LSE Research Online

Article (refereed)

Interpreting television narrative : how viewers see a story

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<u>Divergent Interpretations of a Television Narrative</u>

Abstract

Questions have been raised about whether all viewers receive the same message
from a television program.   However, there has been   little systematic
investigation of divergence in interpretations.   The present research
investigated   the   nature   and   degree   of   divergence   among   viewers'
interpretations of a soap opera narrative watched in natural circumstances.
Four distinct   interpretive positions were adopted by viewers which related
closely but not straightforwardly to the two alternative readings   made
available to them by the structure of the program, and which also included
intermediate or negotiated readings.   Interpretative divergence appeared to
depend on viewers' relationships with the central characters of the narrative,
as   expressed through character identification, evalution, and   recognition.
The implications of these findings for the empirical and theoretical study of
divergent interpretations and   their relation to program structure are
discussed.

<u>Divergent Interpretations of a Television Narrative</u>

Researchers in both traditional mass communications and cultural studies have recently become concerned with viewers' interpretations of television programs (Allen, 1985; Blumler et al, 1985; Collins et al, 1978; Fejes, 1984; Hall, 1980; Reeves et al, 1982). The constructive activities of television viewers question earlier assumptions that the analysis of content <u>per se</u> informs us of the nature of the viewing experience and its consequences and that viewing is a passive or mindless process of little theoretical complexity. Recent research on the pleasures of viewing (Ang, 1985), on how text and viewer interact (Allen, 1985; Eco, 1979; Radway, 1985), and on how viewers from different cultural or social backgrounds interpret the same program (Katz & Liebes, 1986; Liebes & Katz, 1986; Morley, 1980) reveal considerable and often suprising divergences in interpretation which support the current emphasis on the 'active viewer' (Hawkins & Pingree, 1983; Hodge & Tripp, 1986; Levy & Windahl, 1985; Katz, 1980).

The effects of television on people's social constructions of reality are vitally mediated by the interpretative activity of the viewer (Durkin, 1985; Reeves, Chaffee, & Tims, 1982; Roberts & Bachen, 1981). Hall writes "before a message can have an 'effect' (however defined), satisfy a 'need' or be put to a 'use', it must first be appropriated as meaningful discourse and be meaningfully decoded" (1980, p. 130). This raises both the theoretical issue of the interpretive role of the viewer in the communication process and also the methodological or design problem of needing to know the nature of people's interpretations before knowing what effects to seek. For example, the cultivation paradigm presumes viewers' interpretations when deciding what contents should be correlated with what beliefs.   Thus, Alexander (1985) notes that her null results concerning the cultivation of beliefs in relational fragility from soap opera viewing may not indicate the ineffectiveness of the media but instead suggest that the programs "create a very different set of messages for the young viewer than those initially hypothesized" (Alexander, 1985, p. 304).

In many ways, we must reconceptualize television programs and their effects, as viewing can no longer be seen as the passive uptake of and response to a manifest and discrete message. We are no longer so concerned with whether clear and simple program messages are received accurately by the viewer. Much television programming is designed to engage and involve the viewer in a more general way, and often neither clarity nor simplicity are necessary. Indeed, 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 begin with the observation, based on careful textual analysis, that television is dense, rich, and complex, rather than impoverished" (Newcomb & Hirsch, 1984, p. 71). The question then becomes, how is this complexity understood by viewers?

Research has focussed on the soap opera as a relatively 'open' genre (Allen, 1985; Radway, 1985; Seiter, 1981) which provides a substantial role for the viewer (Eco, 1979): the viewer is invited to become involved, committed, speculative, evaluative, to fill in gaps and make relevant his or her own experience (Buckingham, 1987; Livingstone, 1987, in press), to identify with some characters, to recognize others (Noble, 1975), and to discuss events with family and friends (Buckman, 1984; Cantor & Pingree, 1983; Katz & Liebes,

1986).

If the viewer is cognitively involved and the program is sufficiently open (Eco, 1979), allowing multiple interpretations and leaving sufficient ambiguity, then we need to investigate not only the nature of viewers' interpretations, but also the ways in which these interpretations diverge from each other. Lang and Lang (1985) argue that interpretive divergence should not be regarded simply as 'communication failures', as has typically occurred in the past, for "as long as the meanings read into the content are defined as real, they are for this group real in their consequences. They become part of the culturally enshrined symbolic environment" (p. 57).

Some research has found both individual and group differences in program interpretation. Chapko and Lewis (1975) showed that high and low authoritarian viewers differently perceive and evaluate the character of Archie Bunker, the right- wing comic star of <u>All in the Family</u>. Morley (1980) showed that viewers take various different positions (dominant, negotiated, oppositional) relative to the normative outlook of the B.B.C. because of their political beliefs, position in the labor market, and demographic status. Consequently, they generate different interpretations of the same news magazine program, <u>Nationwide</u>. These interpretive differences are complex but internally coherent, and they are consistent with the various social identities of the viewers. Similarly, Radway (1985) reveals how female romance readers operate a specific type of literacy, producing unexpected interpretations, and Katz and Liebes' project (Katz & Liebes, 1986; Liebes & Katz, 1986) on 'the export of meaning' reveals how different cultural groups interpret <u>Dallas</u>. In all these studies, evidence on divergent interpretations is held to reveal the degree to which viewers may negotiate meanings and thereby mitigate against the power of television to impose its own meanings.

Thus far, the theoretical issues surrounding viewers' interpretations have received far more considerable attention than have empirical issues. Apart from the above mentioned research, many discussions of audience interpretations are more speculative than investigative, and studies of the audience are in this respect just beginning. Although uses and gratifications research has pointed to the importance of viewers' relationships with soap opera characters (Carveth & Alexander, 1985; Livingstone, 1988; Rubin, 1985), the importance of these relationships in affecting interpretations has been little addressed. Yet televisions drama, and soap opera especially, inscribes multiple perspectives on pertinant issues into the text through the personification of perspectives in character portrayals. Interactions between characters thus enact conflicts and negotiations among different interpretations and perspectives on events.

Various psychological factors could affect interpretive divergence (Eisenstock, 1984; Jose & Brewer, 1984; Noble, 1975; Potkay & Potkay, 1984) by influencing the viewers' experienced relationships with the characters. Potkay and Potkay (1984) show that viewers identify with cartoon characters according to their perceived similarity to the characters, and further that this identification is independent of character evaluation. Noble (1975) suggests that viewers need not identify with a character in order to adopt their perspective. Drawing upon the concept of 'para-social interaction' (Horton & Wohl, 1956), Noble argues that viewers interpret narratives through a process of recognition, entering into the action by playing against a

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character who is similar to someone they know in real life.
Alternatively, it may be that, despite the findings of Potkay and Potkay (1984), character evaluation does play a role in which viewers take the perspective of liked characters against disliked characters. Regular viewers of soap opera become more involved with the characters than do cartoon fans. Thus identification, recognition, and evaluation may all create divergence in interpretations of a multi-character narrative. If the same events are viewed from a variety of different perspectives, with varying evaluative stances and concerns, then different interpretations of the same narrative must result.
In the television program examined in this research, <u>Coronation Street</u>, a narrative was selected (see below) which concerned a father opposing the marriage of his young daughter by his first marriage to a much older man on the grounds of the fiance's previous adultery with the father's second wife. At least two readings were potentially available in this narrative: either love triumphs over prejudice, or naivety triumphs over wisdom. The themes of the narrative, however interpreted, reflect a mythic or romantic morality, supporting the idea that soap opera functions for viewers as contemporary mythology. The themes are carried by the central characters, so that the young daughter represents love/naivety and the father represents prejudice/wisdom, depending on the reading selected. The text provided various support for either of these readings. For example, the daughter's naivety was evidenced by initial ignorance of her fiance's affairs, particularly with her step- mother, and by her faith in his new-found desire for stability. Yet this could be explained according to the 'love' reading, as she was new to the area and certainly her fiance talked continually of wanting to settle down, seeing her as a golden opportunity to start a new life. The naivety/wisdom reading is more evidenced by the characters' pasts, such as the previous entanglements and the father's position of respect in the community, while the love/prejudice reading is amply supported by their present actions, such as the couple's happiness and the father's hostility (note 1).

In terms of sociological or demographic factors which may affect divergence (Newcomb & Hirsch, 1984), one might ask whether the younger and female viewers will identify with the daughter while older and male viewers' take the father's part? It is increasingly argued that, in theory, women will interpret soap operas differently from men, as they participate in different discourses and because the 'gendered spectatorship' of the genre is a female one (Curti, 1988; Kaplan, 1984). Unfortunately, this position is typically supported by studies of female audiences alone, and still awaits empirical investigation which compares the interpretations of men and women. A second social variable to be studied here is that of age. As Hartley (1984) notes, generation membership indicates access to different discourses and interests and thus suggests possible differential interpretations according to viewers' ages. It seems reasonable to hypothesize that the two readings present in the narrative studied here would be adopted by groups of viewers differentiated by gender and age.
Although the present paper is not directly concerned with 'effects', it should be noted that if the same narrative cues two quite different interpretations, then the effects of viewing should also be different, by increasing either romantic/optimistic or cynical/pessimistic thinking. In the context of the cultivation paradigm, this would lead to low correlations, often found in the

literature (Hawkins & Pingree, 1983), if only one interpretation was tested. In relation to agenda-setting, McCombs and Weaver (1973) showed how psychological needs affected type of media use which in turn affected degree of media influence on cognitions. Implicitly, similar causal chains are proposed by the advocates of the interpretively active viewer, namely that knowledge, interests, and needs affect program interpretation which in turn affects degree and type of media influence. Given the varied relationships which viewers experience with the characters in soap opera, effects mediated by identification, role modelling, and parasocial interaction will surely depend upon program interpretation.

The present research attempts to make some inroads into these issues by examining ordinary viewers' interpretations of a particular soap opera narrative, after they have watched it unfold over some time in natural viewing circumstances. The study aims to discover and describe the nature of any divergence, examining whether viewers fall into distinct interpretive positions. It will also investigate some psychological and sociological correlates of divergence, specifically whether the divergent groups are discriminable by age and/or sex of the viewers (Newcomb & Hirsch, 1984) and by psychological factors which may influence which perspective a viewer adopts on interpreting the narrative (identification, evaluation, and recognition).

Method

Subjects

The 66 subjects (42 female and 24 male) were obtained either through the Oxford Department of Experimental Psychology subject panel (n=35) or in response to a national advertisement for soap opera viewers in SOAP magazine. They were of a wide range of ages (from 16 to 60's) and occupations (mostly white collar workers such as secretaries and clerks, with some housewives, and a few students). All were regular viewers of <u>Coronation Street</u> (average number of years viewing was 11.3, average frequency of viewing was 3 out of every 4 episodes). The average amount of the narrative selected for study which was actually viewed was 'most of it', and average amount remembered was 'most of it'.

The narrative

<u>Coronation Street</u> has been transmitted continuously since 1960, during which time many characters have become firmly established and many emotional entanglements, the stuff of soap opera, have been played out (see Dyer, Geraghty, Jordan, Lovell, Paterson, & Stewart, 1981, for a theoretical analysis of the program and Livingstone, in press, for an empirical analysis of viewers' representations of the major characters). In the narrative studied here, Susan Barlow, the 21 year old daughter of Ken Barlow by his first marriage returns to the Street to live with her father and his new wife, Deidre Barlow. Susan begins a romance with Mike Baldwin, a local factory owner some 20 years older than her. Two problems from the past complicate matters: Ken's guilt at neglecting Susan as a child, leaving her upbringing to his ex-wife; and Deidre's adulterous affair with Mike a few years before, for which Ken has not forgiven them. Susan and Mike pursue their affair while Ken refuses to accept it. When Susan announces her decision to marry Mike, Ken refuses to attend the wedding. Suppressing her guilty feelings, Deidre tries to support both Ken and Susan. Ken and Mike come to blows, and the whole Street becomes involved. On the morning of the wedding, Susan's brother persuades Ken to attend, thereby atoning for his neglect of her childhood. He

relents and gives away the bride. The story ends for the time being as the couple go on their honeymoon.

The story was selected because it typifies the personal, emotional, and moral concern of soap opera, it involves well- established characters, it was a typical but lengthy story (unfolding over several months), and it could clearly be 'read' in several distinct ways. Firstly, it can be seen as a traditional romance, with true love triumphing over adversity: Ken acts out his unreasonable and unforgiving prejudices and jealousies against the man chosen by his daughter. Alternatively, it can be seen as a failed attempt by wisdom and experience (the father) to rescue his naive and innocent daughter from the manipulative grasp of an older and immoral man.

The questionnaire

The questionnaire was administered to viewers just as the couple went on their honeymoon. It was divided into 3 parts. The first part requested demographic and viewing information. The second part indexed potential psychological correlates of interpretive divergence with 5 point rating scales of identification ('How much are you at all like X'), recognition ('Think of the people you know, such as your family and friends. Do you know anybody at all like X? Who?'), evaluation ('How much do you like X'), and perspective-taking ('Do you sympathize with X's viewpoint') for each of the 4 main characters in the narrative (Mike, Deidre, Ken, and Susan). The third part contained 30 statements of narrative interpretation, each with a 5 point rating scale (strongly disagree - strongly agree), see Table 1. The statements were based on pilot testing in which six regular viewers completed an open-ended questionnaire about their interpretations of the narrative.

Results and discussion

Cluster analysis of viewers

In order to discover the emergent groupings among the viewers corresponding to divergent interpretations of the narrative, the data on viewers' agreement with the 30 interpretation statements were entered into a cluster analysis in order to cluster the viewers. The DENSITY procedure of the CLUSTAN package was selected (Wishart, 1978) as the recommended method for discovering natural clusters in the proximities data. The method is based on finding 'dense' points in the data, in which subsets of objects, in this case viewers, are highly similar. Four clusters were found (note 2) which divided the 66 viewers among them by producing two fairly large clusters (n=20 and n=25) and two fairly small clusters (n=9 and n=12).

To interpret the cluster differences, comparisons between clusters on the 30 statements were made, using the analysis of variance (ANOVA) descriptively rather than predictively. As the nature of interpretive divergence was not predicted, the 0.001 level of significance was used (i.e. 5% divided by 30 comparisons) so as not to capitalize on chance. The mean agreement with each statement for each cluster is shown in Table 1, together with the ANOVA results for each of the 30 one-way independent ANOVA's. The following discussion is also based on Scheffe multiple range tests which were performed to interpret the ANOVA results.

(INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE)

Through examination of the results, the following general structure emerges. The four clusters of viewers can be ranked in terms of their relative allegiance to either Ken or to Mike and Susan. One cluster of viewers are most strongly on Ken's side and against the couple, another is

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less on Ken's side, but more so than either of the other two clusters. A third cluster is the most against Ken and most on the side of the couple, Mike and Susan, and the final cluster again supports the couple, but rather less strongly. Hence, viewers occupy a range of interpretive positions between the pro-Ken and the pro-Mike and Susan textual positions.

While labelling the clusters is problematic, it will clarify the following discussion. So, based on the results in Table 1, and bearing in mind that the narrative essentially concerns the perceived authenticity of a relationship, the pro-Ken cluster of viewers will be labelled 'cynics'(n=12), the pro-couple cluster will be labelled 'romantics'(n=20), and the intermediate positions will be labelled the 'negotiated cynics' (n=9) and 'negotiated romantics' (n=25).

The cynics

These viewers' interpretations of the narrative center on their perception of Ken as having acted reasonably and they consider that he was right to oppose the marriage. They believe that Susan and Mike do not really love each other and that they both believe each other to be better people than they really are.   These viewers are especially critical of Susan, who they perceive as wanting Mike for his money and success and as filling her need for a father-figure.

The romantics

By contrast, these viewers interpreted Ken's actions as unreasonable, vindictive, and possessive. They consider that Ken put his feelings for Mike before those for Susan and that Susan was right to disappoint her father for Mike's sake. They believe that Susan and Mike are right for each other, that the couple can overcome any problems that they encounter, and that the marriage will last.

The negotiated cynics

These viewers essentially agree with the cynics, but adopt a more moderate position by doubting whether Ken was right to oppose the marriage so wholeheartedly, whether Susan and Mike are deluded about each other, and whether Mike does not really love Susan. They also show more reservations in imputing unpleasant motivations to Susan, believing rather less than the cynics that Susan wants a father-figure, wants to prove herself an adult, or wants Mike's money and success. As this group of viewers is almost entirely female (8 out of 9), it may be that their identification with Susan as a woman mitigates against their basically cynical reading of the narrative, thereby producing a more balanced interpretation.

The negotiated romantics

This group of viewers basically agrees with the romantics, but also believes to some extent that the couple's perceptions of each other are idealised and that their love may not be 'true'.   They give some credence to the 'father-figure' explanation, and anticipate some problems for the couple. Possibly they represent a 'realistic' reading.

Comparisons between clusters on external factors

The variables of recognition and sex were tested for cluster differences using the chi-square test. The only significant result (note 3) was that there are more males among the cynics (7 out of 12) than would be expected by chance, and the negotiated cynics are almost wholly female (8 out of 9).

On the four recognition questions, there are no significant findings overall: viewers across different clusters do not differ in terms of which characters

they recognize as being like somebody they know in real life. However, there is once more a tendency for the two cynical clusters to differ from each other and from the others (note 4): the negotiated cynics know almost nobody like Susan or Mike (only 1 and 2 respectively) and the cynics are proportionately more likely to know someone like both Susan and Mike (8 and 8 respectively).

Those questions indexed by a continuous dependent variable were analysed using analyses of variance (see Table 2). The age of the viewers was found to be constant across clusters, as was the length and frequency of viewing. Regarding the variables of identification with (or perception of self as similar to) the main characters, there was an effect for Mike in which the negotiated viewers judged themselves as slightly more similar to Mike than did the others. The strongest effect, however, was for identification with Ken, where the cynics saw themselves as more like Ken than did the romantic viewers (p<0.05).

<center>(INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE)</center>

On character evaluation, the results again concern Ken. The cynics like Ken more than do either of the romantic clusters (p<0.05), and in fact they are the only viewers to like Ken at all (mean exceeds the scale midpoint). On the question of whether different clusters view events more or less from the perspective of different characters, only Deidre was unimportant here. The romantic clusters sympathized with Mike and Susan more than did the cynical cluster. Further, sympathy with Susan also discriminated between the two cynical clusters and between the two romantic clusters (p<0.05). In contrast, the cynics, and to a lesser extent, the negotiated cynics, sympathized with Ken (the cynics sypathized more with Ken than did either of the romantic clusters, and the negotiated cynics more than the romantics, p<0.05). One might have expected the negotiated cynics to sympathize more with Ken than with Susan. Yet, possibly because they are mainly women, they could also see Susan's point of view, even though they did not agree with it as much as did the romantic clusters.

In sum, the picture is as follows. The cynics comprise a relatively large number of male viewers, and appear more likely to identify with Ken, evaluate Ken positively, and perceive the narrative sympathetically from Ken's viewpoint. The two romantic clusters consider themselves highly unlike Ken, although not particularly like any other character either. They also dislike Ken as a character. These viewers see events from the viewpoint of Mike and Susan, and cannot sympathize with Ken's position. The negotiated cynics are in an interesting position, for while their interpretation of events is closest to that of the cynics and they too dislike Susan and Mike, they nonetheless sympathize with Susan, and are less critical of her in their inferences about her thoughts and motives.

The experienced relationships with the characters proved important in determining the perspective taken on interpreting the narrative, with identification, evaluation, and to a lesser extent, recognition, all influencing interpretation. Recognition of Susan and Mike related to the differences between the interpretations of the two cynical clusters, but was otherwise relatively unimportant, which is surprising in view of Noble's (1975) evidence that recognition should be especially operative for television rather than for film and for female rather than male viewers. Identification proved an important factor, discriminating clusters along the pro-Ken to

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anti-Ken continuum, as a function of perceived similarity to Ken. This was clearly related to character evaluation, rather than independent of it as suggested by Potkay and Potkay (1984). The perspective-taking or sympathy variables were highly significant with respect to three of the four main characters and the means are consistent with the identification and evaluation judgments for the four clusters of viewers. Given viewers' often considerable involvement in soap opera, it certainly seems plausible that character evaluation, identification, and perspective-taking should become interrelated over time. The strongest results centered on Ken, showing that response to just one major character can significantly affect one's perspective on the narrative as a whole. Although causality can only be inferred here, not demonstrated, the durability of identification, evaluation and recognition relative to the perspective taken on a single narrative suggests that the former, the viewers' relationships with the characters, plays some causal role in influencing interpretation.

To the extent that viewers' sex was associated with a specific interpretation, this did not occur in a predictable fashion, and age was quite unrelated to interpretive position. The narrative opposed young/female (Susan) against old/male (Ken). Yet women did not especially side with Susan. The female cluster (negotiated cynics) merely sided less strongly with Ken than did the viewers with whom they are otherwise closest (cynics).

General discussion

The viewers in the present study fell into four natural clusters in their interpretations of the same soap opera narrative. The four clusters are distinguishable according to two general considerations: firstly, an assessment of the rights and wrongs of Ken's opposition to the marriage, according to which the four readings may be ranked between an endorsement of Ken's actions to an endorsement of Susan and Mike's; and secondly, the nature of the inferences made by viewers about characters' motives and thoughts.

The evaluative differences allow viewers to become involved emotionally and take sides during the unfolding of the narrative. The inferences serve to 'fill out' the narrative, increasing coherence and interest through beliefs about the motives and thoughts which lie behind the characters' actions. The range of responses includes both sides of the narrative debate, as anticipated by consideration of the text itself, plus two intermediate but distinct positions.

The results support Newcomb and Hirsch's (1984) argument that television provides a 'cultural forum', showing the "range of response, the directly contradictory readings of the medium, that cue us to its multiple meanings" (p. 68). The determinants of this range were found not to be not simply sociological (age and gender) but also psychological (identification, evaluation, recognition). Thus one cannot make straightforward assumptions about interpretations from a knowledge of the viewers' socio- structural position but one must also know how viewers relate to the characters. This is especially true for soap opera, where regular viewers build up substantial relationships with the characters over years.

The four interpretive positions are not wholly divergent: the viewers agree on some of the thirty narrative statements (Table 1). Interestingly, they do not disagree on any of the statements involving one of the characters, Deidre (statements 9, 13, 23, 30). Yet textually, Deidre plays a central role, personifying the conflict through her explicit links to both Ken (her

husband) and Mike (her former lover). Just as in Radway's research (1985) the romance readers 'filtered out' the structural role of the secondary foil characters and focussed on the hero and heroine alone, and similarly, in Liebes' (1984) and Livingstone's (1987) research on <u>Dallas</u>, viewers simplified moral ambiguity into clearly oppositional 'good' and 'bad', so here viewers underplay the role of a centrally ambiguous character, simplifying the narrative to one in which there are two clearly opposed sides.

Two further patterns are evident in the distribution of differentiating and nondifferentiating statements. Five statements involved imputing hidden motivations to characters to explain their actions, such as guilt, revenge, desire, and jealousy (statements 5, 11, 14, 23, and 24). None of these significantly differentiate the clusters, suggesting that viewers   are reluctant to seek deeper psychological motivations as the 'glue' to connect their interpretations. Secondly, of the seven statements concerning Mike's role, only two discriminated the clusters, whereas of the eight involving Susan, only two did not discriminate them. This suggests that the divergence in interpretations centers on Susan, again despite the fact that it is Mike's character which is structurally more interesting, for he is making the transition from 'baddie' (playboy, adulterer) to 'goodie' (reformed character, devoted fiance). The narrative appears to be read not as a conflict between two men so much as a female/male conflict concerning the daughter's freedom to choose.

The present research has adopted a quantitative approach to issues often studied ethnographically. While the use of a variety of approaches is always desirable, the present approach offers certain advantages: the complete data set can be economically reported; the four interpretive positions selected for discussion are representative of natural clusterings among viewers; the relative popularity of each position is calculable;   and the results can be understood in relation to the hypothetical alternatives which might have been found (see below).

Several further empirical issues can be raised. The para-social relationships which viewers experience with characters appear to generate divergence, possibly more so than the viewers' socio-structural position. How general is this finding and does it depend upon the genre studied? This raises   the further question of whether the interpretive clusterings found here represent permanent or temporary divergences. For example, 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. If so, does this distinction map onto the viewers' own experiences of personal relationships? If not, how freely do viewers fluctuate, adopting different interpretive positions on different occasions?

The present discussion concerning the ways in which viewers' interpretations of television narrative diverge from both the text (or analysts' readings of the text) and from each other argues strongly for the concept of the active viewer, for the heterogenous audience, for the mediating role of interpretations (and hence of social knowledge and context) in television's effects on viewers' social reality beliefs, and for the inappropriateness of talking of <u>the</u> message or the meanings <u>in</u> a program. However, more theoretical work is required if, as proposed by Fry and Fry (1986), among others, research is to move towards:

"an orientation that places total power neither in the media text (as has been

implicit in some semiotic textual analyses) nor in the interpretive capacities of the audience member (a position that has been often implicit in the uses and gratifications approach). Thus a semiotic model must address the question of the relative power of both the text and audience in determining the meaning of media texts" (Fry & Fry, 1986, p. 444).

Specifically, several issues are raised by the present research which demand attention. These concern primarily the types of interpretive divergence which may exist and the relationship between the interpretations and the text. The following discussion uses the interpretations revealed in this study to illustrate some of the conceptual problems and issues facing research on the role of the viewer in determining the meanings of programs.

What kinds of divergence are to be expected? While all would agree that Ken opposed the marriage of Susan and Mike, viewers clearly 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. In relation to both connotation and ideology, the concept of the role of the reader/viewer comes into its own. The present research found that viewers diverge in their interpretations in relation to perspective taken, evaluative judgments of characters' actions, inferred cognitions which lie behind the actions, and predictions about future events, but not about inferred motives or the relative importance of two of the characters (Ken and Susan) over the other two (Deidre and Mike). Is this a general phenomenon, are there additional areas of textual interpretation, and how might different theories of textual analysis predict the loci of divergence? Although it often seems easier to assess the amount rather than types of divergence in interpretations, the question of the relative power of viewer and text to determine meanings requires a structural account of the role of the viewer (e.g. inferential strategies, attributional reasoning) in relation to the structure of the text (e.g. areas of openness, mechanisms of closure).

How should the four interpretive positions be understood in relation to the program: is one the dominant or preferred reading (Hall, 1980) and one the oppositional reading? This issue bears on that of the relative power of text and viewer, for if one interpretation corresponds to the preferred reading and one is oppositional, it would seem that for the first, the text has more power in constructing meanings whereas the second group of viewers critically distance themselves from the text. Before addressing this issue, let us consider what alternative results could have been obtained.

At least four alternatives exist: no clear cluster structure, as either each viewer makes a different interpretation or all viewers agree with each other; a heavy majority for one reading (maybe the cynical one); a polarised division between romantics and cynics with few or no negotiated readings; interpretations determined by age and/or sex of viewers; and so forth. Yet four clusters emerged, ranging from cynical to romantic, with two distinct negotiated positions.

Two thirds of the viewers adopted one of the romantic interpretations, believing the couple to be truly in love and that the marriage will overcome any problems and last forever. Yet content analysis has repeatedly demonstrated that soap opera marriages frequently end in divorce and that

'true love' is often illusory, deceitful, and temporary (Cantor & Pingree, 1983; Cassata & Skill, 1983). People's apparent faith in romance despite the evidence fits with their description of romance novels as "a man and a woman meeting, the problems they encounter, whether the relationship will gel or not" (Radway, 1985, p. 344). As in this genre, in contrast with the soap opera, relationships always 'gel' without exception, the perception of uncertainty must be a construction of the reader. 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 study 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.

It is arguable that, given the nature of soap opera as a genre (note 5), the dominant reading inscribed in the text studied here is the cynical reading, with its emphasis on the naivity of young love and the fragility of relationships. It would then seem that the majority of viewers persist in the romantic, oppositional reading (note 6). This supports Alexander's (1985) explanation (see earlier) for her absence of a cultivation effect in relation to soap opera viewers' beliefs about relational fragility. This fits with the present results, which suggest that most viewers interpret narratives romantically. They would thus become further enculturated into a romantic perspective (rather than one of relational fragility, as Alexander tested) by seeing this 'romance' played out. Further, when combined with the third of viewers making the contrasting interpretation, no clear effect on social reality beliefs would emerge from a cultivation study which did not differentiate among viewers according to their interpretations of the program.

The present research illustrates a problem in relating interpretations to textual structure, for this involves specifying the nature of the text. How far is one reading favored, another precluded, and a third made difficult by textual organisation? There are problems in assigning the viewer clusters to these categories of dominant, oppositional and negotiated (Hall, 1980; Morley, 1980; Morley, 1981) despite the existence of opposed, internally coherent interpretations. Further, 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. Although they represent a rejection of and distance from one dominant ideological reading, 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 & Katz, 1986). The two intermediate positions can be more straightforwardly see to make negotiated readings. Yet the meaning of a negotiated reading depends on one's conception of the extreme readings between which it falls. Need the negotiation be between a dominant and an oppositional reading, or can it be applied also to a compromise between two dominant but contradictory discourses? In this sense, the negotiated readings expose the existence of incompatible yet dominant discourses centering on the same phenomenon and possibly they represent an attempt to reconcile the two.

A further problem revealed by the present research is that the concept of

a preferred reading confounds the idea of a majority reading by the audience with the idea of an ideologically normative reading. The narrative studied here suggests that a text may contain two normative, although opposed, readings, or even that the majority (here, the romantics) may make an alternative interpretation from the preferred reading (here, arguably the cynical position). This suggests a view of the text is required in which a number of normative alternatives are encoded, so that different viewers may select different readings and yet remain within a dominant framework. It also suggests the need for a view of divergence which is not simply a function of critical distance from the text, for the text is open to a number of referential readings. Thus, the opposed readings epitomized by the romantics and cynics each draw upon traditional, dominant rhetoric about gender relations, responsibilities and morality. More generally, despite interest in subversive or feminist interpretations of soap opera (Ang, 1985; Seiter, 1981), it seems that much interpretive divergence will reflect conventional rather than radical positions. .pa

<div align="center">Notes</div>

Note 1: Earlier research (Livingstone, in press) has shown that, in general, regular viewers of Coronation Street perceive the characters in terms of the general themes or oppositions of morality/power, gender, and approach to life. On these dimensions, the characters central to this narrative are perceived as follows. Ken: very moral (even staid) and weak, neither masculine nor feminine, fairly traditional (and not sexy) in his approach to life; Mike: very dominant and immoral (or roguish), very masculine, modern (and sexy) in his approach to life; Deidre: very moral (and staid) and weak, fairly feminine (and mature and warm), somewhat modern (and sexy) in her approach to life. Unfortunately, this study was conducted before Susan had returned to live with the Barlow's. Nonetheless, it is clear from this study that Ken and Mike are quite opposed characters who are bound to clash over moral/sexual issues, while Deidre is in the middle, being similar to Ken in her moral position and relative weakness, while closer to Mike in her approach to life.

Note 2: The aim of the present analysis was to discover the natural clusters of viewers in the data. As the number and size of these clusters was of theoretical interest, as well as the nature of the clusters, the DENSITY procedure was run to its first stage, and then checked using the RELOCATE procedure. Four dense points were found in the data. After relocation, these four clusters were modified iteratively until a stable solution resulted. To check the stability of this solution further, the data were entered into a K-MEANS clustering algorithm, by using the RELOCATE procedure with the random start option. In this procedure, the relocation of objects to clusters is started from the random allocation of objects to a large number of clusters. A comparison of the two solutions, the random start and the density solution, provides an index of the stability of the solutions and is recommended as standard procedure (Wishart, 1978). The comparison between the density solution and the random start solution continued to the four cluster level revealed agreement of 65.2% in allocation of objects to clusters. On examination of the solutions, most of the disagreement was due
to one of the clusters in the random start solution. When this was fused with another cluster, producing a 3 cluster solution, this solution was 80.3% in agreement with the density solution. Consequently, the density solution was

adopted for further analysis and was considered stable.

Note 3: chi-square comparing these two clusters by sex = 4.86, d.f. = 1, p<0.05).

Note 4: chi-square comparing these two clusters by recognition for Susan = 6.48, d.f. = 1, p<0.025 and for Mike = 4.07, d.f. = 1, p<0.05.

Note 5: See Allen (1985) and Cantor & Pingree (1983) on the relative impermanence of soap opera relationships and the structural importance of this in perpetuating an endless interweaving of narratives with a fixed set of characters.

Note 6: That the narrative studied here is typical of the genre is supported by the recent breakdown of the marriage.

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Table 1: Thirty statements concerning narrative interpretation, showing mean agreement(a) for each cluster of viewers

		R	NR	NC	C(b)
		n=20	n=25	n=9	n=12
01	Susan was right to disappoint her father for Mike's sake	4.40	3.88	3.67	2.75 *(c)
02	Ken acted reasonably, doing what he thought best for Susan	1.90	2.20	3.33	4.50 *
03	Susan's behavior throughout was mature	3.50	2.84	3.67	2.92
04	Ken put his feelings for Mike before his feelings for Susan	4.65	4.44	3.78	3.58*
05	Until he met Susan, Mike had had no desire to marry and settle down	3.00	2.52	2.22	3.58
06	When Ken finally gave Susan away, he still thought he had been right to oppose the marriage	4.15	4.32	4.33	4.75
07	Susan and Mike's marriage will last	3.25	2.88	2.89	1.75*
08	Ken was right to oppose the marriage	1.90	2.12	3.22	4.83*
09	Deidre was more supportive of Ken than of Mike and Susan	2.45	2.84	2.78	3.17
10	Susan sees Mike more as a father-figure than as a husband	2.15	3.40	2.11	3.67 *
11	Ken's feelings for Susan stem more from his guilt about her childhood than from love	3.15	3.36	3.22	3.25
12	Mike and Susan are right for each other	2.00	2.84	2.78	4.00 *
13	Deidre told Ken she would support Susan for Tracy's sake, but this was just an excuse to do what she wanted	2.80	3.08	2.89	3.17
14	Mike's feeling for Susan stems partly from revenge, to get back at Deidre	1.50	2.28	1.56	2.33
15	Susan's youth is important to Mike: he would not love her if she were older	2.15	2.72	1.89	3.00
16	Susan does not truly love Mike, she only thinks she does	1.65	2.88	2.33	3.25*
17	The marriage will have problems because of the age difference	2.40	3.16	2.44	3.75 *
18	Mike thinks Susan is a better person than she really is	2.00	3.04	2.22	3.58 *
19	After the honeymoon, Susan will not work and will have a baby	2.55	3.28	2.89	2.42
20	Susan and Mike can overcome any problems they encounter	3.85	2.88	3.00	2.08 *

Table 1 (contd.)

		R	NR	NC	C	
21	Susan determined to marry Mike to show Ken she is an adult	2.80	3.48	2.22	3.83	*
22	Ken acted unreasonably: he was vindictive and possessive	4.20	4.40	2.78	2.50	*
23	Deidre was jealous of Susan marrying Mike	1.70	2.68	2.33	2.67	
24	Until she met Mike, Susan had had no desire to marry and settle down	3.35	3.56	3.44	3.92	
25	Mike sees Susan more as a mistress than as a wife	1.90	2.56	2.00	2.92	
26	Mike's money and success are important to Susan: she would not love him without them	2.00	2.84	1.56	3.08	*
27	The marriage will have problems as Mike won't like being tied down	2.50	3.24	2.67	3.67	
28	Susan thinks that Mike is a better person than he really is	2.35	3.64	2.78	4.25	*
29	Mike does not truly love Susan, he only thinks he does	1.65	2.76	2.22	3.75	*
30	Deidre's behavior was weak and she could not decide what to do or who to support	2.45	3.28	2.00	2.92	

(a) Agreement ratings on a five-point scale (5=strongly agree)

(b) R = romantic
     NR = negotiated romantic
     NC = negotiated cynic
     C = cynic

(c) * = analysis of variance significant at $p < 0.001$

Table 2: Analyses of variance for variables of character identification(a), evaluation, and sympathy, by cluster membership

	R	NR	NC	C (b)
Self rated as similar to:				
Deidre	2.00	1.88	2.44	1.67
Mike	1.30	1.88	1.78	1.17* (c)
Ken	1.30	1.72	1.78	2.83***
Susan	2.05	2.04	2.56	1.83
Rated liking of:				
Deidre	3.20	2.72	2.89	3.33
Mike	3.10	2.92	2.67	2.25
Ken	1.70	1.88	2.56	3.67***
Susan	3.15	2.76	3.11	2.83
Rated sympathy with:				
Deidre	3.85	3.36	3.44	3.83
Mike	3.75	3.16	3.11	1.92***
Ken	1.65	2.36	3.11	4.00***
Susan	4.45	3.48	4.11	2.50***

(a) high score = high similarity, liking etc.

(b) NC = negotiated cynics
     R = romantics
     NR = negotiated romantics
     C = cynics

(c) * = $p < 0.05$ ** = $p < 0.01$ *** = $p < 0.001$