found in the content of television news broadcasts, or the ways that citizens interpret them, but in the fact that it is meant to be a passive and not particularly intellectually demanding activity. This is not to suggest that media studies should return to the early Frankfurt school's notion of the passive consumer of mass culture, but it is to argue that for most of the audience, most of the time, modern culture is engaged with as a form of escape. Moreover, although Morley's more sociological emphasis pays close attention to the domestic context, his semiotic leanings overstate the ideological importance of the interpretative capacity of the audience. Yet when we come to more explicitly explore actual contexts they are more complex than these speculations allow. For example, James Lull's (1991) study of the mass introduction of television into Chinese society during the 1980's both induced more individualised patterns of leisure, while exposing ordinary people to an increased diversity of semiotic material. Despite the fact that Chinese television remains heavily regulated by the state the shift towards 'home centeredness' could also be linked to an enhanced form of ideological pluralism.

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In this short section we have seen that Morley's research on the television audience opened up a semiotic and sociological analysis of audience activity. These arguments were considered to be of particular importance in light of recent feminist critiques of a masculine obsession with the public rather than the private sphere. Morley's analysis bears out that the particular 'use' the audience makes of media technology and cultural forms is decided through the human archaeology of domestic settings. But Morley's writing, despite some of the qualifications he makes, remains distant from wider structural contexts of money and power. This was evident in relation to the structuration of domestic contexts through more macro frameworks of power, the absence of a theory of ideology that incorporated these very structures of domination, and in the fact that the functioning of certain cultural activities as forms of social control may be more important than their semiotic richness. These matters will continue to be of concern in the following sections.

John Fiske and the Pleasure of Popular Culture

John Fiske, like David Morley, has sought to articulate a theory of popular culture that builds upon Hall's original encoding/decoding essay. Running through most of his writing on popular culture is the distinction between instrumental streamlined forms of production that characterise capitalism, and the creative meanings invested in these products by the consumers. There is a radical break between the interests of the economic institutions that produce cultural forms and the interpretative concerns of the audience. Fiske expresses this distinction as an opposition between the 'power-bloc' (the dominant cultural, political and social order) and the 'people' (sets of felt social allegiances cut across by class, gender, race, age, etc.). The 'power bloc' produces uniform mass-produced products which are then transformed into practices of resistance by the 'people'. As Fiske argues, 'popular culture is made by the people, not produced by the culture industry' (Fiske, 1989a: 24). To be considered popular, therefore, commodities have to be able to be mass produced for economic return, and be potentially open to the subversive readings of the people. For Fiske, once I have purchased the new Madonna compact disc from the local music store, the product has become detached from the strategies of capitalism. The music of Madonna is not simply a standardised product that can be purchased through the institutions of global capitalism, but is a cultural resource of everyday life. The act of consumption always entails the production of meaning.

The circulation of meaning requires us to study three levels of textuality while teasing out the specific relations between them. First there are the cultural forms that are produced along with the new Madonna album to create the idea of a media event. These can include concerts, books, posters and videos. At the next level,

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there is a variety of media talk in popular magazines and newspapers, television pop programmes and radio shows all offering a variety of critical commentary upon Madonna. The final level of textuality, the one that Fiske claims to be most attentive to, involves the ways in which Madonna becomes part of our everyday life. According to Fiske (1987a, 1989b), Madonna's career was launched by a rock video of an early song called 'Lucky Star'. She became established in 1985 as a cultural icon through a series of successful LPs and singles, the film *Desperately Seeking Susan*, nude shots that appeared in *Penthouse* and *Playboy*, as well as the successful marketing of a certain 'look'. Fiske argues that Madonna symbolically plays with traditional male-dominated stereotypes of the virgin and the whore in order to subtly subvert patriarchal meanings. That is, the textuality of Madonna ideologically destabilises traditional representations of women. Fiske accounts for Madonna's success by arguing that she is an open or writerly text rather than a closed readerly one. In this way, Madonna is able to challenge her fans to reinvent their own sexual identities out of the cultural resources that she and patriarchal capitalism provides. Hence Madonna as a text is polysemic, patriarchal and sceptical. In the final analysis, Madonna is not popular because she is promoted by the culture industry, but because her attempts to forge her own identity within a male-defined culture have a certain relevance for her fans.

While Fiske draws from a range of cultural theory, most notably semiotics and post-structuralism, the work of Michel de Certeau (1984) has a particular resonance for his approach. For de Certeau, popular culture is best defined as the operations performed upon texts, rather than the actual domains of the texts themselves. Everyday life has to operate within the instrumental spaces that have been carved out by the powerful. To read a fashion magazine, listen to a punk album, put on a soccer supporter's scarf, or pin up a picture of David Bowie, is to discover a way of using common culture that is not strictly proscribed by its makers. The act of consumption is part of the 'tactics' of the weak that while occupying the spaces of the strong converts disciplinary and instrumental time into that which is free and creative. The specific tactics that evade instrumental modes of domination, or what de Certeau sometimes calls cultural poaching, in practice never become reified as they are constantly shifting and thereby evade detection. In this vein, de Certeau describes as 'la perruque' those artful practices that are able to trick order. For instance, the practice of writing a love letter while at work is a means of stealing time from an instrumental activity and diverting it into a more sensuous pursuit. Thus while the practices of the powerful dominate the production of cultural forms and regulate the spaces of their reception, the reading processes of the weak elude strategies of direct control. To take another example derived from de Certeau; while Spanish colonisers were 'successful' in imposing their own culture on indigenous Indians, the dominated were able to make of this imposed culture something different from that which the conquerors

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intended. This was not achieved through revolutionary struggle, but by accepting the culture of the Spanish and subtly transforming it for their own ends.

Following de Certeau, Fiske dispenses with the notion of the 'preferred reading' evident within the original encoding/decoding model. Both Fiske and de Certeau are keen to distance themselves from cultural theories, like those proposed by the early Frankfurt school, which assume that the consumer becomes more like the product, rather than the notion that consumers make the product more like themselves. More conservative cultural accounts, for de Certeau, stem from the Enlightenment belief that certain authorised forms of knowledge were capable of transforming the habits of the people. This particular disposition establishes a definite hierarchy between those professional intellectuals who construct the text and those who are meant to passively assimilate it. The 'power bloc', in this reading, attempts to close down the potential meanings of the text by hierarchically fixing certain interpretations over others. The modern world, however, has witnessed a decline in the power of tradition in general, and intellectuals in particular, to proscribe meanings in this way. De Certeau writes:

Just as the aeroplane makes possible a growing independence with respect to the constraints imposed by geographical organisation, the techniques of speed reading obtain, through the rarefaction of the eye's stopping points, an acceleration of its movements across the page, an autonomy in relation to the determinants of the text and a multiplication of the spaces covered. Emancipated from places, the reading body is freer in its movements. (De Certeau, 1984:176)

Indeed, for de Certeau, the need to write flows from a psychic desire to master and order the world. The emergence of the novel, therefore, was an attempt to recapture some of the cosmological language that had previously defined one's place in the world within traditional society. In the modern age of atomised individualism there has been a further decline in the commitment to certain beliefs. Further, as those institutions, such as religious and political organisations, lose their capacity to engender belief, the people take refuge in media and leisure activities. We now live in a 'recited' society that constantly circulates narratives and stories through the medium of mass communication. In the post-truth world, the people are saturated by a plurality of discourses that are struggling for the consent of the audience, the difference being that the explosion of messages that characterises modernity is no longer stamped with the 'authority' of their authors. De Certeau aptly describes the way in which old religious forms of authority have been supplanted by a plurality of narratives that empower the reader, rather than the writer. Similarly, Fiske argues that the shift from national to global capitalism has meant that the system of production has become more distant, leaving the necessary space for oppositional tactics. The central paradox of modernity identified by Fiske and de Certeau is that the more information that is produced

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by the power bloc, the less it is able to govern the various interpretations made of it by socially situated subjects. To illustrate this point, Fiske (1987b) draws upon the seminal research of Hodge and Tripp (1986) into children's relationship with television.

Hodge and Tripp aim to refute the joint myths that television is necessarily educationally bad for children and that parents and children read television in the same way. This concern is particularly evident in their attempt to unravel the reasons for the popularity of the soap opera *Prisoner Cell Block H* amongst Australian schoolchildren. Hodge and Tripp found that the schoolchildren identified with the women prisoners of the television series. The authors explain this phenomenon through the structural similarities of the position of the children within the school and those of the fictional prisoners. Schoolchildren and the prisoners live under a single authority, are treated alike in a tightly scheduled order imposed from above, and have their activities co-ordinated by the rational planning of the institution. The schoolchildren also articulated a number of points of similarity, between the school and the prison, in terms of the way they are often shut in, separated from friends, have no rights, wouldn't be there unless they had to be, and are made to suffer rules they see little point in keeping. The pupils' own self-perceptions resembled those represented by the prisoners, who were also reduced to 'childlike' roles within the programmes. Similarly, the teachers and the prison warders, as figures of authority, were often positioned together. Hence the popularity of *Prisoner Cell Block H* is the result of the children's understanding that schools are like prisons. To return to Fiske's arguments, as Hodge and Tripp amply demonstrate, the 'popular' is an open, fluid and shifting culture that is realised through the symbolic tactics of the weak. The symbolic practices of the schoolchildren can only be made sense of if their various interpretations are understood in terms of the asymmetrical relations of power that exist between adults and children. If Fiske's conclusions are accepted, research into children and television should be concerned less with the ideological corrupting influences of television than with the way it is used as a form of resistance.

Life's More Fun with the Popular Press

In a reprinted interview, Fiske describes his own theoretical output as being concerned to articulate 'a socialist theory of pleasure' (Fiske, 1989b). These irreverent forms of *jouissance* that erupt from below are opposed to the disciplinary techniques utilised by the power bloc. Here there is a double pleasure involved in the audience's reading of popular texts. The first is the enjoyment involved in the symbolic production of meanings that oppose those of the power bloc, and the second concerns the actual activity of being productive. These practices are

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particularly important within modern settings, as not unlike his colleague John Hartley (1992), Fiske argues that modern bureaucratic politics is controlled by a small, powerful minority. The 'distance' of parliamentary democracy from the fabric of people's everyday lives means that participation in the political comes through the creative use of popular products. In this scenario, the market, unlike the declining high culture of the powerful, brings certain cultural products within the critical horizons of the people. The problem with much of the cultural production of the power bloc is that it remains insufficiently polysemic and too concerned with the discovery of objective truth. The search for a final universal truth, which this position implies, is totalitarian rather than democratic. The result is the closing down of the plurality of truths that should be allowed expression under a democratic order. Arguments that the news should be more accurate and objective are actually supportive of the discursive practices of the power bloc. A more democratic form of electronic journalism would seek to ironise truth claims by seeking to reveal the ways in which they are socially and historically produced. To claim that there is one truth, therefore, is to capitulate to the dominant regime of truth, and deny the potentially liberatory pleasure of the text. But once the production of information has given up 'the tone of the author-god' (Fiske, 1989b: 193) this should encourage viewers to become more actively involved in making sense of the world. While citizens are excluded from direct forms of involvement in the decision-making processes of modern representative democracies, they could be allowed more micro forms of participation in a semiotic democracy.

Fiske (1992) has recently sought to make these theoretical points more concrete through a discussion of the press. Here he outlines three different forms of news production: quality, alternative and popular. As we saw above, the cultural production of the 'power bloc' ideologically disguises the interested nature of its production by appeals to universal values. In this way, the quality press, through the production of objective facts actually gears its output towards producing belief rather than scepticism amongst its readers. The eighteenth-century public sphere, defended in Habermas's (1989) account, was not so much about communicatively opening up certain repressed questions, as it was a strategy of domination. It was the power bloc rather than the citizens who decided to circulate certain forms of information that did not require the active engagement of the weak. Next, the transmission of more radical perspectives is sustained by the alternative press, which is dependent upon the practice of radical journalists and is mainly consumed by the educated middle class. This form of news is more critical of the practices of the dominant than the quality press, but its readers and writers are usually made up of more marginal representatives of the power bloc itself. The tabloid or popular press, unlike the quality or alternative press, deconstructs the opposition between news and entertainment. This is a necessary move as entertainment is just as much a discursive product as so called 'hard' news, and for the news to become more

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popular it needs to be able to pleurably engage the audience. Fiske also claims that while the quality press produces a believing subject the tabloids encourage more critical forms of cultural production amongst their readers. Through the production of open texts the tabloid press produces:

sceptical laughter which offers the pleasures of disbelief, the pleasures of not being taken in. This popular pleasure of 'seeing through' them (whoever constitutes the powerful them of the moment) is the historical result of centuries of subordination which the people have not allowed to develop into subjection. (Fiske, 1992: 49)

What is important about the tabloid press is not whether the articles and features it runs are actually true, but its oppositional stance to official regimes of truth. Fiske illustrates this argument by referring to a story concerning aliens landing from outer space, which he claims to be a recurrent one within tabloid journalism. The point about such stories is that they subversively blur the distinction between facts and fiction, thereby disrupting the dominant language game disseminated by the power bloc. Further, while official news attempts to ideologically mask the contradictions evident within its discourse, the tabloid press deliberately seeks to exaggerate certain norms, hereby *abnormalising* them. Fiske's argument here is that the sensation-alised stories characteristic of the tabloids produce a writerly text in that they openly invite the interpretative participation of their readers. The tabloids, like other popular texts such as Madonna and soap operas, maintain their popularity by informing people about the world in a way that is open to the tactics of the weak. In this reading, the various forms of depoliticisation evident within Western democracies are attributable more to the quality than to the popular press. On the other hand, Fiske claims to be aware that the popular press is rarely orchestrated towards politically progressive ends. But the cultural and stylistic form of the popular press could, according to Fiske, be turned against the interests of the powerful. A Left political strategy should steer clear of 'preachiness' (Fiske, 1989a: 178) and advocate pleasurable texts that refuse the temptation of imposing certain socially correct meanings. This would hold open the possibility of a genuinely left-wing paper that did not seek rigidly to control the meanings produced by its readers

Pointless Populism or Resistant Pleasures?

The main strength of John Fiske's approach to the study of media and culture is the emphasis he places upon the creative work undertaken by the audience in the production of negotiated and oppositional readings. The study of popular culture is not about the macro issues of political economy, ideology or the public sphere,

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but about the evasive tactics of the weak. This view offers an important corrective to those who continue to ignore the capacity of the audience to involve themselves in semiotic insurgence. Fiske's work has proved to be important to those who wish to respect the ambivalent pleasures of popular culture providing a close reading of different textual and audience strategies. Fiske's work has allowed for the study of fan communities, pleasurable forms of identification and interpretative moments that have read cultural forms against the grain. But I want to argue that the writing of John Fiske has a number of flaws. Here I shall offer five main reasons for this claim: (1) his account pays insufficient attention to the institutions that structurate the reception of symbolic forms; (2) his arguments foreclose the possibility of a theory of ideology; (3) his view of the popular press excludes any concrete investigation of its actual content; (4) he lacks a critical conception of the political importance of the fragmentation of the public sphere; and (5) he consistently substitutes his own reading of popular forms for those of the audience.

1. Fiske's socialist theory of pleasure is dependent on a view of the market democratising the people's access to cultural goods. This assumption can only be maintained if mass forms of culture are compared with so called 'high culture'. As Bourdieu (1984) has argued, access to the relevant cultural disposition for the enjoyment of the 'official arts' is dependent upon the subject's family and educational background. This disposition, or what Bourdieu refers to as the dominant aesthetic, is a learnt bodily sense that emphasises the primacy of detachment and contemplation over active forms of involvement. The habitus of the dominant class can be discerned in the ideology of natural charisma, as well as the notion that 'taste' is a gift from nature. The dominant lifestyle is historically born out of a division within the dominant class between the industrial bourgeoisie and the intelligentsia. The intelligentsia's separation from material necessity has meant that they have traditionally misrecognised their own cultural production as disinterested. Bourdieu's aim is to treat apparently neutral practices, such as those involved in cultural production, as a strategic means of gaining money and power. The intelligentsia's aesthetic disposition naturalises their specific production and reception of certain types of symbolic goods. In opposition, the popular aesthetic, the product of the cultural disposition of the working class, expresses a desire for participation and immediate forms of gratification. This would explain the popularity of soccer as a spectator sport amongst working-class males, given the opportunities for participation through fashion, chanting and singing. The range of cultural practices that are embodied in the popular aesthetic are distinct from those generated by the dominant aesthetic. Hence the social space generated for audience participation within the dominant aesthetic is more tightly regulated. To gain pleasure from the less spontaneous atmosphere of an art gallery or museum, according to Bourdieu, presupposes that one has access to the appropriate social codes and dispositions.

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To return to Fiske, we can see that his and Bourdieu's accounts retain a similarity in relation to the popular need for a strong sense of involvement in cultural practices. Whether these practices are the result of the excess of the tabloids, the writerly texts of soap operas or the more immediate pleasures of soccer spectatorship, they can be defined in opposition to both the instrumental production of the power bloc and the aesthetic disposition of the bourgeoisie. There does indeed seem to be some justification in the argument that the popular culture of the marketplace is more inclusive than that of the educated bourgeoisie or the power bloc. But neither Fiske, nor Bourdieu, in their admittedly distinct analyses, pay any sustained attention to the institutions of the culture industry (Garnham, 1986b). For instance, the commercial institutions of late capitalism are geared towards targeting certain audience segments. Dick Hebdige has described the post-Fordist move away from mass to more flexible forms of production as the 'sociology of aspiration' (Hebdige, 1989: 53). By this he means that commercial forms of culture are symbolically arranged to connect with the lifestyles and the future desires of consumer groups. What is not clear is that the oppositional readings of target groups actually constitute forms of resistance that subvert the economic structures of late capitalism, or that commercial forms of culture are as materially accessible as Fiske implies.

Computer games, for example, are sold to a young teenage audience through television advertising, trade magazines, television programmes, radio shows and the popular press. Fiske could argue that some game formats constitute relatively open texts, which leaves them open to semiotic forms of resistance. The problem with this argument is that it is difficult to see how the structures of late capitalism are threatened by this activity. Indeed, as with other cultural forms, computer games are likely to have a certain semiotic openness deliberately built into them. As I argued in Chapter 2, structures of domination are just as likely to be maintained through social atomism as by ideological consensus. A society whose imaginary is constituted through difference and diversity rather than sameness provides a plurality of markets for capitalist accumulation strategies. Of course this does not mean, as Fiske demonstrates, that certain readings critical of the dominant social order cannot be opened up through an engagement with the popular. What I am arguing instead is that a fragmented culture may undermine the social cohesion necessary to produce relations of solidarity with those not immediately present in time and space. This situation is likely to destabilise political attempts to symbolically create alliances amongst the weak against the power bloc. Indeed, one could argue that the culturally fractured nature of the audience works in the interests of the culture industry, as it provides new markets and promotes an individualistic culture.

If this argument is followed, then a more effective means of resisting the capitalist computer game industry would be by the use of decommodification strategies. Such practices could include the setting up of public lending libraries

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for computer games and the production of new games by co-operatives. That such projects are unlikely to occur is surely due to the fact that investment is controlled by large transnational corporations, which in turn are progressively privatising public forms of culture. This problem is completely bypassed by Fiske. In fact, he even suggests, at one point, that new forms of solidarity evident on the dance floor, in fan culture and other popular practices could provide the basis for a more socially just society (Fiske, 1989a: 176). A more institutional frame of reference could have more adequately contextualised the creative responses of the audience by linking them to socially reproducible structures of domination. In this interpretation semiotic playfulness and the dominance of the status quo could be more closely related than Fiske is aware.

Similarly, the absence of an institutional perspective blinds Fiske to material rather than symbolic distinctions amongst the audience. As Peter Golding (1990) has argued, the Western capitalist nations exhibit massive inequalities in terms of their access to cultural goods. This situation is mainly determined by the much publicised ever-widening gap between rich and poor. Fiske seems to assume that the capitalist market has a democratising effect in that it makes widely available a whole range of pleasurable texts. This argument, as we have seen, has some validity, if one compares genuinely popular cultural forms to those that require the application of scarce symbolic resources. Yet if we return to the analysis of computer games presented above, what should be obvious is that it neglects to mention the unequal distribution of the necessary computer technology. In 1986, 32.1 per cent of those whose household income was over £550 a week owned a home computer, compared to 1.3 per cent of those surviving on £45 or less (Golding, 1990). By 1998 these dimensions had remained remarkably stable with 8% of the poorest 20% owning a home computer compared to 57% of the top 20% (Golding 2000). Class structure then erects certain material, in addition to symbolic, barriers to cultural forms of participation, that are neglected by Fiske's concern with signs and symbols.

2. A critical theory of ideology is dependent upon the notion that certain linguistic signs symbolically reinforce or leave unquestioned material relations of domination. Fiske, I would argue, forecloses the possibility of a theory of ideology by always reading the popular as a form of resistance. Returning to Bourdieu, it is apparent that Fiske lacks a theory of cultural domination as such. Bourdieu refers to the dominant aesthetic as arbitrary, since there is no intrinsic reason why certain upper-class accents and tastes should be indicative of a high culture. Culture is a tool of class domination. The bourgeoisie misrecognise their lifestyle and cultural forms of production as being ahistorical and disinterested. The education system, for example, reproduces the dominance of the bourgeoisie through the recognised superiority of the dominant aesthetic. Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) argue that education institutions impose the dominant form of life on the working classes.

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The dominant habitus does not socialise subjects into the cultural patterns required by the education system, but results in the self-exclusion of the dominated classes. Through a process that Bourdieu calls symbolic violence, the working class recognises that the dominant habitus is superior to its own. For Bourdieu (1991) language does not serve as a pure instrument of communication but expresses the social position of the speaker. It is not, in other words, the complexity of the bourgeoisie's vocabulary that ensures its superiority. Instead the symbolic dominance of the bourgeoisie is maintained by its ability to censor the legitimacy of other modes of expression. Working-class lifestyles, on this reading, are culturally dominated and evaluated from the perspective of the dominant cultural style. Thus even those who enjoy the robust activities of supporting a soccer team are likely to view higher forms of cultural practice (such as visiting the opera) as having greater worth. Alternatively, Fiske views the popular as the site of resistance rather than domination. He discounts the possibility, which admittedly Bourdieu overstates, the people would view their own cultural practices as being less important than those of the power bloc. What Bourdieu's analysis reveals is that certain cultural styles and dispositions are able to impress themselves upon others due to relations of authority that exist outside of language.

On a different subject, Michael Schudson (1993) shares Fiske's doubts concerning the extent to which advertising directly affects consumer choices. This is because advertising competes with other forms of information (press reviews, peer assessment, brand loyalty) and is also the subject of popular disbelief. In some respects, however, advertising can be a powerful medium for persuading more *vulnerable* consumers of the merits of a particular product. One such group are young children, who necessarily have access to more restricted sources of information when compared to adults. While they are able to make sense of television advertisements, they are unable to decipher much of the output of the print media and are relatively inexperienced cultural consumers. Fiske, in response, would undoubtedly object that Hodge and Tripp's study argues that children and adults read television in very different ways. While this may be true, Fiske is unable to account for the reasons why children seem to be such easy prey for advertisers. Jim McGuigan (1992) adds that not only are advertisements geared towards creating material desires amongst a young audience, but television programmes and films are often specifically produced in order to sell a range of products from expensive toys to T-shirts. That is, children may decode symbolic forms differently from the ways the producers of the image intended, while becoming convinced of the desirability of a particular product. Thus, in so far as Fiske is hostile to a critical concept of ideology, it would seem that he is able to appreciate only a narrow range of cultural practices.

3. What immediately strikes the reader of Fiske's analysis of popular culture is the inadequacy of his perceptions of its content. Although Fiske's (1982)

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background in semiotics means that he was fully equipped to probe the internal structures of popular texts, he gives them a decidedly one-dimensional reading. There are, in fact, few sustained analyses of popular texts in his work. This leads one to doubt some of the claims he makes on behalf of popular culture. At the heart of his view of the popular press is the assumption that discursive modes of exaggeration produce a certain scepticism within the reading subject. For Fiske, stories about aliens landing from outer space subvert the language game of the power bloc. One of the problems with this argument is that Fiske offers very little by the way of evidence to support his argument concerning the widespread nature of such stories. Indeed, much more evidence is available for arguing that the actual content of the tabloid press is overtly ideological. For instance, the systematic content studies of Van Dijk, (1991) have demonstrated the racist nature of much of press content. In a study of the British and Dutch press during the 1980s he uncovers the extent to which press coverage ideologically reproduces a system that sustains white group dominance. While these issues cannot be explored here, it could be argued, in terms of actual content, that the popular press is more readily characterised by the racist nature of its content, than by the sort of bizarre stories Fiske discovers. Rather than abnormalising commonly held norms, the popular press is more often involved in symbolically creating certain out-groups. The white national press consistently ignores those subjects that are of most concern to ethnic minorities (housing, work, health) while representing them as a social problem (riots, crime, immigration). There is a case for arguing – and this point is forcibly made by Van Dijk – that by representing ethnic minorities in such a way the press is helping to sustain white dominance. This is not to argue that such stories would necessarily be uncritically accepted by their readers, but I would want to at least hold open such a possibility. That Fiske largely ignores such arguments compromises his more impressionistic view of the content of popular culture.

4. In dealing with the alternative press, Fiske argues that it has a tendency to be authoritarian and overly prescriptive. Similarly, in his view the culture of the power bloc concentrates upon the ‘official’ activities of the rich and powerful in a way that is distant from the lives of so-called ordinary people. These very practices constitute the major reason, offered by Fiske, for the ‘culture gap’ that has opened up within Western democracies between elected politicians and the populace. In place of the quality and alternative press, Fiske advocates a more politically diverse range of popular texts. This argument contrasts with the perspectives of Williams and Habermas offered in previous chapters.³ Williams and Habermas suggest that modernity has witnessed the growing differentiation of high- and low-quality forms of information. This and other processes, including the privatisation of knowledge, social atomism, economic stagnation and the restricted nature of democracy, has contributed to the progressive depoliticisation of the public sphere. In turn, this has created a social vacuum which the tabloids fill with their particular brand of

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scandal and sensation. Fiske, on the other hand, uncovers some of the discursive strategies that have been incorporated by popular news, and reminds us that the audience is capable of making plural meanings. However, Fiske's argument that a pluralist, participatory culture can only be sustained once the quality press has become more like the tabloids is perhaps mistaken. Colin Sparks (1992a) has argued that the popular press tends to represent the world in terms of an individualised conflict between good and evil. The quality press, regardless of its political content, is much more concerned with relating 'events' to the public context of social and political relations. Sparks justifiably argues that an informed public debate necessarily rests on the discussion of institutional processes and practices opened up by the quality press. I would add that Fiske misunderstands the original notion of the public sphere that has been developed by Williams and Habermas. Despite the limitations of their approaches, both writers stress the need for a communicative sphere protected from the operation of money and power. Thus the culture of the power bloc should be less about producing belief, and more concerned with the process of argument and discussion. That the actually existing public sphere often employs ideological strategies to legitimise the dominance of ruling elites is undeniable. But, as Williams and Habermas argue, a more democratic society and culture can be ensured only by the production of diverse forms of knowledge, and the social and political structures that encourage democratic forms of participation. John Keane (1991) argues in this vein that informed debate amongst the citizens of modern democracies, especially within globalised settings, is dependent upon high-quality forms of information. In his terms, and similar to Sparks, good investigative journalism depends upon the patient processes of investigation that seek to keep a watchful eye over those in power. However, Fiske's arguments point to the possibility that 'new formats' such as talk shows, infotainment and fan magazines have something to teach so called 'serious' political discussion. It is indeed possible that less hierarchical and rigid formats operationalised by these cultural forms can lead to the mixing of critical knowledge and pleasure. As I have argued, the fear of these formats on the part of cultural commentators, can often be read as a fear of the feminine (Gray 1999). As we shall see, it has been feminist media scholarship that has best developed our understanding of the subversive value of the popular. Yet these qualifications aside, Fiske's analysis remains blind to many of the ideological and material strategies that continue to constitute the popular.

5. Fiske's central claim is that the fluid practices of consumers constitute a form of resistance against the dominant instrumental society. While I have questioned some of his assumptions concerning the notion of semiotic resistance, Fiske has been accredited with opening up the theoretical space for the investigation of the audience. The problem here is that, similar to de Certeau, Fiske often substitutes his own experience of the text for that of the audience. John Frow (1991)

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argues that de Certeau's semiotic categories lead him to implant his own voice, where we should expect to find those of the users of popular culture. Fiske offers very little by way of empirical evidence to support his claims concerning the vibrant activities of the audience. This is due to his own enthusiasm for popular texts and his intellectual background in semiotic forms of content analysis.⁴ His analysis of the intertextual nature of Madonna is largely based on his own skilful reading, and only briefly engages with the perspectives of her 'fans' through the letters page of a teenage magazine. Similarly, Fiske's argument that the tabloid press is open to the subversive tactics of the weak remains at the level of the text. He is unable to offer any empirical support for his argument. Admittedly, while television and film studies are beginning to open up perspectives on the audience, there has, as yet, been little research of a comparable quality on newspaper culture.

One of the few examples of such research is offered by Mark Pursehouse (1987) in an ethnographic account of the reading practices of tabloid consumers. Pursehouse accurately describes the mode of address of the *Sun* newspaper as 'heterosexual, male, white, conservative, capitalist, nationalist' (1987: 2). His study represents the interview subjects as artfully negotiating with the way in which the newspaper is symbolically constructed. This was particularly evident amongst the women readers who viewed the page three pin-ups and the sports sections as off limits. Pursehouse also reveals that many of the readers viewed the paper as a source of fun and relaxation to be enjoyed as a 'break' from work routines. Yet the newspaper is commonly interpreted as a working-class paper, unlike the qualities, which are presumed to have a more middle-class readership. The *Sun*, for these readers, is defined by the personal use it has in ordinary contexts. We can interpret this reading as a form of ideological masking or dissimulation. As J.B. Thompson (1990) has put it, dissimulation is established when certain social relations are linguistically concealed. When the newspaper is read as a form of private entertainment it becomes detached from the axes of power and politics. The identification of the newspaper as working-class, I would suggest, denies its political and institutional location. As is well known, the *Sun* is owned by the global media empire of Rupert Murdoch, and throughout the 1980s it helped construct the authoritarian populist politics of the far Right. That Pursehouse's readers are unable to give the newspaper a more political reading is probably the result of its being seen as a means of private pleasure rather than public concern. Fiske's lack of hermeneutic sensitivity to the horizons of the audience, despite his claims to the contrary, slides his own reading of tabloid newspapers into that of the audience. More interpretatively sensitive investigations should both open out the space for the responses of the audience, while positioning them within unequal social relations. This is precisely what Fiske fails to do.

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Feminism and Soap Opera: Reading into Pleasure

In feminist research into popular media cultures the emphasis has been placed upon rescuing women's pleasures from overtly masculine frameworks and definitions. These studies have stressed the importance of commercial cultures in providing a space for utopian readings and transgressive identities. Again I will argue that although studies which underline the ambivalent nature of popular cultures are important, they neglect a wider range of political interests with which feminism is concerned.

The recent changing paradigms within feminist theory have had a marked impact on culture and media studies. Both perspectives, in recent times, have witnessed a move away from a concern over constraining social structures towards an investigation of the social construction of identity. Michelle Barrett and Ann Phillips (1992) offer some interesting reflections on the theoretical shifts in feminist attempts to 'destabilise' previously secure masculine frameworks. In particular, Barrett draws some comparisons between contemporary and 1970s feminism. Seventies feminism, she claims, can be roughly characterised by the belief that it was possible to locate the cause of women's oppression. Most feminists argued, according to Barrett, that the essence of male domination could be located within the social and family structure. This trend was expressed in media studies through attempts to objectively identify the exclusion of women from the employment structures of the media, as well as the ways in which patriarchy was supported in sexually stereotyped images and representations (Tuchman, 1978). The picture being presented here is one of progressive feminist aims being subordinated by a male-dominated media. It was widely assumed, amongst old-style feminists, that the process of change could be accelerated by presenting more positive images of women. This perspective reproduced a simple binary opposition between the excluded voices of progressive feminists and the dominant ideological culture. But, according to Barrett, this consensus has now been broken by the impact of post-structuralism and the opening up of issues around sexual difference. Feminists, along with others concerned with identity issues, seek to establish gendered selves as discursively unstable constructions. The aim is to fruitfully deconstruct simple polarities between men and women, straights and gays, lesbians and gays, and unravel the complex ways in which identities are actually constructed. Likewise, the emphasis on identity in cultural studies has opened up a less moralising examination of popular culture and the public sphere. In the study of popular texts academics have lost a certain lofty and objectifying aura. This less regimented atmosphere of discussion has allowed media researchers to own up to their own enjoyment of the popular while throwing light on the contradictory pleasures of the audience. Through studies of women's interpretative relationship to popular

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culture, cultural studies has addressed previously repressed issues of pleasure and identity. Thus groups within feminism and cultural studies have jointly sought to map out the ways in which the self is fashioned out of contemporary cultural forms. The merging of the concerns of feminism and cultural studies, I would argue, is marked in the study of romantic fiction, soap opera, and women's magazines.

Feminism, Mass Culture and Watching *Dallas*

The classic study of women's relationship to soap opera remains Ien Ang's (1985) study of the American serial *Dallas*. While Ang was compiling her study, *Dallas* was being shown in 90 countries and had become part of a global culture. Indeed, according to Ang, in her own country the Netherlands, during the spring of 1982, *Dallas* was being watched by just over half the population. The programme itself, for those who have never seen it, concerns the personal relations of a family made rich by Texan oil. Ang's book is an attempt to account for the popularity of the series through an interpretative understanding of the pleasures of the audience and her own evident enjoyment of the programme. At the time, the main reason that was being offered by the Dutch media for the success of *Dallas* was the **cultural imperialism** thesis. By this Ang means an account that represents a synthetic global American culture that is repressing more authentic national cultures. For Ang the implication of this argument would be to restrict the free trade in commercial culture to enable national forms of cultural production. Such a perspective, on her account, is flawed in that it would probably lead to cheap attempts by nation states to imitate *Dallas's* glossy production, but more importantly, such a view fails to account for the reasons why the audience tune in each week. The related argument that the arrival of *Dallas* is explained as resulting from media hype and the dominance of the culture industry is similarly dismissed, since by implication it reduces the audience to cultural dopes. Along with Morley and Fiske, the guiding theme of the research is to take a hermeneutics of trivial pleasures seriously.

Ang got in touch with fellow *Dallas* watchers by placing a small advertisement in a Dutch women's magazine:

I like to watch the TV serial *Dallas*, but often get odd reactions to it. Would anyone like to write and tell me why you like watching it too, or dislike it? I should like to assimilate these reactions in my university thesis. (Ang, 1985:10)

She argues that popular pleasure is defined by immediate and sensual forms of enjoyment. As both Fiske and Bourdieu point out, the enjoyment of the popular is usually associated with a more relaxed bodily attitude in that the notion of

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being entertained offers a release from the usual demands of society. But even these suggestive remarks offer comparatively little in terms of addressing the specific pleasures of the audience. By offering an interpretation of the respondents' own self-interpretations, Ang claims that the avid watchers of *Dallas* find it *emotionally realistic*. This might, at first, seem like an odd claim to make on behalf of a programme whose context is far removed from the daily lives of the vast majority of the audience. Indeed, Ang notes that it was *Dallas's* perceived lack of realism that was the most common complaint amongst the programme's detractors. This argument, which Ang partially blames on the cultural circulation of the media imperialism thesis, misunderstands the complexity of popular reactions.

First, to complain that a work of fiction is unrealistic is to misunderstand the nature of symbolic production. The text, Ang reasons, does not reflect the world but in fact produces it. The realism identified by *Dallas* fans is not empirical but psychological. The 'reality effect' of *Dallas* is not produced through its correspondence with the world outside, but through the feelings of direct involvement that it forms within the audience. The fascination with the world of J.R. and Sue Ellen, Pamela and Bobby Ewing is the result of the audience's identification with 'more general living experiences: rows, intrigues, problems, happiness and misery' (Ang, 1985: 44–5). Like other soap operas, *Dallas* provides a plurality of narratives that symbolically invents a notion of community around the family. As a melodrama, however, *Dallas* embodies what Ang calls a tragic structure of feeling, in its construction of family life. By this Ang means that family life is not so much romanticised as 'constantly shattered' (Ang, 1985: 69). The characters within *Dallas*, in keeping with the tragic structure of feeling, exhibit little self-reflection and lack control over their own lives. This connects with a realisation amongst the viewers that suffering and pain are the everyday fare of personal relationships. The world of *Dallas* was felt to be realistic by certain sections of the audience because it took for granted the workings of patriarchal society. The tragic structure of feeling not only symbolically opened up a world where the celebration of happiness is always short lived, but represented those with power as most often being men.

Other than the tragic structure of feeling, Ang discovers other ways of relating to *Dallas*. She found that many of the viewers had developed an ironic disposition towards the programme. This is a form of viewing that partakes in the pleasures of *Dallas*, but in a way that utilises humour as a means of creating a form of social distance between the reader and the text. Ang views this reaction as a defensive means of preserving the pleasure of the text against the normalising discourse of the cultural imperialism thesis. The notion of cultural imperialism, on this reading, not only represses the cultural productivity of the audience, but acts as a means of symbolic violence against popular tastes. Ang, however, wants to defend the ordinary pleasures offered by *Dallas* by linking these concerns to a utopian feminist politics.

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Feminism is utopian to the extent to which it bases an imaginary politics on the future possibility of living in a world where men no longer dominate women. The dialogic involvement of the mostly female audience points to a basic contradiction in the text between the different subject positions offered by Sue Ellen and Pamela. While Ang recognises that both Sue Ellen and Pamela are trapped in patriarchal structures of domination, they embody culturally distinct ways of subjectively expressing this relationship. Sue Ellen, in tune with the tragic structure of feeling, displays a cynical recognition of the inevitability of male dominance, while Pamela holds forth the utopian possibility of equal forms of sustaining love between men and women. That both characters eventually share the same miserable fate should not distract feminists from seeking to unravel the ways in which the process of reading mass culture opens up new forms of political identity. It is not that Ang is unaware that those imaginary positions that we take up in fantasy are not necessarily allowed to reflect critically on the real. She does, however, close the study with a call for feminists to examine more closely the ways in which the spheres of actual lived social relations and psychic identification may cut into one another. In doing so, she indicates a critical path between the lumping of women's private pleasures into the ideological prison house (Modleski, 1988) and the populist celebration of the resistant housewife (Fiske, 1987b).

Psychoanalysis, Identity and Utopia

Other feminists have sought to develop the themes outlined by Ang. Looking back, Ang's study is perhaps most marked by her lack of concern to develop a psychoanalytic understanding of gender construction, and neglect of the social context of the audience. In this respect, Janice Radway's (1987) slightly earlier study has proved to be seminal for a number of feminist writers seeking to develop the themes of identity, mass culture and utopia (Geraghty, 1991). Like Ang, Radway maintains a utopian politics by considering the reading practices of women consumers of popular culture. But she takes these issues further by seeking to link a more complex notion of gendered subjectivity to a psychic process of identification. In addition, Radway crucially relates the pleasures of reading romantic fiction to women's subordinate position within patriarchal households.

Running through Radway's study is a concerted emphasis on the ideological complexity of romance reading. Her fieldwork focuses on a small group of avid romance readers from a Midwestern town called Smithton in the United States. In a later article she claims that the romance study presents the reader's world as a 'collaboratively produced patchwork quilt, where small, separately (but also collectively) worked patterns are stitched together over time by a variety of seamstresses' (Radway, 1987: 109). As with Morley and Fiske, Radway provides a

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critique of a theory of meaning that commences with the individual reader. Her argument is that the social meaning of the romance is a product of the interrelation between the cultural life-worlds of the readers, ideology and relations of power.

The identifications of the women readers are largely unknown to the producers of the romance fantasies. This disjuncture between the encoders and the decoders was mediated by a trusted selector from whom the women purchased their romance novels. The selector, in this sense, was able to narrow the distance between the capitalist production of the novels and the expressed needs and desires of the women. Hence the role of the mediator was far more important than the advertising strategies employed by the romance producers in determining which books the women actually read. A similar gatekeeper role also informs other cultural activities such as the music press's reviews of new releases, a friend's recommendation of a novel, and the video store's enthusiasm for certain titles. This aside, what was evident from an investigation into the interpretative understandings of the women was that many of the readers read the romances as symbolic of female triumph. This was because the most popular novels offered a narrative of transformation where cold, distant, isolated men became on the story's conclusion caring, nurturing and feminised. It was the ability of the romance to articulate a deep form of human understanding between the hero and the heroine that accounted for its success. The novels that deviated from this predictable pattern often left the reader unsatisfied. In the case of disappointing narratives, the mediator would either recommend avoidance to other readers, or the women themselves wouldn't bother to read the text once they realised that the novel didn't end happily.

The practice of novel reading seems important for the women because it enables them to negotiate a certain amount of social space for their own leisure pursuits, and opens up a limited critique of patriarchy. Radway notes, along with others (Gray, 1992), that the women's enjoyment of the romance novels can only be accomplished once they have successfully negotiated the cultural derision of their husbands, as well as their own sense of guilt. The guilty pleasures involved in romance reading are emotionally sustaining in a male-dominated social order that seeks to discipline women into subordinating their own needs to those of significant others. Their reading operates in a compensatory way, offering them, via the text, the emotional support they are denied in their personal relations with men. The romantic escape, however, is also dependent upon a form of utopian receptiveness where the reader has the feeling that her own needs are being met in a caring and receptive way. Paradoxically, the romance both ideologically helps sustain the women in patriarchal relations and holds forth the possibility of more nurturing human relationships.

At this point, Radway draws on the psychoanalytic writing of Chodorow (1978). Chodorow argues that the masculine subject establishes his identity through a process of disidentification with the mother. The repudiation of his first love

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object is necessary for the psychic establishment of the self as an 'independent' person. The boy's identification with the father leads him to value autonomy over dependence and separation over connection. Thus, while the young male is able to recognise the other as separate from the self, he often has difficulties in experiencing empathetic relations with others. The need for the establishment of firm boundaries between self and other is also coupled with a fear of being reabsorbed by the mother. This, Benjamin (1988) argues, following Chodorow, holds the key to understanding men's desire to dominate women. Male anxiety concerning the maternal body leads to the wish to have power over it and, ultimately, to denigrate it. This perhaps partially explains masculine aversion to popular texts that champion feeling, affect and emotion. Conversely, the girl's more intense form of identification with the mother does not allow her to express her own *separate* desires. Mothers, Chodorow argues, tend to experience their daughters as more like themselves than their sons. As a result girls are not encouraged to separate themselves off and more readily develop psychically through their interrelations with others. Romantic fiction occupies the fold between patriarchy's denial of the women's own needs and the psychic desire for more relational and emotionally sustaining human relationships. But, as Radway well understands, the utopian wishfulfilment experienced by the women is only able to question the women's most intimate relations. The relational world of the text remains ideologically separate from the masculinely defined public world.

The difficulty with Radway's reliance upon Chodorow is that she cannot very well explain the women's desire, however guilty this may be, for a separate social space in which to enjoy the novels. As Elliott (1994), Sayers (1986) and Flax (1990) have argued, Chodorow's argument does not account for the psychic emergence amongst feminists for more autonomous social relations. In Radway's own study, the women express some of the difficulties they encounter in seeking to negotiate the isolation necessary for reading. This space was desired not only so that they could encounter a more nurturing form of masculinity, but so that they could widen their own horizons by engaging with the differing historical and geographical locations mapped out in the novels. Thus there is a desire for separation that enables the fulfilment of more emotionally sustaining forms of identification. Radway's reliance upon Chodorow means that the desire for separation amongst women remains under-theorised. As both Radway and Gray have pointed out, although subordinate, women's own demand that they enjoy a form of pleasure, often belittled by men, leads them into conflictual negotiations with their male partners. Again, while one of the strengths of Radway's study is that it raises some difficult questions related to identity that have been ignored by discourse analysis and main stream media studies, there remain a number of unanswered questions in this respect. However, the argument that audience theory should form a closer relationship with psychoanalytic perspectives is one of the main achievements of Radway's book.

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Reading Magazine Cultures

Finally, I want to look at some of the latest developments in audience research in respect of the consumption of magazines. This has been particularly significant for myself, as I have been involved in this research which has not surprisingly prompted some rethinking on my part on the significance of audience studies more generally. As we shall see, questions of gender have been particularly prominent within this area and have largely grown out of earlier waves of feminist research into the media of mass communication.

Much of the early research on women's magazines, informed by the work of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham, was cast within an encoding/decoding perspective, with an emphasis on 'decoding' the text through various theoretical manoeuvres rather than through more direct encounters with actual readers. Angela McRobbie's study of the 'romantic individualism' encoded within *Jackie* (originally published as a CCCS Stencilled Paper in 1978) is a classic example of this genre. The essay is described by McRobbie as offering "a systematic critique of *Jackie* as a system of messages, a signifying system and a bearer of a certain ideology . . . which deals with the construction of teenage femininity" (1991: 81–82). According to McRobbie, magazines like *Jackie* served to introduce girls to adolescence. Their ideological work represented "a concerted effort . . . to win and shape the consent of the readers to a particular set of values" (1991: 82). The magazine in McRobbie's terms retains a role as a powerful ideological force despite identifying processes of decoding. McRobbie was therefore openly hostile to the magazines for their portrayal of a "cloyingly claustrophobic environment" characterised by "monotonous regularity", "narrowness" and "repetition" (1991:117–8). With only one paragraph on how readers actually looked at *Jackie*, her method was semiological, privileging her own reading of the magazine over more formal content analysis and without any direct involvement from readers. Four sub-codes were identified and relentlessly pursued: romance, personal/domestic life, fashion and beauty, and pop music. Yet in the concluding section McRobbie admits that "this does not mean that its readers swallow its axioms without question" and that we need to know more about how girls read *Jackie* and how they encounter its ideological force.

McRobbie addresses the 'one-sidedness' of her earlier analysis in a subsequent essay which aims "not to denounce . . . but to understand" the popular appeal of the magazines (1991: 184). This later essay traces the changes in magazine content and in academic practice between the 1970s and 1980s, including "the spaces these magazines offer for contestation and challenge" (1991: 186). McRobbie documents the decline in romance and the ascendancy of the commercial culture associated with pop music and fashion epitomised in the shift from *Jackie* to *Just Seventeen* as the best-selling magazine for teenage girls. Acknowledging that feminists such

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as Janice Radway (1987) and Janice Winship (1987) had shifted their attention “away from texts and meanings, to the readers and their different and complex readings” (1991: 137), she opens her analysis a little more to the pleasures of the text. Drawing particularly on Winship’s work, for example, McRobbie contrasts a negative view of the internal logic of the ‘problem page’ (characterised by an unsisterly individualism) with a more positive assessment of its external logic (how the magazines are read and giggled over collectively). While McRobbie acknowledges this move away from “the text in all its ideological glory” (138), actual reader’s fail to make an appearance in her analysis.

We have already seen the important role played by Radway in helping to shape feminist approaches to popular media cultures. This role is of particular significance in respect of the analysis of magazines. Radway’s work signals an important break with text-centred approaches, emphasising the agency of ‘ordinary readers’ as well as the internal contradictions of the text. Radway’s work grapples with the tension that her readers feel between the pleasures of the text and the uneasy sense that reading romantic fiction reinforces patriarchal ideology with its fantasies of male chivalry, female subordination and the all-encompassing world of romantic love. Radway argues that reading romantic fiction is “a collectively elaborated female ritual through which women explore the consequences of their common social condition” (1984: 212), emphasizing how readers construct their reading as a ‘declaration of independence’ from their socially-determined domestic responsibilities. Rather than insisting that romantic fiction is fundamentally conservative or incipiently oppositional, Radway explores the ambiguities of the genre. She also demonstrates that women’s readings are embedded in their social lives and that their media use is “multiply determined and internally contradictory” (1984: 7–8). Radway attempts to isolate a variety of patterns or regularities among the diversity of readings she uncovers (including notions of fantasy, guilt, luxury, self-indulgence, ‘reading for instruction’ and compensation). Among this diversity of readings, Radway suggests, “similarly located readers learn a similar set of reading strategies and interpretive codes which they bring to bear upon the texts they encounter” (1984: 81).

A comparable approach is adopted by Elizabeth Frazer (1992: 195) who uses a concept of ‘discursive register’ (“an institutionally, situationally specific, culturally familiar, public way of talking”) to argue that teenage readers of *Jackie* engage in frequent and dramatic shifts in register without those registers being necessarily contradictory. Based on a series of group discussions with 13–17 year-old girls, she demonstrates that readers are rarely ‘victims’ of the text. Notions of ambiguity and contradiction are therefore increasingly prevalent in recent approaches to magazine reading. Thus Hermes (1995: 3) writes of a mixture of pleasure and guilt, while Ballaster et al (1991) reject the stark choice between ‘bearer of pleasure’ and ‘purveyor of oppressive ideologies’. They assert that:

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“the identification of ‘contradiction’ . . . fails to embarrass either editors, writers or readers . . . The success of the women’s magazine is no doubt connected with its ability to encompass glaring contradiction *coherently* in its pages” (1991: 7).

If McRobbie’s early work was characterised by an emphasis on the text to the exclusion of actual of readers, the most recent research on women’s magazines is characterised by the opposite tendency: an emphasis on readers to the neglect of the magazines’ actual content. For example, Joke Hermes’ (1995) work focuses on readers as the producers of meaning with almost no attempt to distinguish between the various magazines they read. Criticising the over-emphasis of earlier studies on the text, she identifies what she calls “the fallacy of meaningfulness” (1995: 16): the assumption that all forms of popular media carry significant meanings. In contrast, Hermes insists on the everyday and mundane character of magazine reading for the majority of her readers (accessed via 80 in-depth interviews). Magazines are ‘leafed through’ during gaps in their readers’ everyday routines; they are ‘easily put down’ rather than invested with any deeper significance. In this account, magazine reading emerges as “a low-priority means of spending leisure time or unoccupied minutes” (1995.: 20) rather than having any greater cultural or political significance. Rather than offering a single ‘academic’ reading of the text, her approach involved an identification of the interpretive repertoires through which different women made sense of the magazines.

Compared to the richness of feminist work on women’s magazines, previous work on men’s magazines has been much more limited. There was a brief flurry of work associated with media debates about the ‘new man’, following the launch of GQ in the late 1980s (Moore, 1989; Chapman, 1989) and a variety of accounts in the 1990s examining the ‘new visual codings’ of masculinity in the style press and early men’s lifestyle press (Mort 1996; Nixon 1993, 1996, 1997; Edwards 1997). Some of these accounts were hostile to the emergence of new forms of masculinity, seeing them as a pretence or as a strictly commercial development:

“consumption is being redefined as an activity that is suitable for men – rather than simply a passive and feminised activity – so that new markets can be penetrated. More products are being aimed at young men and shopping is no longer a means to an end but has acquired a meaning in itself” (Moore 1989: 179).

Others were more concerned to explore the the circuits of meaning fostered by the magazines. Both Mort and Nixon focused on the cultural significance of recent changes in men’s fashion photography and the style press (Mort 1996; Nixon 1996, 1997). Their work concentrates on the emergence of ‘softer’ forms of masculinity and the blurring of sexual scripts. Tim Edwards (1997) places a similar emphasis

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on the way that men are being encouraged to look at themselves and at each other as objects of desire. Yet while these studies have made an important contribution, these authors have little to contribute about the emergence in the 1990s of more 'laddish' forms of masculinity and their associated commercial cultures. Here I want to tentatively introduce some of my own research (conducted with Peter Jackson and Kate Brooks) into men's lifestyle magazines. This research aimed to explore the different circuits of information involved in the production and consumption of men's magazines including interviews with editors, exploration of magazine content, and focus group interviews with mostly young men (Jackson et al 2001). Focusing on a range of titles from *GQ* to *Loaded* and from *FHM* to *Attitude* we sought to examine the ways in which the magazines and their consumption could be related to wider questions of masculinity and sociological changes in respect of men's changing position within society.

In particular, we explored the different discourses and fantasies that the magazines make available to their readers. In general, the magazines address the reader as a 'mate'. The magazines attempt to become the 'reader's friend' by offering handy hints, pointing out obvious pitfalls and providing useful advice, all in the language of 'common sense', with irony being used as a warning against taking anything that is said too seriously. In this sense, the magazines are careful to avoid talking down to their readers. Further, drawing on focus group discussions with a wide range of men (and a smaller number of women) we sought to understand the magazines in the context of men's changing identities and gender relations. In particular, we explored how our focus group participants attempt to 'make sense' of recent changes in masculinity and consumer culture through their reactions to the magazines, including their coverage of previously neglected topics such as fashion, health and relationships. Though our analysis focuses on 'men's talk', the inclusion of some mixed gender focus groups and one all-women group provided additional insights into contemporary constructions of masculinity and gender relations. Indeed, the group that was most openly hostile to the magazines and critical of the resurgence of 'laddish' forms of masculinity was the only all-female group. However given the magazines are mostly aimed at men it is men's voices we sought to capture in the focus groups. At the end of this process, we identified a range of discursive repertoires through which our respondents attempted to 'make sense' of the magazines. We identified a range of discourses from 'naturalness' to 'honesty' which with a considerable degree of ambivalence largely affirmed the culture of the magazines. Media constructions of 'laddishness' had come to seem so 'natural' that for many respondents there was no need to defend them or to consider alternative forms of masculinity. While some participants were critical of the magazines' celebration of 'laddish' masculinities, many more revelled in the lack of restraint implied by what they construed as a return to more 'natural' expressions of masculinity, including, for example, the opportunity to look at pictures

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of 'sexy' women in an unself-conscious and relatively guilt-free way. However, returning to a more 'honest' or 'natural' expression of men's 'true selves' is partly contradicted by some of the magazines' encouragement of a greater sense of 'openness' to new forms of masculinity. The men we interviewed also identified the role of the magazines' played in unfixing the male subject, and generally broadening the different scripted ways there are of being a man. Magazines like *Men's Health*, for example, encourage men to be more 'open' about themselves (to talk about their feelings, for example), while bringing out into the open certain (previously repressed) aspects of masculinity including more public discussion of men's relationships, fashion and health. However, the magazines constantly monitor this process, using humour and other devices to help 'distance' their readers from any embarrassment that they might feel at being seen to take these issues 'too seriously'.

In terms of masculinity, the more 'certain' world of patriarchal relations is not only part of a wider nostalgia for a social order that protected men's material interests, but the reaction against a new world of economic changes, the questioning of sexuality by lesbian and gay groups, the undermining of traditional notions of public and private, and the political role played by feminism which have all served to destabilise modern masculine identities. Hence, in a situation where certainties and tradition are being progressively undermined, they have (somewhat paradoxically) to be 'constructed'. The construction of certitude in cultural forms need not, however, be read simply as a 'backlash' against feminism. Instead, we suggest that, while such formations have political implications, they may be understood as a more complex response to changing gender relations. Arguably, the construction of certitude gives both men and women a sense that the social world is more stable than it actually is. That is, images of phallic masculinity promote a cultural 'comfort zone' giving the self (however temporarily) a sense of fixity and psychic security. How, then, might this analysis be applied to our understanding of men's lifestyle magazines? It is most apparent in the profusion of 'how to' sections that are carried in many of the magazines, offering advice (often in a semi-ironic tone) so that readers can brush up on a variety of techniques from the monitoring of sexual performance to changing a car tyre. Similarly our interviews with the groups of 'young' men moved between the naturalisation of masculinity and **reflexivity**. In this sense contemporary consumer culture positions male subjects in terms of a number of different and contradictory locations. It is the magazines capacity to be able to accommodate both more 'open' and reflexive aspects of modernity along with the certitude of traditional features that explains their appeal. This enables male consumers to 'open up and close down, to move into and withdraw from the flow of messages' (Melucci 1996:51). Hence the magazines represent the commodification of contemporary gender anxieties. That is they are sources of cultural power in respect of the speed at which network capitalism simulate new markets and help inform the changing definition of contemporary

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masculinity. In this analysis, therefore, we are not forced into making a choice between viewing the magazines as either forms of flexible accumulation or a largely conservative gender politics. That is as with women's magazines it is seemingly the ambivalences within the text and the ways in which they are read which account for the magazines commercial success.

The development of research into magazine content and audiences then has further impressed upon media researcher's the importance of increased reflexivity within the research process. This has led to the 'opening' of questions which involve the relations between interviewer and interviewee, the instability and shifting nature of the audience, the intertextual nature of meaningfulness, and finally that media scholars and the audience are always already constituted through certain discourses (Alasuutari 1999). These questions have developed earlier waves of theorising seriously questioning the extent to which audience studies can be said to 'naturalistically' capture the horizon's of the audience. That is audience studies has progressively become aware of the complex levels of social and cultural construction that are involved in making claims about ordinary patterns of media consumption. Further, the development of the study of magazine cultures has further emphasised the importance of gender in seeking to understand the interpretative practices of audiences. That gender is currently the most important category within sociological and cultural studies of media audiences also underlines its comparative neglect by other traditions of media studies.

Feminism and Critical Theory

One of the most controversial issues for feminist media theorists has been the formation of the gendered subject. This issue is complex, and it involves a number of related issues and questions. Yet, I shall argue, the emerging paradigm that seeks to unfold feminine (and of course masculine) forms of *jouissance* should be reintegrated into a wider media sociology. In terms of the development of feminism and media studies this would suggest a critical re-engagement with earlier strands of research that articulated more institutional frameworks. While feminist researchers have been uncovering women's previously neglected readings of popular culture, there has occurred the widely reported deregulation of public service broadcasting and the corresponding globalisation of the media of mass communication. These structural changes should not be thought of in isolation from the viewing, reading and listening practices of the audience. My focus in the following discussion will be on reconnecting feminist concerns with the need for a reformulated public sphere. Hopefully, such a discussion will contribute to a more substantial utopian feminism, that goes beyond a concern with soaps and paperback romances, important as this undoubtedly is.

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Melodramas such as *Dallas* have long been part of a genuinely popular cultural tradition. Since the 1790s, melodrama's rhetoric of excess, sense of the spectacle and championing of the sentimental in the battle between good and evil has been delighting the people, while offending more refined tastes (Barbero, 1993; Brooks, 1976). As Barbero points out, the cultural form of the melodrama can be traced back further to the bawdy seventeenth-century literature produced for the popular classes. The Spanish *cordel* and the French literature of *colportage* offer a combination of high and low culture that draws upon the language of the people. These popular texts ironised high culture while relaying heroic tales of bandits and criminals. It is then these popular styles and idioms, in Fiske's terms, that are now hegemonically incorporated by the power bloc and disseminated for popular enjoyment. It seems that if we historically retrace the shifting hegemonic alliances of the melodrama, the idea of popular pleasure as a subversive articulation of the people is never far away. To return to Ang's study of *Dallas*, the tragic structure of feeling was expressive of the ordinary everyday concerns of the women embedded within a patriarchal society. Ang, as we saw, even suggested that 'the language of the personal', mediated by *Dallas*, offered a feminist-inspired utopian politics. Those theorists, Ang assures us, who concern themselves with issues such as cultural imperialism are actually aligning themselves with national elites who are seeking to preserve dedining national cultures.

Ang's argument against the media imperialism thesis is that *Dallas* is a polysemic text whose construction is dependent upon the social and discursive context of the viewer. Similarly, Katz and Liebes (1985), like Ang, are generally dubious that *Dallas* imprints the values of Western consumer capitalism on to the consciousness of its global audience. Their study reveals that different ethnic groups bring their own identities to a judgement of the programme's content. In general, they found, in accordance with Ang, that it was the melodramatic nature of the narrative, rather than the glitter of consumerism, that captured the attention of the audience. Katz, Liebes and Ang all argue that if the social meanings of American capitalism are subverted by the audience's interpretations then this disproves the media imperialism thesis. Soaps such as *Dallas* affirm and validate the importance of the immediate and the everyday, rather than the interests of global capital.

The argument that the media imperialism thesis ignores the cultural complexity of the audience is of course correct. Yet there remains the reverse problem that a concern with the ambivalences of subjectivity, identity and the discursive construction of the audience cancels a concern for the political economy of media production. Yet here I should like to distance myself from those such as Curran (1990) and Evans (1990), who have argued that politically the semiotic concern with diverse meanings constitutes an uncritical pluralism. The values of the audience researchers are more adequately characterised as respectful attention to the sorts of popular practice that historically have been marginalised by the academy. This

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new history from below reveals the ‘art of making’ our ‘space within their place’ (Fiske, 1993: 70). Hence politically audience studies is better thought of in relation to the recovery of difference and otherness than the bland celebration of plurality. As many have commented there seems to be a gendered division with academic circles in terms of this particular dispute (Hermes 1997, Gray 1999). While male theorists are mostly concerned with the public power of media cultures, feminist scholarship has tended to concentrate upon the sphere of consumption. This in effect has meant that feminist media analysis has neglected questions of public cultures whereas the ‘malestream’ dismisses audience studies as being less important than the study of the official public sphere (Geraghty 1996).⁵ The recognition of the gendered division of research should hardly surprise anyone who has read this far. However, I want to argue that a feminist inspired critical theory of media cultures needs to think of ways of deconstructing these divisions. That is while researcher’s will undoubtedly continue to retain their own particular points of departure we need to ask what critical resources are available for developing more systematic research agendas. These agendas (in light of what I have already said) would need to proceed in such a way that deconstructed gendered assumptions while respecting the domains of political economy and the diverse subjectivities of the audience. Feminists, for instance, surely want to achieve a public culture where issues such as male violence are discussed in an informed, democratic manner. According to Soothill and Walby (1990), the British press consistently isolates issues related to sex crime from those of power and masculinity. The press is more likely to represent rape through sensational accounts of deviant outsiders (usually described as being animal-like, i.e. ‘The Fox’ or ‘The Panther’) in such a way as to ideologically abnormalise the offenders. Such a strategy displaces a concern for male power, while assuring heterosexual men and women that rape is the product of evil. That the readers of these stories could resist the ways in which rape is publicly portrayed is not in doubt. Indeed, recent evidence suggests that while viewing fictional rapes, women with no experience of male violence were much more likely to blame the victim, than those who had (Schlesinger *et al.*, 1992). This, as Schlesinger and his colleagues cautiously argue, cannot be considered a direct effect of the media. But surely a more informed media discussion of the issue of male violence could pose certain questions, challenge stereotypes, provoke critical thinking, allow a more plural range of perspectives and treat the matter with the public respect it undoubtedly deserves. A democratically reformulated public space would discuss the legal procedures for dealing with male violence, the funding of victim support units, the protection of the victim’s identity; – rehabilitation and punishment of offenders, safer forms of public space and the social construction of masculinity. Such a discussion would involve men and women’s identities as critical and reflexive members of a regenerated public sphere. This conversation could not only be predicated upon certain rights of access, but would also involve

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the obligation to attend respectfully to the perspectives of others, with due regard to the power relationships evident between men and women. That is a critical media culture inspired by a feminist analysis would seek to reformulate still powerful conservative gender ideologies and the more problematic aspects of hegemonic masculinity. Hence without arguing for a return to the feminist cultural politics of the seventies there is an evident need to rejoin the analysis of political economy with the semiotic complexity of the audience in such a way that deconstructs gendered oppositions. As I argued at the end of the previous chapter, this would involve a view of mediated citizenship which critically cuts across the domains of public and private. That feminist analysis has brought us closer to the emergence of such an agenda is not to be underestimated. In this we have to be careful that a progressive media politics is mutually concerned with the liberation of the subject from conservative gender ideologies and the critical questioning of wider cultural frameworks. That is feminist inspired media studies needs to be able to offer more normative judgements as well as alternative institutional arrangements (Fraser 1995). A transformative feminist media politics then would need to be able to link (where possible) the critical potential within the audience to the necessity of redesigning and reworking how 'public space' becomes constituted and defined through a range of discourses and practices.

Summary

The interpretative concerns of David Morley, John Fiske and feminist audience theory have sought to produce a hermeneutics of audience activity. These debates, especially when the semiotic articulation of meaning becomes intermeshed with a sociological concern for domestic power relations, have made a crucial contribution to media theory. While respecting the specific differences of these approaches, however, it should be stressed that these strands of audience theory share certain common problems. Much audience theory remains over-concerned with the microscopic worldview of socially dispersed viewers, readers and listeners. It was noted that the structuration of reception practices in economic, political and cultural institutions was often displaced by more local concerns. The semiotic focus upon the production of meaning (encoding and decoding practices) was inadequately appreciative of the social function of consumer leisure activities within late capitalism. This said, particularly in respect of David Morley and feminist audience theory, such approaches have considerably broadened the political implications of media theory. At this point, audience theory has introduced a politics that aims to criticise attempts to normalise difference. It has only been able to do so to the extent to which it is alive to the complexity of contemporary gender relations, the discursive construction of the subject, and the power relations that continue



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to shape our most intimate connections with others. That this agenda now needs to be rejoined to questions of public and private power has been sustained throughout. While such attempts are dependent upon scholars from future generations they at least should be grateful that they already have such intellectually germane traditions upon which to build.

