LSE Research Online

Article (refereed)

[Sonia Livingstone](#)

The resourceful reader : interpreting television characters and narratives

The Resourceful Reader:

Interpreting television characters and narratives

Sonia M. Livingstone
Department of Social Psychology
London School of Economics
LONDON   WC2A 2AE

I. THE ACTIVE AUDIENCE
  (a) Researching the Television Audience

New ways of conceptualizing the television audience may be seen in mass communication concepts such as the introduction of the active viewer, the implied reader, the interpretive community, critical distance and divergent readings. The audience is no longer 'disappearing' (Fejes, 1984); on the contrary, it is flourishing The audience is now widely seen as an active interpreter of television programs rather than as a passive recipient. In addition, the audience is now seen as occupying specific and diverse cultural contexts rather than as homogenous and isolated. The meanings of television programs, as interpreted by viewers, are now seen as a subject for empirical investigation rather than to be presumed through textual analysis. Most important for the present essay is the assumption that the audience brings its own experiences and knowledge to bear on the task of making sense of television; the audience is no longer considered ignorant.

Recent research on the television audience is centering on the role of interpretation in processes of viewing and effects. Mass communications researchers from both the traditional and critical schools have come together in debating issues of audience reception (Blumler, Gurevitch, and Katz, 1985; Schroder, 1987) and a growing body of empirical work has resulted (Ang, 1985; Hodge and Tripp, 1986; Katz and Liebes, 1986; Radway, 1985). This work has been conducted in different ways–with critical researchers drawing on reader-response theory through ethnographic methods, and traditional researchers drawing on sociocognitive psychology through quantitative methods.   However, the convergence of researchers on problems of audience reception and interpretation has raised a range of new questions and challenges for audience research. After nearly a decade of this research, we are now in a position to consider some tentative conclusions and to identify remaining research questions. The present paper will attempt to do this through the presentation of a specific body of work on audience   interpretations–both theoretical and empirical–which has   bridged the traditional/critical approaches.

The author has conducted a series of studies on viewers' reception of popular soap operas, focusing on the ways in which viewers make sense of and represent characters and narratives. As the title 'The resourceful reader' indicates, I will focus mainly on the reconceptualization of the television viewer as a knowledgeable and informed interpreter of meaning, rather than on related changes in views of the text and of media effects. To ground this approach, I will draw on empirical and theoretical links between research on interpretation in social psychology and in mass communications, focusing on parallel developments in these two domains.

  (b) The Convergence on Audience Interpretation

In studies of media effects, production, and content, researchers typically make implicit assumptions about the interpretations that viewers make of programs: that the audience is homogeneous, that viewers interpret programs in the same way as researchers, that meanings are obvious and given, and that prior social knowledge and experience is relatively unimportant.

This is often true for both schools of mass communications– traditional or 'administrative' (Lazarsfeld, 1941) and critical, for neither tends to focus on audience interpretations. In general, traditional scholars have focused on audience effects but have neglected the structure of programs or texts, resulting in an underestimation of the complexity of program meanings. Thus, little recognition is given to the interpretive work required to make sense of television, whether theories conceive of the audience as passive, as in Behavioral learning theory, in cultivation theory (Gerbner and Gross, 1976) and in 'hypodermic' theories; or

as active, selecting from the media according to their motivations, as in the uses and gratifications theory (Blumler and Katz, 1974).

On the other hand, critical scholars have neglected audiences by focussing on the text. While textual analyses of programs have resulted in an awareness of the interpretive complexities required in making sense of programs, these analyses have been conducted largely from the analyst's point of view (Fiske, 1987; Rowland and Watkins, 1984). It is not known whether viewers make the same interpretations, either compared with researchers or with each other, or whether their social knowledge and experiences are unimportant in the interpretive process (effective only in generating trivial individual differences). Text analysts often require assumptions to be made about viewers' interests and experiences for their analyses of the pleasures or impacts of texts (Fiske, 1987; Mander, 1983; Newcomb, 1982). Until recently these assumptions have not been seen as a subject for empirical investigation.

The above is, of course, a simplified characterization of a vast and diverse body of mass communications research. Yet there is concern about the relation between the traditional and critical schools. Together with others (Fry and Fry, 1986; Katz and Liebes, 1986; Morley, 1980; Schroder, 1987), my research has proposed that we address the interrelation between viewers and programs (or readers and texts). How do people actively make sense of programs, how does their social knowledge direct and inform the interpretive process, and how do texts guide and restrict the interpretive process?

Recent empirical research on audience reception of television programs shows that common assumptions about the television audience are questionable–the audience has been found to be heterogenous (Liebes and Katz, 1986; Morley, 1980), to interpret programs differently from researchers (Hodge and Tripp, 1986; Radway, 1985) and to play an active, constructive role in the reception of meaning (Drabman et al, 1981; Pingree et al., 1984; Reeves et al., 1982). We can no longer infer audience interpretations or media effects from semiotic or content analytic findings; nor can we assume the meanings of experimental materials in effects studies (van Dijk, 1987).

We must consider both the roles of programs in inviting an interpretive contribution from the reader/viewer, and of the social knowledge of the viewer in fulfilling this role. Research must investigate the meanings which viewers actually construct from programs, and the ways in which prior social knowledge and experience guides and informs this constructive process. To do this, we must also explore different methodologies for studying audience interpretations. There has been some debate about the possibility of convergence between the critical and traditional schools over the empirical study of audience interpretation of texts. Some traditional scholars welcome this move (e.g. Blumler et al., 1985), while critical scholars are more uncertain.
For example, Hall (1980) and Schroder (1987) are cautiously optimistic while Carey (1985) and Allen (1985) seem more resistant. Notwithstanding these doubts, research is going ahead and should, perhaps, be judged on its results.

(c) The Role of Interpretation in Mediating Effects

There has been a certain disappointment over the failure of traditional mass communications research to provide clear evidence for the effects of television on its audience. For example, despite considerable funding and research effort, Hawkins and Pingree (1983) and Durkin (1985b) argue that the evidence for effects is weak and problematic. Roberts and Bachen (1981) blame the 'problem-orientation' of research on the neglect of theoretical innovation and integration. Many researchers are now reconceptualizing the effects of the media in terms of gradual, cumulative, cognitive effects on people's frameworks for thinking, and on the content of

their thoughts (Katz, 1980; Roberts and Bachen, 1981; Reeves, et al., 1982). According to the sociocognitive formulation, cognitive frameworks and representations are held to mediate or buffer the effects of television.

Before we can study the effects of television, we must ask how viewers have interpreted the programs whose effects are being questioned. When interpreting television, viewers must, on the sociocognitive account, integrate the information in the program with their own knowledge--of the program, its genre, and of the real-world phenomena to which the program makes reference. This process of integration, itself, depends on the viewer's cognitive habits, processing heuristics, and motivations. Presumably, the effects of the program must surely depend on viewers' personal interpretations and transformations of the program.

For example, if viewers of Dynasty saw the heroine, Alexis Carrington-Colby, as a successful and powerful older woman, those older women in the audience may have gained an increase in self- esteem through watching such a relatively rare positive image of older women on television. If, however, they saw her as an unattainable ideal, she may have simply depressed them and increased feelings of helplessness. If they saw her power as inevitably linked to her wickedness, they may have ended up with a diminished desire for public power. If they saw her as externalizing her inner loneliness and neurosis through external manipulation, they may have pitied her and striven instead for alternative sources of self-esteem. One could go on, for such a character was deliberately formulated so as to be read in multiple ways and to appeal to diverse audiences. The point is that the character interpretation is the mediator of effects.

The presumption of particular interpretations in order to hypothesize about particular effects is a recipe for exactly the minor, confused and contradictory results so common in the effects literature. For example, in light of Noble's (1975) argument, that Western films are primarily interpreted as portrayals of loyalty and cooperation rather than aggression and individualism, should we be surprised that research has found only weak and inconsistent evidence for increased aggressiveness, or 'fear of crime', following viewing of supposedly aggressive programs? If a text is open to different readings, then it may also generate different, possibly contrasting effects.

Not only may different readings or interpretations give rise to different effects, but the same effect may have different implications or be a product of different processes, depending on the interpretation made. For example, Tan's study (1979) showed that watching advertisements for beauty products increased ratings of the importance of beauty in popularity with men among adolescent girls, but how should we understand the observed effect? Did the girls consider women more powerful than previously so, having interpreted the advertisements as showing how women can manipulate men's vulnerabilities, or did they consider women less powerful than previously, having interpreted the advertisements as saying that beauty is women's major, if not only, source of power, so that in all other areas they are inferior?

I have been arguing that we should study the television audience's interpretations of programs because it is these which mediate any effects of television. Any study of interpretations may clarify predictions about types of effects (e.g. direction of effect, implications of effect), about the nature of texts (e.g. genre, openness) which produce different effects, and about processes of effects (e.g. the use of heuristics for consistency, parsimony, coherence, relevance, and selectivity, the use of social knowledge representations in interpretation). There is also a phenomenological reason to study viewers' interpretations--they are of interest themselves. Viewers' interpretations inform us about the nature of the

viewing experience–the ideas, images, and concepts with which viewers can and do engage, the pleasures and emotions which fill their leisure time, and, consequently, the repertoire of representations on which they may draw in their everyday interactions with others.

(d) The Interpretive Process

How, then, should we theorize the process of interpreting television? Thus far, I have made use of the 'text-reader' metaphor of audience interpretation in place of the more traditional 'sender-message-receiver' model. Treating television programs as texts focuses attention on the symbolic and structural nature of program meanings, on the cultural practices and contexts within which they are constructed, and on the interpretive demands which they impose upon their readers. The reader (or viewer) is, on this account, an active and informed participant in the construction of meaning. Just as the text is to be conceived in terms of the reader's interpretive strategies and resources, so too is the reader to be conceived in terms of the structural demands of the text. This contrasts with the strict separation of sender, message and receiver in traditional communications theory--in which the message is seen as fixed, acontextual and unitary in meaning and the receiver is typically a passive and powerless pawn in the communication process.

Reader-oriented textual theories have focused on the relationship between texts and readers (Holub, 1984). Specifically, in Germany there has arisen a school of reception aesthetics (Iser, 1980; Jauss, 1982), in Italy, Eco (1979) has theorized the 'role of the reader', and in America, various literary critics offer the 'reader-response' approach to texts (Suleiman and Crosman, 1980; Tomkins, 1980). Reader-oriented theories begin by recognizing the twin problems of unlimited semiosis and divergent readings. In neither theory nor practice can one identify a unique and fixed meaning in a text. Consequently, different readers can make different but meaningful and coherent readings of the same text, and so the communicative process is inherently plural.

The text can be split, according to Eco (1979), into the "virtual" or as yet unread, nonmeaningful text and the "realized" or interpreted (and thus plural and context-dependent) text which participates in communication. Ingarden (1973) discusses the text as a "schematized structure" to be concretized by the reader. In this, he draws upon the similar, Gestalt-based imagery of the cognitive psychologist, who talks of knowledge structures as schemata–abstract and incomplete representational systems which require completion by concrete and contingent circumstances in order to generate meaning.

The text, then, cannot be said to be meaningful independent of an interpreting or "implied reader" (Iser, 1980) or "model reader" (Eco, 1979) reader whose own knowledge or "horizon of expectations" (Jauss, 1982) provides the contingent circumstances against which the text is realized. The text anticipates, or presupposes, a competence in the reader and, at the same time constructs that competence through the process of reading. Developing the structuralist tradition, Eco's model reader can be conceived of as a set of textual codes which comprise the competence or interpretive resources of the reader. The "model reader" is discoverable by analyzing the textual codes of stereotyped overcoding, co-reference, rhetoric, inference, frames, and genre. These codes are the means by which the text invites the knowledge and interpretive strategies of the reader to inform the reading process and thus to realize the virtual text. Textual analyses should thus reveal the "role of the reader", or the demands which the text places on the reader in order for it to make sense.

A further distinction relevant to mass communications is Eco's opposition of open and closed texts. For Eco, popular culture texts are typically closed, in so far as they aim for a

specific, predetermined reading, presuming a particular set of codes or resources on which the reader must draw to make sense of the text. Open texts, on the other hand, typify the texts of high culture, for they envisage a variety of interpretations and play on the relations between the different possible readings which they invite their readers to make. Through the notion of the open text, we may escape the assumptions of traditional message analysis and focus instead on the multiplicity of meanings in a text, on the interplay between meanings, and on the conventions–generic, cultural, or ideological–which constrain the range of possible meanings.

To regard programs as texts rather than stimuli or messages allows us to accommodate their complexity more easily. Contrary to being unitary and given, and multiple yet bounded, as in the stimulus-based assumptions of traditional psychology and mass communications, we should expect texts to be multilayered, conventionally constrained, open and incomplete. This complexity then need not be regarded as noise or miscommunication or as a source of problems, and we need not design measures to eliminate it. Similarly, diversity in audience interpretations, or interpretations which differ from those of the text analyst need not be regarded as instances of inaccuracy or miscommunication, but should instead raise questions about the role of the audiences' resources and circumstances which produce the observed interpretations.

This approach moves us away from conducting text analysis or content analysis as a way of studying the meanings which circulate in society as a result of watching television. In relation to content analysis, Durkin (1985a) notes that "frequency of message has yet to be demonstrated to be isomorphic with viewers' receptive processes" (p.203). In relation to semiotic analysis, unless the implied reader is so strongly inscribed in the text that actual readers have no option but to follow, more a set of instructions than of invitations, again, we must study the activities of empirical audiences. If the meanings which result from television viewing depend on the actual realization or instantiation of virtual texts, we are directed towards an investigation of the knowledge, experience, and viewing contexts of the audience. Thus reception analysis becomes an empirical project.

A further move treats popular culture texts such as television programs as open rather than closed texts (Allen, 1985; Seiter, 1981). Certain popular genres, especially the soap opera, can be seen as open to some degree because they resist closure through their conventional absence of beginnings and endings. They present a never-ending and interweaving cluster of narrative strands. The soap opera constructs multiple viewpoints of the events portrayed, as personified by the characters, and thus the interactions between characters represent the interplay between diverse perspectives. By appealing to a wide audience, and by anticipating a wide variety of interests and experiences, the soap opera invites its audience to actively construct any of a range of possible and coherent readings. The very familiarity and perceived realism of the characterizations permits the audience to become involved with or to interrogate the text, undermining any passive or fantasy-based reception of closed meanings. Hence, we must study actual interpretations as a function of the mode of interaction with the text, this mode of interaction being itself influenced by the conventions of the genre.

The social rather than literary concerns of mass communications research are, consequently, transforming the reader-oriented approach in a manner possibly unanticipated, or even disapproved of, by its originators (Holub, 1984). In short, the concept of the role of the reader is being treated not simply as an analytic category but as one which may raise empirical questions (Liebes, 1986a; Livingstone, 1990; Schroder, 1987), and which may be applied to popular culture texts as well as high culture.

The kinds of empirical questions one might raise concerning the interpretation of television

programs may be illustrated by a consideration of the task facing the viewers when they must make sense of characters portrayed in a drama. The range of personality traits perceived by viewers must be inferred from the interactions between the characters, as revealed through the concrete details of the narratives as these unfold over time. As characters are typically used by writers as vehicles to personify key themes, the conflicts and allegiances between characters can be read as carrying underlying messages about the relations between moral or social themes. Characters may be stereotyped according to gender, class, occupation or whatever, so as to facilitate the inference process by simplifying the required inferences and by making salient the relevant social knowledge resources of the viewers. On the other hand, characters may also be drawn ambiguously, so as to appeal to diverse viewers, who must realize their own 'preferred' version of the characters, according to their own interests and experiences. The perceived realism of the characters (Livingstone, 1988) is enhanced by the complexity of the portrayals, and most of the pleasure in viewing lies in having to work out for oneself what the characters are like and what is the meaning of the narratives enacted. Viewers come to a program equipped with considerable interpretive resources for making sense of people in everyday life, and they exploit the openness of television drama programs in constructing their own, motivated and informed interpretations of the characters they see.

Consequently, we need a theory of the viewer's interpretive resources. The present approach to the "active viewer" reconstructs theories of social knowledge–of people and of episodes–as theories of interpretive resources–of characters and of narratives. This social knowledge should be conceived of as dynamic and integrative, directing and informing interpretations of television, rather than as a static and disjointed set of facts which television may simply replace with its own given set of meanings. Social cognition (Fiske and Taylor, 1984; Reeves et al., 1982) involves, for example, people's biases towards seeking confirmatory rather than falsifying evidence to fit their preconceptions, their knowledge of standard event sequences of "scripts" (Schank and Abelson, 1977), their use of story grammars (Mandler, 1984) to interpret narrative, and their use of implicit personality theories (Bruner and Tagiuri, 1954; Schneider, Hastorf, and Ellsworth, 1979) in making sense of people in their everyday lives. Researchers have examined the interpretive heuristics which people draw upon, based on considerations such as salience, availability, recency, relevance and prototypicality (Kahneman, Slovic and Tversky, 1982). A theory of viewers' interpretations of the media may be found at least in part within theories of social cognition. For example, what do viewers find salient in programs and according to what criteria are they selective? How do they integrate "new" program information with "old" social knowledge? How perceptive are they of underlying messages? When and to what extent do they impose standard knowledge structures such as schemata, story grammars and implicit personality theories onto the programs they view?

(e) Social Psychology and the Role of the Reader

Readers approach a text with a range of interpretive resources in addition to the role which is provided for them by the text. Readers–or viewers–have expectations, knowledge, experiences and motivations which, in order to prevent the 'disappearing audience', we must study. The role of the empirical reader should not be underestimated. Nor need it be investigated from scratch. In his study of the reception of EastEnders (a popular British soap), Buckingham (1987) argues that viewers draw upon three categories of knowledge. In relation to characterization, narrative, and cultural discourse, the text invites viewers to contribute their knowledge, and thus they require knowledge of people, so as to identify the different perspectives from which to interpret the programs, they require knowledge of narrative in order

to piece together sequences of events and make inferences and predictions about past and future events, and they require common-sense knowledge of everyday life so as to relate the program to their ordinary experiences and fill out their interpretations of the program. This is, of course, a fairly basic specification of the resources required by the reader, and is intended as only a beginning point in the project of theorizing the role of the reader in more complex terms.

My point is that theories of personality, narrative, and common-sense knowledge (encompassing attributional explanations, moral judgements, prejudice and stereotyping, sociolinguistic rules and practices, and so forth) comprise the domain of social cognition. Thus, far from beginning at the beginning, there is a large literature on which we can draw (e.g., Fiske and Taylor, 1984; Heider, 1958). The field of developmental psychology is, necessarily, relevant for theorizing the role of the child reader, as children do not share adults' knowledge of narrative (Collins, 1983), moral judgement (Kohlberg, 1964), or media conventions (Rice et al., 1987). Furthermore, so that the role of the reader is not conceived of in the disjointed manner implicit in text-oriented approaches–here filling in a gap, there making an inference, later elaborating an example–we need to consider the broader cognitive goals of the reader: attempting coherence and order in episode sequencing, constructing a "mental model" (Johnson-Laird, 1983) and aiming for parsimony and consistency in the relation between text and social knowledge.

Several theoretical and methodological advantages result from the use of social psychology to study the interpretations made by the television audience. On the level of theory, there are a number of parallels between social cognition theories and reception theories, which can be exploited in theorizing the empirical role of the reader.

Firstly, the semantic representation approach to social knowledge parallels the binary opposition approach to text analysis. As the social world is presumed too complex and varied for adaptive action based on complete and veridical perception, the person is seen as selective, constructing abstract representations for organizing perceptions in meaningful ways. These abstract summaries of past experiences then also frame people's understandings of new experiences. The analysis of the emergent underlying themes of organization resembles the approach of the text analyst who, seeking to reveal the order underlying a complex and multilayered text, identifies key organizing themes with binary poles according to which different aspects of the text may be arranged in a meaningful way. For example, Dyer et al., (1981) analyze the soap opera, Coronation Street, on the basis that their "method of analysis examines the oppositions operative in the serial. This approach, which owes much to Levi-Strauss ... seeks to uncover the concealed structures of the text within its cultural framework" (p.84). For both approaches, a domain is in an important sense understood once the basic themes- -described as dimensions or oppositions–have been revealed beneath the surface diversity, for then relations between domains and transformations of the themes are readily identified. Both the study of semantic representations, and the oppositional analysis of textual structures, depend on the "spatial metaphor of meaning" (Livingstone, 1990). This proposes that meaning lies in the similarities and differences between semantic units rather than in the relations between signs and real-world referents, where semantic relations are conceptualized by analogy with physical relations (closeness, distance, orthogonality, opposition, clusters, and so forth).

For example, in the domain of perceiving other people in daily life, researchers have discovered that people use a common semantic representation organized around the independent abstract themes of evaluation (positive:negative), activity (active:passive) and

potency (weak:strong). On meeting a new person, people seek to locate the person on each of these dimensions, and then to use this knowledge to generate expectations about the person's other traits and to make comparisons between one person and another (Ashmore and Del Boca, 1986; Osgood, et al., 1957; Schneider et al., 1979).

Similarly, the domain of gender stereotyping has been studied in terms of two competing semantic representations: one opposes masculinity and femininity, and relates all personality traits to this basic dimension (Ashmore and Del Boca, 1986; Broverman et al., 1972); the other conceives of masculinity and femininity as two separate dimensions along which individuals may be perceived to vary independently (Bem, 1984). Under the former scheme but not the latter, one would expect people to draw inferences or generate predictions about, for example, a target person's warmth or kindness on the basis of knowing how decisive or assertive they are.

A second parallel between sociocognitive and text-reader approaches to interpretation concerns the focus on narrative. Psychologists have studied people's interpretations of narrative in terms of "story grammars" (Mandler, 1984). By analogy with linguistic grammars, these representational structures are organized by culturally accepted rules which serve to generate expectations, legitimize inferences, and make comparisons between stories. These story grammars resemble the episode sequences studied, for example, by Propp (1968) in his literary analysis of the underlying structure of folk tales. They comprise distinct, ordered parts, each subdivided (for example, summary, setting, orientation, complication, resolution, evaluation, conclusion; Van Dijk, 1987); they provide for set roles (characters, settings, goals, and so forth), they determine what counts as the beginning and ending of a narrative, and they define out any contraventions of these rules as ungrammatical. Thirdly, both social cognition and reception theory use the notion of the schema to conceptualize strategies for interpretation. The schema, deriving originally from German Gestalt theory, is a representational structure which is dynamic and process-oriented. It is flexible, adaptive, efficient and holistic in its processing (Bartlett, 1932; Piaget, 1968). It operates by balancing assimilatory and accommodatory forces in integrating past and present experiences. In social cognition, the person is held to operate a set of abstract but adaptive schemata which provide general interpretive guidelines, but provide for gaps to be filled by particular environmental contingencies (Fiske and Taylor, 1984). Reception theory reverses this (Holub, 1984), conceiving of the interpretive process as one in which the skeletal structures of the text provide for gaps in which the reader may insert his or her social knowledge to realize the hitherto virtual text. Unfortunately, each focuses on the nature of the schema and each neglects the ways in which gaps are filled and the resources with which this is achieved--yet each awaits a theory of the other. Clearly both the knowledge of the person and the structures of the text are schematic, organized, incomplete, abstract and awaiting instantiation in specific contexts of interpretation.

There are, no doubt, other ways in which theories of readers and of texts parallel each other. For example, both are concerned with ideological biases such as theories of prejudice and stereotyping, and theories of preferred or dominant readings. Both must deal with the balance between openness and closure in representations. Both acknowledge the role of sociostructural factors in determining the construction of knowledge representations or text structures. While differences will naturally exist also, these parallels seem sufficiently sound to provide a basis for using social cognition as a theory for the interpretive resources used by television viewers in their active role of making sense of programs.

Finally, let us consider the methodological advantages of drawing on social psychology to

investigate the active viewer of television. Social psychology has developed a range of methodologies for studying the ways in which people make sense of their everyday lives, and these can be applied to the study of the ways people make sense of television. Those audience researchers who have begun to study audience reception clearly indicate an uncertainty about methodology (Ang, 1985; Morley, 1980, 1981). How should we discover the interpretations which people make of television, and what criteria should we use to assess the results (e.g. reliability, validity, generalizability)? One problem is how to aggregate data from many viewers in a meaningful way, without either losing the differences between individuals or groups or claiming false generalities on the basis of single cases. Researchers using qualitative methods tend to provide illustrative or suggestive quotations from viewers, with the implicit suggestion that these illustrative cases are typical of the sample. Other qualitatively oriented researchers provide summary statistics on the frequencies with which certain characteristics were found in their samples (e.g. Hodge and Tripp, 1986; Liebes and Katz, 1986). Although some psychological methods involve the imposition onto the data of a priori categories of interest to the researcher, other methods are concerned with discovering data structures or principles of cognitive perception and organization.

Bartlett's (1932) study on dynamic remembering processes, using a version of the children's game "Chinese whispers", shows the operation of Gestalt principles (Kohler, 1930) of coherence over disconnected text, of meaningfulness over incomprehension, of the familiar over the unfamiliar, of the gist over trivia, of narrative sequence over temporal inconsistency, and of causal over associative linkages. By studying either the ways in which people recall a text or the elements of a text which they recognize when shown them later, we can reveal the schematic structures by which people organize material. For example, finding false intrusions in the recall paradigm reveals the knowledge structures which inform interpretation, showing the statements which people falsely believe were present in the text because, to them, it is more meaningful for them to be included. Similarly, omissions or failure to recognize certain statements reveals the parts of the text which do not fit knowledge structures. We can also learn about readers' interpretive structures or story grammars (Mandler, 1984) from their reordering of narratives, from the elements of the text which they foreground, from the inferences they insert or the connotations they add to their recall of the narrative (see, for example, Owens, Bower and Black, 1979, on the "soap opera effect" in narrative recall and Liebes', 1986b, on cultural differences in "retellings" of episodes from Dallas).

Another method which aims to reveal implicit and spontaneous knowledge structures used by people to make sense of their everyday worlds is that of multidimensional scaling (Kruskal and Wish, 1978). Multidimensional scaling operationalizes the spatial metaphor of meaning, discussed earlier, by exploiting the analogy between conceptual and physical space. Premised on the notion that meaning lies in the relations between semantic units, rather than in the relations between units and their referents, multidimensional scaling obtains measures of conceptual similarity and difference between the units of interest and then transforms these conceptual relations into physical ones, so that conceptual similarity may be expressed as physical proximity and conceptual difference may be expressed as physical distance. Thus, a model is fitted to the data rather than imposing a pre-existing model upon the data. Oppositions underlying these judgments of similarities may then emerge as the polar dimensions of a multidimensional space. Multidimensional scaling discovers the implicit themes by which people make sense of a set of concepts and the structural relations (e.g. clusters, circumplex) perceived to hold between the concepts. From this, we can test hypotheses about the number

and identity of the dimensions.

In the research reported in the next section, the concepts used were television characters (see also Reeves and Greenberg, 1977; Reeves and Lometti, 1978). Here, the analysis of viewers' judgments of similarities and differences between characters reveals the implicit, underlying themes by which viewers make sense of the characters. This opens the way to theoretically informed investigations of the active viewer, for the dimensions of a scaling space parallel both the dimensional theories of social knowledge (e.g. person perception and stereotyping; Schneider et al. 1979) and the oppositional approach of textual analysis. As Forgas (1979) notes, multidimensional scaling can be used as a discovery method, as "an excellent alternative to the qualitative journalistic, descriptive methodologies currently being advocated by some critics" (p. 254).

Viewers of soap operas discuss the characters with the familiarity and involvement with which they discuss real people, and they describe the experience of viewing as one of engaging with people one knows well, as if dropping in to catch up on gossip with the neighbors (Livingstone, 1988). Consequently, theories of person perception, and methods of multidimensional scaling, can reasonably be applied to the representation of television characters so as to reveal the underlying processes of perception and judgment which guide the construction of these representations.

II. THE RESEARCH PROGRAM
(a) Research overview and aims

The program of research to be described in this section is an investigation into the television audience's interpretations of characters and narrative in soap opera. The research aims were as follows. Firstly, to discover and describe the nature and structure of viewers' interpretations of characters and narrative and to compare these to the interpretations made by text analyses of the same programs, in order to determine how viewers may diverge from the text in their interpretations. Secondly, to reveal the relationship between social knowledge structures of persons and narratives and the viewers' representations, in order to determine the role of social knowledge in interpretations of television. Thirdly, to examine the extent of divergence or consensus among viewers' interpretations and fourthly, to examine the relationships between different aspects of interpretation, specifically characterization and narrative.

On a more general level, the project is an attempt to empirically study the role of the reader in mass communications, with a focus on the role of social knowledge as a resource for informing the interpretive process. While one may analyze both texts and readers separately, empirical study is required to discover what happens when they come together. This represents a break from theoretical analyses of texts alone, or of ideal rather than actual readers, and from simply inferring about interpretations when studying the effects of viewing. On a still more general level, the research aims to facilitate convergences between the domains of traditional and critical mass communications and between mass communications and social psychology.

There are, of course, many ways to study the negotiation between text and reader, although little empirical research has been conducted thus far. This research examines the representations which result from and mediate people's interpretations, rather than the process of interpretation itself. To study representations which are both relatively stable and naturally available, a domain was used with which people have become familiar as part of their daily routine over many years. Soap opera characters and narratives were selected as viewers have a

long-term, complex, naturally-acquired, and involved relationship with them. Soap opera also raises theoretical challenges through its portrayal of relatively dominant women (contrasting with viewers' stereotypes) and through the relative openness of its texts.

(b) Viewers' representation of characters

Television characters mediate a range of television effects, through the processes of imitation, identification, role modelling and parasocial interaction. Especially in soap operas, viewers become acquainted with the relatively constant set of characters and feel involved with them. Characters carry the narrative, so that narrative or genre themes should be reflected in viewers' representations of the characters. Arguably, the openness of soap opera, where the role for the reader is maximized, is located especially in the characters rather than in the narratives (Allen, 1985). As the characters in soap opera offer multiple possibilities, and as the viewers must be aware of the paradigm of possibilities from which any one choice is made, considerable demands are placed on their interpretative efforts. The research on character representation used multidimensional scaling to discover the nature of viewers' representations of the characters in an American primetime soap opera, Dallas, and two popular British soap operas, Coronation Street, and EastEnders. Predictions made by theories of social perception were compared with cultural studies' research on program structure, so as to examine the relative importance of and roles of viewer and program determinants, as reflected in the representations. Subjects were regular and long-term viewers of the programs. They varied in age, occupation (few students), and sex.

Literary analysis of Dallas (Ang, 1985; Arlen, 1981; Mander, 1983) suggests that Dallas is structured around two major themes. The viewers' interest is derived from the conflict between and ambiguity in these themes as they are repeatedly enacted through various characters and plots. The first theme is that of morality, closely related to the unifying symbol of the family (implying loyalty, honesty, and durability). The second theme is the morally corrupting power of organizations, business and money.

In the study of audience reception of Dallas (see Livingstone, 1987a, for details), viewers were found to discriminate among characters using two general themes or dimensions. These were morality (aligned with warmth and valuing the family), and almost orthogonal, power (dominance: submissiveness, active:passive, valuing power and business, hard:soft). The morality dimension polarized the characters (e.g. Miss Ellie versus. J.R.) with few characters in between (e.g. Sue Ellen). The power dimension was highly gender stereotyped, with no male characters in the soft/submissive portion of the space. Certain women were perceived as counterstereotyped (e.g. Donna), and generally, the women were perceived to occupy a greater range of positions than the more rigidly stereotyped men. The character representation is shown in Figure 1. Conceptual similarities and differences between characters, as judged by viewers, have been transformed into closeness and distance in two-dimensional space. The attribute vectors superimposed on this space were generated by a second sample of viewers who rated each character on a range of attributes. These were regressed onto the space to aid in interpretation of the original, implicit similarity judgments. Each vector represents a linear increase in characters' ratings on the attribute. As the vectors are shown in one direction only, for clarity one must imagine each attribute extending in opposite directions. For example, in the case of morality, as one moves through the space to the left, the characters are perceived by viewers as increasing in morality (e.g., Miss Ellie is more moral than Sue Ellen) and as one moves to the right, the characters become increasingly immoral (e.g., J.R. is more immoral than Lucy or Bobby).

———— Figure 1 about here ————

Dallas is seen to contrast a (mainly female) world of pleasure, weakness and femininity with a (mainly male) world of organizational power and hard-headed business. The former, hedonistic world is not seen to differ in morality from the business world, for the morality vector is orthogonal to the potency cluster of vectors. With power split equally between the "goodies" and the "baddies" the fight between good and bad in Dallas will be equal and endless.
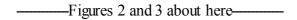
One might have expected that morality would be associated with business and immorality with pleasure, or that immorality would be associated with dominance (Ang, 1985). As these themes were orthogonal, characters may occupy any of four positions. Narratives are tied to these themes, for characterization is in part reification of characters' past narrative involvements. For example, in different plots, harmony in the Ewing home may be divided according to business issues, while at other times characters realign to divide according to moral issues. Interestingly, the character representation provided a variety of female positions. While the men were seen simply as either moral and powerful or immoral and powerful, the women occupied all four possible combinations permitted by these two oppositional themes.

The characters in the British soap operas were seen rather differently, though quite similarly to each other, indicating a basic difference in genre conventions. Coronation Street concerns everyday events in a small, urban working class street in Northern England. It is noted for its strong women. Paterson and Stewart (1981, p. 84) conclude that "it is possible to see the major oppositions of Coronation Street as Inside:Outside and Male:Female". Generally, narratives are set within a class framework, so that Inside:Outside is frequently aligned with Working Class:Middle Class. Like Coronation Street, EastEnders conforms to the genre conventions for British soap opera in the social realist tradition (Dyer et al., 1981), containing strong women, a nostalgic concern with traditional, working class life, and a focus on contemporary social issues (Buckingham, 1987).

In the study of viewers' representations, the characters in the British soap operas were, like for Dallas, represented in terms of the basic themes of morality, power, and gender (see Livingstone, 1989, 1990, for details). However, these were differently related to each other and they carried different connotative meanings. See, for example, the viewers' representation of the characters in Coronation Street (Figures 2 and 3). Morality (here meaning staid versus roguish, rather than good versus evil) was opposed to power in viewers' representations. Characters seen as moral were lacking in power, immoral characters were powerful. Unlike Dallas, the moral battle is an unequal one here. The spaces show how the generation of certain inferences and expectations by viewers are valid. For example, if a moral character in Coronation Street is portrayed in an argument with an immoral character, viewers may assume that they are more likely to be defending a traditional issue, to be emotionally warm, and lose the argument compared to the immoral character.

The main arena for conflicts in the British soap operas is not morality but gender. Female and male characters are not differentiated by their potency, but rather they are equally matched. Moreover, gender is interpreted in this genre as having a matriarchal flavor, for it does not relate femininity to passivity, irrationality, or submissiveness, but to maturity, warmth, and centrality to the community. On the other hand, masculinity is strongly related to immaturity, coldness, and a peripheral role in the community. A third dimension, of traditional versus modern approach to life, suggests that many narratives are construed in terms of a conflict between

traditional, nostalgic, domestic stability and the exciting and seductive challenges of a new and changing way of life.

————Figures 2 and 3 about here————

While only the representation for <u>Coronation Street</u> is shown here, that for <u>EastEnders</u> was very similar, suggesting basic differences of genre between British and American programs (Livingstone, 1990). These character representations have proved reliable across and within samples, and over different methods of data collection. They seem durable insofar as the replacement of old by new characters in a soap opera is often achieved without altering the basic dimensional structure of the program (Livingstone, 1990).

The character representations were examined for differences among viewers as a function of age and gender. The representations from different subgroups were remarkably similar. There were only slight and inconsistent differences by gender, so that men differed slightly from some women in the third dimensions. Although there seem to be few differences in representation for different groups, caution is required because the samples were rather small once subdivided, and further, one might subdivide viewers in different ways, according to social class, for instance, or their identification with different characters.

The studies of viewers' reception of soap opera characters show that viewers construct coherent representations of the characters in television programs. These representations throw light on viewers' experiences and understandings of the programs. The nature of the representations provided evidence for the constructive use of person knowledge as the social knowledge resources of interpretive viewers. This is exemplified by the common importance of the themes of potency, gender and social evaluation in the character representations, for these are central to the perception of people in daily life (Ashmore and Del Boca, 1986; Bem, 1984; Osgood <u>et al.</u>, 1957). Social knowledge also overrides the themes foregrounded in the program structure. This may be observed in the clarity of the moral and immoral clusters (supposedly ambiguous in the texts: Ang, 1985; Arlen, 1981; Mander, 1983), and in the independence, rather than the opposition, of the themes of morality/family and power/business (Ang, 1985).

Certain themes central to the textual analyses proved irrelevant to character representations–they could not be fitted to the spaces without excessive error–most notably, the theme of social class. A subsequent content analysis of the interactions between characters in <u>Coronation Street</u>, which was scaled as pairwise frequency of interactions, showed that characters interact more with those of similar social class (Livingstone, 1989). Thus Dyer <u>et al.</u>'s theme of class did seem to be present within the program, but it was nonetheless not salient to the viewers. The viewers' representations focused on alternative themes guided by their strategies for perceiving and representing people in everyday life. It was not that viewers cannot identify the characters in terms of their social class, for they did, but rather that they do not when asked for their spontaneous and implicit character perceptions.

While the concept of Insider:Outsider (or central:peripheral to the community) was important to viewers, as suggested by Dyer <u>et al.</u> (1981) it was not related to Working class:Middle class, as they had argued, but instead was more related to gender, at least for <u>Coronation Street</u>. It is men who are seen to threaten the stability and security of a primarily female and domestic community, not the middle classes who threaten to disrupt a working class way of life.

The research also revealed ways in which viewers are receptive to the structure of the text in

precedence to the dictates of abstract social knowledge. For example, themes central to textual analyses of soap operas, but not relevant to person perception (Schneider et al., 1979), were found to structure the character representations--morality, centrality to the community, and matriarchal femininity. Similarly, certain person perception dimensions (e.g. intelligence and rationality) were neglected, and the relations predicted to hold between these dimensions were modified. For example, the general prediction (Osgood, et al., 1957) that evaluation, potency, and activity would all be independent of each other was not supported. This social knowledge schema was variously "overwritten" by the text structure, depending on the nature of the program being represented. Again, the opposition of masculinity and femininity in the representations does not fit with gender schema theories (Bem, 1984), suggesting a receptivity to the basic gender stereotyping of the programs.

The existence of differences between the representations for the British and American programs also suggests that viewers are receptive to different program structures. Such findings argue against a heavily top-down or overly constructivist approach which holds that viewers see what they want to see, presumably according to prior knowledge of other people in the case of character representation, or that they reduce all information to a standard formula. Clearly, social knowledge and text structure are both determinants of viewers' representations, and each serves to modify or buffer the influence of the other. The resultant representation depends on the input of each, and of the nature of the interaction or negotiation between the two.

Viewers have been shown here to be sensitive to messages concerning non-traditional images of gender. These images may be found within the counterstereotyped images of Dallas or seen in the matriarchal images of the British programs (see Modleski, 1982, on women's pleasure in watching dominant women). One might predict that viewing soap opera would increase viewers' non-traditional conceptions of women (Pingree, 1978). But, conversely, the neglect by viewers of messages concerning social class suggests that viewing may not increase beliefs about social class distinctions, despite the apparent emphasis on such distinctions by programs.

Viewers may generate particular expectancies about narrative development, make predictions about the course of events, and readily identify the issues at stake, all on the basis of their more permanent knowledge of the characters involved. From the relationships between characters in the scaling representation, one can see an operationalization of the concept of paradigm: if all characters are potentially available for a particular narrative role, then the selection of a specific character gains its significance for the viewer through its relations to other, non-selected characters. The reader or viewer must follow the developing thematic contrasts or equivalences established between characters during the course of the narrative.

From comparing the personality space with the interaction space for the same characters, it seemed that characters perceived as similar are less likely to interact than are personality opposites--indeed, they may serve as functional equivalents in interactions. Interactions occur between personality opposites on the dimensions central to the program. These interaction patterns are likely to be institutionalized in the narratives through work relationships or longstanding friendships and, of course, these latter may lead to marital, or other family relationships, which make permanent the enactment of a particular opposition. This makes sense, as it is through the enactment of the thematic oppositions, with each pole personified by a particular character, that the narratives gain interest, involve conflict, and explore culturally important oppositions. The opposition on which a particular character pair differ is likely to be the one on which their interactions are based.

(c) Viewers' representations of narrative

Following Bartlett (1932) and his more recent followers (Mandler, 1984) on the ways in which memory distortions create divergences in recall, several studies examined narrative interpretation.

In the first exploratory study (Livingstone, 1990), viewers were asked to retell narratives involving a popular and central character, Rita Fairclough, in Coronation Street. Much attention focused on Rita's friendship and work relationship with Mavis Riley, both popular, middle-aged women who are less working class than most other characters. From the multidimensional scaling character representation (Figures 2 and 3), it appeared that viewers represented Rita and Mavis as quite different in personality on the dimensions of sociability, morality, power, and approach to life. Thus Rita is seen as more dominant, modern, and sociable than Mavis, who is in turn seen as more moral, traditional, and staid. They are fairly equivalent in femininity.

Consequently, narratives which centre on their relationship often concern Rita's teasing dominance, bossiness, or modern approach to life--conflicting either harmoniously or more acrimoniously with Mavis' old-fashioned, staid and weak personality. Narratives thus concern the areas of personality conflict or contrast rather than those of consonance, such as their femininity or warmth. Being based on salient oppositions, their apparently trivial gossip about the others in the community ensures the expression of two contrasting viewpoints on events, establishing a range of perspectives for viewers.

Divergence in retelling lay in how viewers used these consensual personality representations. Some viewers evaluated Rita's dominance positively--she teases and supports Mavis, others saw her as domineering--"giving trouble" to Mavis and manipulating her. Specific events were thus given different interpretations: compare "Rita badgered Mavis into learning to drive, she was devious about it by the way she had Mavis's flat decorated in exchange" with "She persuaded Mavis to have driving lessons and told her that she would pay for them, and have her flat painted & decorated for her. This shows she can be very kind and generous".

Viewers differed in the complexity of their interpretations and in the social rhetoric which they drew upon to support their interpretations. In this, they varied in their use of the open aspects of the text. The closed aspects also gave rise to divergence, through inaccuracies in recall, when actions were misremembered, and then woven into a meaningful story. In both cases, viewers made various kinds of inferential connections to make their stories coherent. Thus, they fitted the narratives to their perceptions of the characters by, for example, making different attributions of motivations to lie behind the events.

Certain viewers exhibited Liebes and Katz's (1986) referential mode of viewing, showing themselves as involved in the events, and talking of Rita, as they might of someone they knew. Others appeared to stand back and admire, assessing the quality of the events as fictional construction (the critical mode of viewing).

In sum, narratives were interpreted as involving conflict between characters along the themes found to be salient discriminators of those characters in studies of character representation. Viewers draw their own inferences about the significance of events observed. These inferences involve motivations, feelings, and intentions serve which fill out the interpretations. Often viewers draw upon more general mythic or culturally consensual knowledge frames, concerning for instance, rhetoric about maternal feelings, the nature of relationships, or ways of helping or influencing others. Viewers may misremember certain aspects of a narrative, but all interpretations are nonetheless made coherent and contain the gist of the events which occurred.

A second study examined in more detail the narrative structure of viewers' retold versions of a single story from <u>Coronation Street</u> (Livingstone, 1990, in preparation). Viewers' treatment of areas of openness and closure within the text were analyzed. The story concerned a potential adultery between a secretary and the husband in a long-standing and popular marriage in the program. This analysis reveals ways in which the structure of viewers' interpretive schemata and their past knowledge of the genre and program served to guide their readings of the narrative. The openness of the text posed a particular problem for them, as it conflicted with the closed and familiar structures of social knowledge. The various resolutions which viewers adopted, resulting in divergent readings of the same text, illustrate the roles of social knowledge and expectations in constructing the meanings of television programs. Viewers focus on different events or make different inferences according to their evaluations of the characters or their introduction of cultural knowledge. Further, the narratives told by viewers depend on viewers' recognition of textual openness which they resolve through the application of story grammars.

Firstly, viewers' accounts were compared with both the text itself and with the abstract structure of a story grammar, with which viewers presumably make sense of specific narratives on television (van Dijk, 1987; Mandler, 1984). While the text contained various inconsistencies or indeterminacies in its sequencing of events, these were often "clarified" by viewers, who imposed a determinate and common-sense story grammar onto the events seen. For example, while the married couple in the program went on holiday during the period in which their marriage was under threat, many viewers recalled that the holiday took place at the end of their accounts, where it gained added meaning as the celebratory conclusion to the eventual reconciliation. In general, events which fitted key places in the story grammar--disruptive events, complications, resolutions, conclusions--were well recalled, while intervening or incidental events were more often forgotten.

The text offered a range of explanations for the occurrence of adultery (Livingstone, 1987b, 1990), each personified in a different character. This textual openness was also "read" according to viewers' prior knowledge of the characters or their expectations of the program. The "preferred reading" (Hall, 1980) or that most advocated and validated by the text, namely that men commit adultery as a result of fears of lost virility (the "male menopause"), was not favored by viewers. Instead they emphasized psychological motives such as revenge and jealousy. The former explanation was particularly interesting as it depended upon viewers recalling a story from long ago in which the wife in this marriage herself committed adultery. Textual explanations for adultery which identify the husband as the agent but which avoid responsibility attributions are resisted by viewers in favor of explanations which identify female agents (either the wife or the secretary) and which attribute clear responsibility for the events which take place.

Soap opera stories do not so much begin and end, as they emerge from previous stories and feed into future stories, with numerous intertwining links across time and events (Allen, 1985). Story grammars, on the other hand, place considerable emphasis on the beginning and ending of a narrative as fixed points around which the events may be organized and to emphasize the goal towards which events are directed. As a similar vagueness about boundaries existed for the text under study here, one can ask how viewers cope with the conflict between text and interpretive resources in their readings. Most viewers, interestingly, were receptive to the conventions of the genre, reflecting the vague beginnings of the narrative in their accounts. A few viewers, however, imposed a clear closure on the narrative, eliminating all uncertainty. Compare "we had

weeks of Ken being worried about his feelings for Sally changing from those of a boss to those of a potential lover, and it eventually culminated in him kissing her and embracing her in the office" with "it started with a kiss in the office". Despite the typical absence of an ending to this narrative, as the reconciliation scene was marred by a lingering uncertainty never to be clarified, many viewers inserted an ending of their own to resolve the marital conflict. They variously referred to a second honeymoon holiday, a "happy ever after", an agreement to try again, a realization of the temporary nature of the infatuation, and so forth. Fewer viewers than for the beginning of the narrative were able to leave their accounts unresolved, and all told stories which fitted with the genre conventions and which "made sense", irrespective of their accuracy.

How can we account for viewers' divergence in their interpretations of narrative? Although uses and gratifications research has pointed to the importance of viewers' relationships with soap opera characters (Carveth and Alexander, 1985; Livingstone, 1988), little attention has been paid to the importance of these relationships in affecting interpretations. Various psychological factors could affect interpretive divergence (Eisenstock, 1984; Jose and Brewer, 1984; Noble, 1975; Potkay and Potkay, 1984) by influencing the viewers' experienced relationships with the characters--via identification, recognition or "parasocial interaction" (Horton and Wohl, 1956), or character evaluation.

These relationships were examined in a study of narrative recall (Livingstone, in press). A narrative was selected from Coronation Street which concerned a father opposing the marriage to an older man of his young daughter by his first marriage because this man had previously had an affair with the father's present wife. At least two readings were potentially available in this narrative: either love triumphs over prejudice, where the young daughter represents love or naivety, or naivety triumphs over wisdom, where the father represents prejudice or wisdom. The text provided various types of support for both of these readings. Viewers were asked to say how much they agreed with a series of interpretive statements which indexed both textual readings. By cluster analyzing viewers according to their responses, it was found that viewers fell into one of four categories.

The cynics saw the father as having acted reasonably and they considered that he was right to oppose the marriage, for they did not believe that the couple really loved each other, each being deluded about the character of the other. They were especially critical of the daughter, seeing her as a gold-digger who was also fulfilling her need for a father-figure. The romantics interpreted the father's actions as unreasonable, vindictive, and possessive, seeing him putting his hostility to the bridegroom before his feelings for his daughter, and seeing her as right to disappoint her father. They believed that the couple were right for each other, that they could overcome any problems that they might encounter, and that the marriage would last. The negotiated cynics and the negotiated romantics took coherent, intermediate positions, making less judgmental, more straightforward assessments about the characters, and making inferences which fitted their own perspectives.

In general, the cynics comprised a relatively large number of male viewers. They were more likely to identify with the father, evaluate him positively, and perceive the narrative sympathetically from his viewpoint. The two romantic clusters, who formed the majority, considered themselves highly unlike the father, and they disliked him. These viewers saw events from the viewpoint of the couple and could not sympathize with the father's position. The negotiated cynics are in an interesting position, for while their interpretation of events was closest to that of the cynics and they too disliked the couple, they nonetheless sympathized with the daughter and were less critical of her in their inferences about her thoughts and motives.

The relationships experienced by the characters proved important in determining the perspective taken on interpreting the narrative, with identification (or perceived similarity of characters to oneself), evaluation or liking/disliking, and to a lesser extent, recognition (or perceived similarity of characters to people one knows in daily life), all influencing interpretation. Given viewers' often considerable involvement in soap opera, it seems plausible that character evaluation, identification, and perspective-taking should become interrelated over time. As shown here, responses to just one major character- -here, the father--can significantly affect one's perspective on the narrative as a whole.

The narrative opposed young/female (daughter) against old/male (father), yet viewers' ages made no difference to their interpretations, and the women did not especially side with the daughter; indeed, the female cluster (negotiated cynics) merely sided less strongly with the father than did the viewers with whom they are otherwise closest (cynics). One cannot make straightforward assumptions about interpretations from a knowledge of the viewers' socio-structural position, but one must know how viewers relate to the characters. This is especially true for soap opera, where regular viewers build up substantial relationships over the years with the characters.

III. ISSUES IN AUDIENCE RESEARCH
(a) Transcending dichotomies

While we no longer see audiences as passive, mindless and homogeneous, there is a danger in too whole-heartedly adopting the opposite stance. To simply see people as initiators, constructors, creators, is to replace one polemic with another. If we see the media as all-powerful creators of meaning, we neglect the role of audiences. If we see people as all-powerful creators of meaning, we neglect program structure. Instead we should ask how people actively make sense of structured texts and how texts guide and restrict interpretations. Through the analysis of these processes, traditional conceptions of both texts and readers may require rethinking.
(b) Comprehension and Interpretation

The concept of the "reader" contrasts with the concept of the "information-processor", which traditionally implies consensual responses. The "information" to be processed is unitary and given, and "processing" implies a single, linear set of automatic transformations by which information is comprehended. These two ways of conceptualizing the person carry different implications. For example, the information-processing approach tends to treat communication as information transfer, thus raising questions of miscommunication or inaccurate transfer, in contrast to the questions of divergence among interpretations resulting from the constructivist account of the reader. Only if it were easy to specify a correct and unique message, if people generally agreed on this message, and if, further, we had a semantic theory which avoided intuitive identification of meanings, might the information processing approach serve us well. Unfortunately, we lack a theory to identify the "correct" meaning of a message, falling back on an implicit consensus among researchers. Moreover, people commonly and routinely disagree both between themselves and with researchers about the meanings of messages. Thus an approach which anticipates and theorizes divergence, which sees texts as multiple rather than as singular in meaning, and which conceives of texts and readers as related rather than as independent, is preferable.

Interpretation is a variable process rather than an automatic function of the nature of the "information", and it is constrained by the structure of the text and is socially located so that

the experience and knowledge of the reader plays a central role. This is not to say, however, that texts do not contain information, nor that questions of accuracy or miscommunication are irrelevant; the viewers who hears forty people instead of fourteen were killed in a plane crash, or the child who thinks the detective committed the crime, because she or he sees the detective re-enact the crime to establish the means, are clearly wrong or have missed the point. However, much research on the comprehension of television has confined itself to those aspects of texts which can be assessed in terms of correct or incorrect understandings, focusing on the denotational level of texts and considering texts insofar as they are closed. Thus research may be discouraging and invalidating divergent or creative interpretations. Interpretation concerns ways of understanding texts through their relation to mythic or ideological meanings, narrative or conventional frames, and cultural resonances. Interpretation implies a contribution of the reader, and so is not to be judged correct or incorrect, but rather should be seen as a product of the readers' experience, as more or less plausible given normative assumptions, or as more or less creative, critical or interesting. As interpretations are specifically invited by textual openness, they are very likely to diverge from one another.

Researchers can easily talk at cross-purposes by referring ambiguously to understanding or sense-making without distinguishing between comprehension and interpretation. Traditionally, psychologists have found comprehension more interesting for it reveals viewers' dependence on basic knowledge structures, while critical media researchers focus on interpretation because this reveals the cultural and contextual factors which differentiate among viewers. Each approach has addressed itself to a different aspect of the sense-making process. The questions for research must concern the relationship between comprehension and interpretation, the relations between different aspects of texts, the development of increasingly sophisticated social knowledge structures, the importance of divergence and consensus (for some divergence is trivial, other divergence is critically functional), and so forth.

The analysis of programs and their audiences is ultimately concerned with the power of the media to influence, and the power of the audience to resist or enhance that influence. Not only do interpretive processes mediate effects, but different modes of relationships between audience and program also mediate different types of effects. One can suggest that critical readings offer resistance to influence; passive, comprehension- oriented or referential readings encourage reinforcement or consolidation of past effects; active, creative readings allow for the introduction of new ideas or validation of uncertain associations, while mindless viewing may enhance mainstreaming effects (Gerbner et al., 1982). Maybe active viewing is more typical of relatively open texts, where divergence is meaningful, for active processing of closed texts may simply lead to aberrant readings.

(c) Consensus and Divergence

Much television programming, especially the soap opera, is designed to engage and involve the viewer. The more open and diverse programs are, the better they may implicate the viewers in the construction of meaning and thus enhance their interest both cognitively and emotionally. We can assume neither complete consensus nor complete divergence in interpretations, but instead should begin to investigate the areas of consensus and divergence. For this, we should anticipate variations in the experienced relation between viewer and text. Viewers may identify with particular characters, seeing themselves as in that character's shoes; they may regard a character as a role model, imitating that character's behavior in order to gain some of the rewards which the character is shown to enjoy; or they may engage in parasocial interaction (Horton and Wohl, 1956), watching the action as if playing opposite the character. Different genres invite

20

different viewer positions—and this affects the viewer's response in terms of involvement and interpretation.

Katz et al. (1988) suggest a typology of interpretative modes deriving from basic distinctions between referential and critical modes and hot and cool modes. Alternatively, we may distinguish between readings which diverge on the level of denotation (as studied by the information-processing and developmental psychology of Collins, 1983, or Pingree et al., 1984), on the level of connotation (focusing on the different horizons of expectation of reception theory, social knowledge structures or Piagetian schemata), on the level of ideology (accepting or opposing preferred readings, making oppositional, dominant or negotiated readings), or on the level of contextual relevance (with reference to different interpretative communities and social uses; Ang, 1985; Modleski, 1982; Radway, 1985). Doubtless there are yet further ways of subdividing varieties of readings.

This raises several empirical questions. To take the case of the study on divergent interpretations discussed earlier, the parasocial relationships which viewers experience with characters appeared to generate divergence, possibly more so than the viewers' socio-structural position. How are the multiple readings related to diversity in the audience? For example, do the interpretive clusterings found in that study represent permanent or temporary divergences (i.e. do some viewers consistently adopt a romantic view of events in all drama or even in all of their lives, while others are consistently cynical)? Do these divergences derive from the viewers' own experiences of, for example, personal relationships? If not, how freely do viewers fluctuate, adopting different interpretive positions on different occasions? We can also ask about the kinds of divergence to be expected. While all would agree that in the retelling study discussed earlier, the father opposed the couple's marriage, viewers disagreed over the connotative issues of whether one side was in the right and why the characters acted as they did, and presumably they would also disagree over the deeper ideological themes of, for example, whether the program is saying that young women should not marry much older men or that fathers always oppose their daughter's fiance, or that the patriarchal fabric of modern society is disintegrating. Can different theories of textual analysis predict the nature and loci of divergence? How should we assess not only the degree but also the types of divergence in interpretations?

The research presented on viewers' representations of television characters generally found consensus in interpretations. Other researchers have identified areas of divergence (Ang, 1985; Katz and Leibes, 1986; Morley, 1980). Discovering divergence in interpretations may be an artifact of methodology, for while the research presented in the previous section uses a quantitative approach, other researchers use qualitative methods which, while often highly suggestive in their findings, leave one with doubts concerning the representativeness of the illustrations provided and the reliability of the findings. Future research using multiple methods for convergent validity are now needed.

Additionally, while consensus exists in relatively abstract meanings, divergence may be found at a more concrete level. The multidimensional scaling studies indexed fairly general and abstract representations of characters and summaries of general program themes, as the viewers perceive them, which provide a resource for the interpretation of particular narratives. Yet, the viewers' character representations do not solely determine the interpretation of particular narratives. The retelling research suggests that divergence in interpretation occurs in narrative interpretation, when the application of general knowledge structures is varied as a function of the viewers' experienced relationships with familiar characters.

(d) <u>The preferred reading</u>

Drawing on the concept of preferred readings, which have "the institutional/political/ideological order imprinted in them" (Hall, 1980, p. 134) allows for divergence in interpretation, yet avoids pluralism by retaining some notion of textual determination or guidance by which certain readings are made easier, specifically those which fit with the dominant ideology. However, the studies of the reception of preferred readings have confounded the idea of a majority reading by the audience, with the idea of an ideologically normative reading (Morley, 1980). A text may contain two normative, although opposed, readings. In the retelling study, while the romantics clearly endorse a dominant romantic ideology, idealizing love and predicting a "happy ever after" ending for the characters, the cynics do not fit the oppositional category, for they endorse another, concerning notions of the patriarchal father, of daughters as property, the alignment of age and wisdom, and the corrupting influence of an adulterous older man. Neither reading appears critical in the political sense of oppositional, challenging the authority of the text, intended by Morley; and both groups viewed the program referentially (Liebes and Katz, 1986).

Further, the majority of viewers may make a different interpretation from the preferred reading. This is illustrated in the retelling study, where most viewers made a romantic reading of an arguably cynical narrative (for content analysis has repeatedly demonstrated that soap opera marriages frequently end in divorce and that 'true love' is often illusory, deceitful, and temporary (Cantor and Pingree, 1983).

Allen (1985) suggests that the involvement of viewers lies not in predicting <u>what</u> will happen but in seeing <u>how</u> it happens (a concern with the paradigmatic, not the syntagmatic). The present research suggests that viewers may not in fact perceive the predictability in narrative that researchers identify, or alternatively that they suspend this knowledge and enter into the certainty or uncertainty of the characters themselves.

A number of normative alternatives can be encoded in the text and different viewers may select different readings and yet remain within a dominant framework. Hence, the negotiated readings may be a compromise between two dominant but contradictory discourses. Divergence is not simply a function of critical distance from the text, for the text is open to a number of referential readings. Despite interest in subversive or feminist interpretations of soap opera (Ang, 1985; Seiter, 1981), it is apparent on analyzing empirical data, that much interpretive divergence will represent conventional rather than radical positions.

(e) <u>The Active Viewer</u>

The term 'activity' is the source of many confusions, for an active viewer need not be alert, attentive and original. Activity may refer to creative reading–making new meanings of the text, but it may also refer to the more mindless process of fitting the text into familiar frameworks or habits. Here the person is active in the sense of changing the context for and associations of the text ('doing' something with it) but not creative in the sense of doing something original or novel with the text. The notion of active, creative readings may be further divided, into readings invited by the text (as a function of openness) or those made despite the text (which we would term aberrant if they deny denotational aspects of the text or oppositional if they oppose ideological aspects of the text). As a term, 'active' has become fashionable, it has been used in many, often contradictory ways which need to be clarified on use. To reject the toolkit, do-what-you-will-with-the-text, model is not necessarily to reject a vigilant, attentive and creative reader or viewer, but nor is it to reject a habitual, schematic, unimaginative one. Rather, the point is that viewers must inevitably 'do' something with the text, but that they are likely to

draw upon their formidable resource of knowledge and experience to do so, and whether viewers are creative or habitual in their responses will depend on the relationships between the structures of the text, the social knowledge of the viewer and the mode of interaction between them.
NOTE: Thanks to Nuffield College Oxford for financial support and to Peter K. Lunt for helpful comments on this paper.

REFERENCES

Allen, R. C. (1985). Speaking of soap operas. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Ang, I. (1985). Watching DALLAS: Soap opera and the melodramatic imagination. New York: Methuen.

Arlen, M. (1981). Smooth pebbles at Southfork. In R. P. Adler (Ed.), Understanding television: Essays on television as a social and cultural force, 173-181. New York: Praeger.

Ashmore, R. D., and Del Boca, F. K. (1986). The social psychology of female-male relations: A critical analysis of central concepts. Orlando, Florida: Academic Press.

Bartlett, F. C. (1932). Remembering A study in experimental and social psychology. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bem, S. L. (1984). Androgyny and gender schema theory: A conceptual and empirical investigation. In Nebraska Symposium on Motivation, 32, 179-226. Lincoln: University of Nebraska.

Blumler, J. G., Gurevitch, M., and Katz, E. (1985). REACHING OUT: A future for gratifications research. In K. E. Rosengren, L. A. Wenner, and P. Palmgreen (Eds.), Media gratifications research: Current perspectives. Beverly Hills, Cal.: Sage.

Blumler, J. G., and Katz, E. (Eds.) (1974). The uses of mass communications: Current perspectives on gratifications research. Beverly Hills, Cal.: Sage.

Broverman, I., Vogel S., Broverman D., Clarkson F., and Rosenkrantz P. (1972). Sex-role stereotypes: A current appraisal. Journal of Social Issues, 28(2), 59-78.

Bruner, J. S., and Tagiuri, R. (1954). The perception of people. In G. Lindzey (Ed.), Handbook of social psychology, 2. Cambridge, Mass.: Addison-Wesley.

Buckingham, D. (1987). Public secrets: EastEnders and its audience. London: British Film Institute.

Cantor, M., and Pingree, S. (1983). The soap opera. Beverly Hills, Cal.: Sage.

Carey, J. W. (1985). Overcoming resistance to Cultural Studies. In M. Gurevitch, and M. R. Levy, (Eds.), Mass Communication Review Yearbook, 5. Beverly Hills, Cal.: Sage.

Carveth, R., and Alexander, A. (1985). Soap opera viewing motivations and the cultivation process. Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media, 29(3), 259-273.

Collins, W. A. (1983). Interpretation and inference in children's television viewing. In J. Bryant and D. A. Anderson (Eds.), Children's understanding of television. New York: Academic Press.

van Dijk, T. A. (1987). Communicating racism: Ethnic prejudice in thought and talk. Newbury Park, Cal.: Sage.

Drabman, R. S., Robertson, S. J., Patterson, J. N., Jarvie, G. J., Hammer, D., and Cordua, G. (1981). Children's perception of media-portrayed sex roles. Sex Roles, 7, 379-389.

Durkin, K. (1985a). Television and sex-role acquisition 1: Content. British Journal of Social Psychology, 24, 101-113.

Durkin, K. (1985b). Television and sex-role acquisition. 2: Effects. British Journal of Social Psychology, 24, 191-210.

Dyer, R., Geraghty, C., Jordan, M., Lovell, T., Paterson, R., and Stewart, J. (1981). Coronation street. British Film Institute Television Monograph no. 13. London: British Film Institute.

Eco, U. (1979). The role of the reader: Explorations in the semiotics of texts. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Eisenstock, B. (1984). Sex-role differences in children's identification with counterstereotypical televised portrayals. Sex Roles, 10(5/6), 417-430.

Fejes, F. (1984). Critical mass communications research and media effects: The problem of the disappearing audience. Media, Culture and Society, 6(3), 219-232.

Fiske, J. (1987). Television culture. London: Methuen.

Fiske, S. T., and Taylor, S. E. (1984). Social cognition. New York: Random House.

Forgas, J. P. (1979). Multidimensional scaling: A discovery method in social psychology. In G. P. Ginsberg (Ed.), Emerging strategies in social psychological research. New York: Wiley.

Fry, D. L., and Fry, V. H. (1986). A semiotic model for the study of mass communication. In M. L. McLaughlin (Ed.), Communication Yearbook, 9, 463-479. Beverly Hills, Cal.: Sage.

Gerbner, G., and Gross, L. (1976). Living with television: The violence profile. Journal of Communication, 26(2), 173-99.

Gerbner, G., Gross, L., Morgan, M., and Signorielli, N. (1982). Charting the mainstream: Television's contributions to political orientations. Journal of Communication, 32(2), 100-127.

Hall, S. (1980). Encoding/Decoding In S. Hall, D. Hobson, A. Lowe, and P. Willis (Eds.), Culture, Media, Language. London: Hutchinson.

Hawkins, R. P., and Pingree, S. (1983). Television's influence on social reality. In E. Wartella, and D. C. Whitney (Eds.), Mass communication review yearbook, 4, 53-76. London: Sage.

Heider, F. (1958). The psychology of interpersonal relations. New York: Wiley.

Hodge, R., and Tripp, D. (1986). Children and television: A semiotic approach. Cambridge: Polity.

Holub, R. C. (1984). Reception theory: A critical introduction. London: Methuen.

Horton, D., and Wohl, R. R. (1956). Mass communication and para- social interaction. Psychiatry, 19, 215-229.

Ingarden, R. (1973). The cognition of the literary work of art. Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press.

Iser, W. (1980). The reading process: a phenomenological approach. In J. P. Tompkins, (Ed.). Reader-response criticism: from formalism to post-structuralism. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Jauss, H. R. (1982) Towards an aesthetic of reception. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Johnson-Laird, P. N. (1983). Mental models: Towards a cognitive science of language, inference and consciousness. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Jose, P. E., and Brewer, W. F. (1984). Development of story liking: character identification, suspense, and outcome resolution. Developmental Psychology, 20(5), 911-924.

Kahneman, D., Slovic, P., and Tversky, A. (Eds.), (1982). Judgment under uncertainty: Heuristics and biases. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Katz, E. (1980). On conceptualizing media effects. Studies in Communication, 1, 119-141.

Katz, E., and Liebes, T. (1986). Mutual aid in the decoding of Dallas: Preliminary notes from a cross-cultural study. In P. Drummond and R. Paterson (Eds.), Television in transition. London: British Film Institute.

Katz, E., Iwao, S., and Liebes, T. (1988). On the limits of diffusion of American television: a study of the critical abilities of Japanese, Israeli and American viewers. A report to the Hoso Bunka Foundation, Tokyo.

Kohlberg, L. (1964). Development of moral character and ideology. Review of Child Development Research. Vol. 1. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

Kohler, W. (1930). Gestalt psychology. London: Bell and Sons.

Kruskal, J. B. and Wish, M. (1978). Multidimensional Scaling. Sage University Paper series on Quantitative Applications in the Social Sciences, series no. 07-001. Beverly Hills, Cal.: Sage.

Lazarsfeld, P. F. (1941). Remarks on administrative and critical communications research. Studies in Philosophy and Science, 9, 3-16.

Liebes, T. (1986a). On the convergence of theories of mass communication and literature regarding the role of the 'reader'. Paper presented at the Conference on Culture and Communication, Philadelphia, October, 1986.

Liebes, T. (1986b). Cultural differences in the retelling of television fiction. Paper presented at the International Communications Association Annual Conference, Chicago, May, 1986.
Liebes, T., and Katz, E. (1986). Patterns of involvement in television fiction: A comparative analysis. European Journal of Communication, 1, 151-171.

Livingstone, S. M. (1987a). The Implicit Representation of Characters in Dallas: A multidimensional scaling approach. Human Communication Research, 13(3), 399-420.

Livingstone, S. M. (1987b). The representation of personal relationships in television drama: realism, convention and morality. In R. Burnett, P. McGhee, and D. D. Clarke, (Eds.), Accounting for relationships: explanation, representation and knowledge. London: Methuen.

Livingstone, S.M. (1988). Why people watch soap opera: An analysis of the explanations of British viewers. European Journal of Communication, 3, 55-80.

Livingstone, S. M. (1989). Interpretive viewers and structured programs: the implicit representation of soap opera characters. Communication Research, 16(1), 25-57.

Livingstone, S. M. (1990). Making Sense of Television: The psychology of audience interpretation. Oxford: Pergamon.

Livingstone, S. M. (in press). Interpreting television narrative: How viewers see a story. Journal of Communication.

Livingstone, S. M. (in preparation). The role of the viewer in audience research: A case study in retelling romantic drama. For M. Gurevitch and J. Curran, (Eds.), Mass Communication and Society. London: Routledge.

Mander, M. S. (1983). "Dallas": The mythology of crime and the moral occult. Journal of Popular Culture, 17(2), 44-50.

Mandler, J. M. (1984). Stories, scripts, and scenes: Aspects of schema theory. Hillsdale, N.J.: Erlbaum.

Modleski, T. (1982). Loving with a vengeance: mass-produced fantasies for women. New York: Methuen.

Morley, D. (1980). The Nationwide audience: Structure and decoding. British Film Institute Television Monograph No. 11. London: British Film Institute.

Morley, D. (1981). The Nationwide audience: A critical postscript. Screen Education, 39, 3-14.

Newcomb, H. (Ed.), (1982). Television: The critical view. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Noble, G. (1975). Children in front of the small screen. London: Sage.

Osgood, C. E., Suci, G. J., and Tannenbaum, P. H. (1957). The measurement of meaning. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

Owens, J., Bower, G. H., and Black, J. B. (1979). The "soap opera" effect in story recall. Memory and Cognition, 7(3), 185-191.

Paterson, R., and Stewart, J. (1981). Street life. In R. Dyer, C. Geraghty, M. Jordan, T. Lovell, R. Paterson, and J. Stewart, (1981). Coronation street. British Film Institute Television Monograph no. 13. London: British Film Institute.

Piaget, J. (1968). Structuralism. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Pingree, S. (1978). The effects of nonsexist television commercials and perceptions of reality on children's attitudes about women. Psychology of Women Quarterly, 2(3), 262-277.

Pingree, S., Hawkins, R. P., Rouner, D., Burns, J., Gikonyo, W., and Neuwirth, C. (1984). Another look at children's comprehension of television. Communication Research, 11(4), 477-496.

Potkay, C. R., and Potkay, C. E. (1984). Perceptions of female and male comic strip characters II: Favorability and identification are different dimensions. Sex Roles, 10(1/2), 119-128.

Propp, V. (1968). The morphology of the folktale. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Radway, J. (1985). Interpretive communities and variable literacies: The functions of romance reading. In M. Gurevitch, and M. R. Levy (Eds.), Mass Communication Review Yearbook, 5. Beverly Hills, Cal.: Sage.

Reeves, B., Chaffee, S. H., and Tims, A. (1982). Social cognition and mass communication research. In M. E. Roloff and C. R. Berger (Eds.), Social cognition and communication. London:

Sage.

Reeves, B., and Greenberg, B. (1977). Children's perceptions of television characters. Human Communication Research, 3, 113-127.

Reeves, B., and Lometti, G. (1978). The dimensional structure of children's perceptions of television characters: A replication. Human Communication Research, 5, 247-256.

Rice, M., Huston, A., and Wright, J. (1987). The forms of television: effects on children's attention, comprehension and social behaviour. In O. Boyd-Barrett, and P. Braham, (Eds.), Media, knowledge and power. London: Croom Helm.

Roberts, D. F., and Bachen, C. M. (1981). Mass communication effects. Annual Review of Psychology, 32, 307-356.

Rowland, W. D., and Watkins, B. (1984). Interpreting television: Current research perspectives. Beverly Hills, Cal.: Sage.

Schank, R. C., and Abelson, R. P. (1977). Scripts, plans, goals, and understanding: An inquiry into human knowledge structures. Hillsdale, N. J.: Erlbaum.

Schneider, D. J., Hastorf, A. H., and Ellsworth, P. C. (1979). Person perception. Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley.

Schroder, K. C. (1987). Convergence of antagonistic traditions? The case of audience research. European Journal of Communication, 2, 7-31.

Seiter, E. (1981). The role of the woman reader: Eco's narrative theory and soap operas. Tabloid, 6.

Suleiman, S., and Crosman, I. (Eds.), (1980). The reader in the text. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Tan, A. S. (1979). TV beauty ads and role expectations of adolescent female viewers. Journalism Quarterly, 56, 283-288.

Tompkins, J. P. (1980). (Ed.). Reader-response criticism: From formalism to post-structuralism. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Biographic Sketch, for Communication Yearbook 15.

SONIA M. LIVINGSTONE (D.Phil., Oxford University, 1987) is Lecturer in Social Psychology at the London School of Economics and Political Science. Her research interests include the active television audience and reception theory, the domestic use of communication technologies, and the psychology of everyday understandings. She is author of Making Sense of Television; The psychology of audience interpretation, Oxford: Pergamon, 1990, and articles in communication and psychology journals.

Abstract, for Communication Yearbook 15.

The resourceful reader:
Interpreting television characters and narratives

The television viewer is an active interpreter, not a passive recipient, of programs. Viewers' interpretations of programs mediate television effects. The 'active viewer' is accepted by both traditional and critical mass communication scholars, allowing for a possible convergence between these two schools through a more sophisticated theory of the relation between text and reader. Recent empirical research within the reader-reception theory tradition is discussed. An original research program is described in which the 'role of the reader' is explored, using both quantitative and qualitative methods to show how viewers' interpretations of programs depend on their sociocognitive resources (a summary of experiences and understandings of everyday life) as well as on program structure. Theoretical problems with reception research are considered, focusing on the differences between comprehension and interpretation and between consensus and divergence, and the nature of the preferred reading and the active viewer.