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AUDIENCE RECEPTION:
THE ROLE OF THE VIEWER IN RETELLING ROMANTIC DRAMA

Rethinking the audience

There are many ways of conceptualising the television audience, from the populist view of a discriminating, heterogenous audience to the elitist view of a mindless, passive mass. Each approach carries particular implications for conceptualizing the role of the viewer, the nature of programmes, and the consequences of viewing television. Each raises different issues to be studied and suggests appropriate methodologies. Consider the following quotations:

"The power of the media [is] to define normal and abnormal social and political activity, to say what is politically real and legitimate and what is not" (Gitlin, 1978, p.205)

"In its role as central cultural medium it [television] presents a multiplicity of meanings rather than a monolithic dominant point of view...the raising of questions is as important as the answering of them" (Newcomb and Hirsch, 1984, p.62-3)

"The longer we live with television, the more invisible it becomes...The mass ritual that is television shows no signs of weakening its hold over the common symbolic environment into which our children are born and in which we all live out our lives" (Gerbner, Morgan and Signorielli, 1986, p.17)

"Television viewing is constructed by family members; it doesn't just happen. Viewers not only make their own interpretations of shows, they also construct the situations in which viewing takes place and the ways in which acts of viewing, and program content, are put to use.....It is through talk about television that the audience is constituted in certain ways" (Lull, 1988, p.17)

"Effects [of television viewing] occur in each one of the various fields, but not to such a degree that the children would have been fundamentally changed. Television, then, is not as black as it is painted, but neither is it the great harbinger of culture and enlightenment which its enthusiasts tend to claim for it" (Himmelweit, Oppenheim and Vince, 1958, p.40)

"Audience members confront their experience actively, taking from it in accordance with the particular gratifications they pursue and the perceived abilities of the various media sources to satisfy these gratifications" (Palmgreen, Wenner and Rosengren, 1985, p.23)

These writers generally agree on the importance of television in our daily lives. Yet they disagree markedly on most or all of the major dimensions of audience analysis: in their conceptions of the audience (either active or passive, vulnerable or resistant), of the programme (as a resource for diverse motivations or a normative pressure on all, as comprised of literal or

hidden meanings--moral, symbolic, behavioural, or referential), of the processes of effects (either audience selectivity or 'hypodermic' imposition, as mediated by motivation or cognition, imitation or questioning), of the nature of effects (ideological, symbolic, belief-based, or behavioural), of the level of effects (individual, familial, social mainstreaming, or political), and of the appropriate methods for study (ethnography, survey, experiment, text analysis, or social commentary). Any similarly ad hoc selection of quotations from influential mass media researchers would have revealed just such a diversity of approaches.

In this paper, I will consider a recent approach to the television audience--empirical reception research--and its implications for conceptualizing the text, viewing context, and effects. Informed by a long history of theoretical debates, and taking on board some of the contradictions between active audiences and dominant messages, or directive texts and resourceful readers, empirical reception research offers an integrating, convergent approach to the television audience. This approach focuses on the viewers' active interpretation--or meaning negotiation--of television programmes, where these are increasingly analyzed within their everyday context. Empirical reception research regards viewers' interpretations as primary, seeking to relate these to ethnographic and to effects-related concerns at a later stage. The omission of interpretative issues is seen to have impoverished other approaches to the audience, and yet the study of such issues itself raises numerous problems.

As Katz notes, following his discussion of effects research, we must still ask ourselves:

> "what is the text? Where do values inhere? Who is the viewer addressed by the text? Who is the viewer in fact? What role is he or she playing? What is the immediate viewing context? What is the nature of the society within which the viewer is decoding the message?" (Katz, 1988, p.367)

The approach which informs these questions seeks to apply a literary critical, reader-reception orientation to traditional problems of the television audience, recasting these problems into the new framework. Not only should we ask what readers do to texts or how texts direct readers but also the dynamic between text and reader should be addressed. How do both reader and text embody a set of expectations of the other which inform this dynamic? How do actual, empirical readers differ from researchers' expectations of the ideal or model reader? How can theories of audience and text analysis be integrated without underestimating either the role of the reader or the complexity of programme meanings, as has traditionally occurred when text and reader (or, roughly, critical and administrative mass communications research) are separated (Katz, 1988)?

Reader-oriented approaches to audience reception

To regard television programmes as texts and television viewers as readers is to draw on literary critical developments termed 'reception-aesthetics' in Europe (Hohendahl, 1974; Holub, 1984) and 'reader-response theory' in America (Suleiman and Crosman, 1980; Tompkins, 1980). One main proponent of reception theory outlines the central proposition:

> "The work itself cannot be identical with the text or with its actualization but must be situated somewhere between the two. It must inevitably be virtual in character, as it cannot be reduced to the reality of the text or to the subjectivity of the reader, and it is from this virtuality that it derives its dynamism. As the

reader passes through the various perspectives offered by the text, and relates the different views and patterns to one another, he sets the work in motion, and so sets himself in motion too" (Iser, 1980, p.106)

Eco (1979) uses the concept of code to analyze the 'role of the reader', arguing that the existence of this role itself undermines structuralist theories of what he terms the 'crystalline text':

"The existence of various codes and subcodes, the variety of sociocultural circumstances in which a message is emitted (where the codes of the addressee can be different from those of the sender) and the rate of initiative displayed by the addressee in making presuppositions and abductions–all result in making a message...an empty form to which various possible senses can be attributed" (p. 5)

He too, emphasises the dialectic between text and reader:

"A well-organised text on the one hand presupposes a model of competence coming, so to speak, from outside the text, but on the other hand works to build up, by merely textual means, such a competence" (p.8)

Emphasis is shifted from an analysis of the meanings 'in' the text, central to the text-based approaches to television programmes, to an analysis of the process of reading a text. Thus the meanings which are activated on reading depend on the interaction between text and reader. Reception theory has developed within literary criticism as an alternative means of analyzing literature (or 'high culture'), to the elitist and static analyses of structural approaches. Applying reception theory to the television audience involves two key theoretical moves, that from high to popular culture, and that from ideal or model readers to actual, empirical readers. The former move is moderately uncontentious, although some literary critics would argue that analytic concepts are overstretched in the extension to popular texts, tending to exaggerate their literary merits. The latter move is more radical, as it demands empirical research, with all the epistemological and methodological problems which are thereby introduced.

Certainly model or ideal readers (Eco, 1979; Iser, 1980; see also Holub, 1984) were originally conceived as analytic devices, ways of accommodating the polysemic, open, and context-dependent aspects of meaning within a text, and ways of recognising the particular inscription of a reader (or subject position) within a text as central to its meaning. The advocates of empirical reception research would, however, argue that while the readers and readings of literature may be known and available, thus obviating the need for empirical research (Culler, 1981), those of popular culture are largely unknown and require investigation. Implicitly if not explicitly, we are still tackling the thorny question of effects. Having argued that texts are dynamic, that meanings are context-dependent, and that readings may be divergent, we must study the activities of actual audiences in order to know how they interpret programmes, within what contexts and with what interpretative resources they view television, and how and why they diverge in their readings. The direct link between the meanings inherent in the text and the consequent effects of those meanings on the audience has been broken, not only because viewers may choose which programmes or programme segments to watch or because texts may target

different audiences, but also because the same 'virtual' text may mean different things to different audiences. As this is not a wholly variable or random process, but is constrained in important ways by cognitive, motivational, ideological, textual and contextual factors, empirical research is needed.

Convergence in audience research

Empirical reception research--"a new and exciting phase in so-called audience research" (Hall, 1980, p.131)--has opened the way for communication between traditional or administrative researchers and those from the critical or cultural studies school. There is no doubt that the traditional approach can offer a range of methods for the empirical study of television audiences (Schroder, 1987), despite some limitations in dealing with complex interpretative and ideological issues (Carey, 1985). These methods are much needed by critical scholars feeling their way into empirical audience research. On the other hand, traditional audience researchers have tended to underestimate the complexity and, especially, the polysemic, open and conventional aspects of programmes considered as texts rather than stimuli (van Dijk, 1987). Although critical research has tended to ignore, presume, or underestimate the interpretative activity of the audience (see Fejes', 1984, 'disappearing audience' in critical mass communications), the text, too, must not be allowed to disappear (Blumler, et al., 1985). These hitherto opposed approaches may instead be seen as complementary and mutually challenging, each provoking the other to face neglected problems.

In the 'export of meaning' project, Katz and Liebes (1986, 1990) examined the issue of cultural imperialism through empirical research on the reception of the popular primetime drama, Dallas, by diverse cultural groups. They analyzed focus group discussions held during and after viewing an episode of Dallas in people's own homes. Analysis of Dallas reveals basic cultural themes which structure the programme (such as lineage, inheritance, sibling rivalry, property, sex and marriage) which may account for the programme's popularity. While these may have suggested a common reception by the audience, the empirical audience study found that viewers of different social and cultural backgrounds generated very divergent interpretations of the 'same' episode. For example, Russian Jews were found to make ideological readings centred on the moral and political messages underlying the narratives, while Americans focused on personalities and motivations to make their readings coherent, and Moroccan Arabs were concerned with event sequencing and narrative continuity (Liebes and Katz, 1986). Each groups' reading was clearly based upon and constrained by the text, and yet the interaction between cultural resources and textual openness permitted the negotiation of quite different readings on viewing the episode.

Morley's study (1980, 1981) of audience readings or decodings of the current affairs magazine, Nationwide, revealed how audiences diverged along political lines in their interpretations as a function of their socio-economic or labour position (see Corner, this volume, for a discussion of the importance of this work for the reception project). These readings were more or less legitimated or 'preferred' by the text (Hall, 1980), with the dominant or normative readings of, for example, bank managers or schoolboys, being most consistent with the major assumptions and frameworks of the text, while the positions of the trainee teachers or trade union officials were somewhat inconsistent or negotiated. Still other groups, for example shop stewards, took a clearly oppositional position, using the resources of the text to construct a reading quite unintended by the text, though nonetheless reasonable in terms of both text and reader. Only a few viewers could not connect with the text at all (for example, black further

education students) and remained alienated from it as the text did not afford them a reading congruent with their own cultural position--in the Export of Meaning project, it was the Japanese who occupied this position (Katz, Iwao and Liebes, 1988). While Katz and Liebes examined the role of cultural variation in decoding (see also Silj, 1988, for a comparison of audience decodings of popular dramas in different European countries), and Morley considered socioeconomic or class factors (see also Buckingham, 1987, for an analysis of the readings of EastEnders viewers of different classes and race), other researchers have focused on the role of gender as a source of codes which inform the active 'role of the reader' (for example, Ang, 1985; Hobson, 1982; Seiter et al., 1987).

Viewers may diverge not only from each other but also from critics' expectations when interpreting popular culture. This strengthens the case for empirical research, and necessitates caution in making purely textual analyses. For example, Radway (1984, 1985) contrasts the readings of popular romance novels made by ordinary women readers compared to those of literary critics. She notes that "different readers read differently because they belong to what are known as various interpretive communities, each of which acts upon print differently and for different purposes" (Radway, 1985, p.341). For example, she shows how the women emphasise literal meaning and the factual nature of language in preference to narrative consistency (preferred by the critics) when the two conflict. Although the heroine, initially described as strong and independent, ultimately is shown to submit to her hero's demands, the feminist criticism is resisted by readers in favour of an alternative (also feminist?) reading in which the heroine subtly manages to win over her hero unbeknownst to him, thus revealing her true strength, as stated at the outset.

There are various ways, analytically, of integrating text and reader. If we examine empirical reception research to date, much of it adopts an implicitly content analytic approach which undermines its explicit emphasis on semiotic or textual rather than stimulus-bound conceptions of television programmes. In other words, text and reader are considered together by prioritising the text and then asking how readers fit into this structure--asking, for example, whether readers match or conflict with textual meanings or, which aspects of the text, analyzed a priori, are reflected in audience readings. The 'texts of experience' may contribute to interpretation mainly in a 'slot-filling' capacity, where gaps to be filled are specified by the 'skeletal' structure of the text (Iser, 1980) rather than by the reader's concerns. The reader or viewer tends to become fragmented by such analysis, with coherence in the reading sacrificed in favour of textual coherence. Interestingly, the psychology of textual interpretation reverses this bias. The reader's resources are conceived in terms of schemata which provide integrative, knowledge-based frameworks for active interpretation and which leave gaps or slots to be filled according to the particularities of the text. As I have argued elsewhere (Livingstone, 1991), this opens the way for an analysis of the reader's sociocognitive resources which frame and direct the processes of reading a text. Such sociocognitive resources (Fiske and Taylor, 1984) might involve narrative knowledge such as story grammars (Mandler, 1984), character knowledge such as stereotypes or person prototypes (Cantor and Mischel, 1979), and explanatory or attributional knowledge (Kelley, 1972). Theorising the role of the viewer in this way precludes being able to predict audience readings from an analysis of the text alone, without implying that these readings are entirely unpredictable or idiosyncratic. However, a truly dynamic and mutually defining conception of text and reader seems still to be lacking in this area.

A case study in narrative interpretation

We will now consider some of the ways in which viewers take an active, interpretative role in making sense of television drama, and the importance of recognising the coherent and structured nature of audience readings will be illustrated. Regular viewers of the enormously popular, long-running British soap opera, <u>Coronation Street</u>, were asked to tell, in their own words, the story in which, as rumour had it, "Ken was becoming too interested in Sally as a woman, instead of simply his secretary" (Livingstone, 1990a, 1991). In fact, the affair between Ken and Sally was never consummated, and Ken, a central character and a middle-aged journalist, returned to his wife, Deirdre. The text is analyzed in Livingstone (1990a). The method of retelling has been variously used in audience research. Bartlett's (1932) early studies on remembering used the game of 'Chinese whispers', or serial retellings of a narrative, to examine the selection, framing and organisation of material in accordance with memorial (or perceptual) principles. The principles which he identified derive from Gestalt psychology–for example, emphasis on the gist rather than the trivial, completion of gaps, omission of the unfamiliar, or insertion of connecting inferences (Kohler, 1930). A similar concern with the holistic and dynamic operation of schemata lead to the development of reception-aesthetics in literary criticism. The ways in which people relate a narrative reveals the implicit operation of their interpretative processes. Only a few analyses of actual audience interpretations have been conducted within the empirical reception framework. We may still ask what viewers' readings look like, how they relate their own experiences and knowledge to the structures of the text or genre, how programmes constrain their readings, what, in short, is the 'role of the viewer'? In the present case, while most viewers wrote rather shorter stories than that presented below, this one story raises many important points for discussion. Other stories or retellings will be referred to subsequently (see also Liebes, 1986, and Livingstone, 1991). All viewers had watched the episodes at the time of transmission and before any knowledge of the interview. They then recalled their stories when they met the researcher, over a year after they had watched the episodes. We might note here that the very fact that people remember stories over so long a period is evidence of the importance of the programme in people's lives and, most significant from the viewpoint of reception research, it suggests the substantial fund of memories surrounding each character upon which viewers must surely draw when interpreting a current episode. Indeed, in a previous study (Livingstone, 1990a), viewers could recall stories reaching back over the twenty five year history of <u>Coronation Street</u>. Here then is one viewer's account, that of a twenty five year old woman:

> "As far as the relationship between Ken and Sally was concerned, not a lot really happened. 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. Prior to this he had taken her to the Rovers several times for a drink/meal etc. supposedly to discuss a story. He told her how he felt about her. His feelings for her were obviously much stronger than hers for him and she seemed rather taken aback that he could feel so strongly for her, but also rather flattered. She seemed to have been flirting with a number of the characters in the Rovers and Ken was just one more. Nothing much more happened between Ken and Sally as they decided to take things no further. I think Ken was afraid to go further and Sally wasn't really that interested in Ken. Also, I think Ken really didn't want to split up with Deirdre, and break up yet another marriage, and face all the rumour and gossip.

"Deirdre was too suspicious from the start. She began to suspect Sally and Ken long before anything was actually going on between them and she misinterpreted a number of quite innocent occurrences. Things were not going too well between her and Ken at home as he was busy working to get his newspaper established was not giving her as much time and attention as she demanded and she did not seem 100% certain that running the newspaper was a good job for him. Then she began listening to rumours and gossip and instead of confronting Ken and asking straight out what was happening bottled up all her feelings inside her.

"At this time Billy Walker had returned to (visit his mother?) and help with the pub for a while. He was an old boyfriend of Deirdre's and started paying her compliments, buying her drinks, etc. and I think she was flattered by this attention. He was also drinking a lot and gambling a lot at this time, particularly with Mike Baldwin. He was going through some sort of financial crisis back in Jersey and was in a very unhappy and uncertain frame of mind. Mike and Billy became rivals in the gambling and also over Deirdre because Mike, too, started paying Deirdre a lot of attention. In the end, Billy lost out because he was drinking too much and getting himself in a dreadful state. The field was left open for Mike, Deirdre being very upset about what she heard about Sally and Ken.

"Mike took Deirdre out and wined and dined her. She had told Ken that she was seeing an old girlfriend. As they sat in the car late at night at the end of the evening at the end of the street away from the Barlow's house they were spotted by Hilda Ogden. Then a few nights later Mike turned up on Deirdre's doorstep asking her to go away with him. The episode ended and we waited with baited breath until the following Monday to see what would happen. The popular press had a field day.

"It was all an anti-climax she and Ken did not split up. There was a showdown with Mike in the Barlow's house. Ken and Deirdre ended up going away for a holiday to patch things up. Later, Sally was written out of the series when she wrote a story for another newspaper when Ken had refused to print it in his own - so honour was satisfied!"

Let us consider this narrative. Consistent with the conventions of the soap opera genre, the beginning is very open, with a gradual development of events and no clear starting point. The romantic frame is then introduced with a description of the key event, the kiss, which drives subsequent events. The focus is on feelings rather than actions, with a readiness to speculate about each character's emotions so as to provide coherence and purpose to otherwise mundane events ("not a lot really happened...I think Ken was afraid to go further...I think Ken really didn't want to split up with Deirdre", and so forth). The account recognises two simultaneous levels: first, visible actions and actual events and second, hidden feelings and beliefs about events (as in Deirdre's 'misinterpretation' of innocent events, her bottled up feelings, or the lies which both Ken and Deirdre tell each other).

The viewer draws on knowledge of (much) earlier episodes to provide background

explanations for present motives. This knowledge may concern both general representations (Livingstone, 1989) and specific knowledge, for example that Billy was Deirdre's old boyfriend. On this basis, each key action can be accounted for: Sally's generally flirtatious personality explains her actions, Deirdre and Ken's 'shaky' marriage is invoked to account for their present troubles, Billy's business crises are drawn in, and so on. The apparent contradiction between "not much happening" and "waiting with bated breath" which characterises the peculiar tension of soap opera is captured in the retelling. The many inferences about motivation and personality play a central role here not only in generating coherence but also in creating multiple narrative possibilities despite the predictable nature of actual events. These inferences not only create coherence for the present narrative, but also they maintain coherence with past narratives and they generate expectations for the future. As more characters are drawn into the picture, a complex set of interconnecting links--retrospective, inferential, and predictive--is established in the mind of the viewer (Iser, 1980).

In this retelling, the focus moves from Deirdre's suspicions and misinterpretations to her vulnerability and distress, our sympathies switch from Ken to Deirdre, thus altering our interpretative frame on subsequent events (Livingstone, 1990b). This sets the scene for the morally satisfying return to justice represented by the second affair of the narrative, that between Deirdre and Mike, which balances the relationship between Ken and Sally. Again typical of soap opera, this affair is unproblematic until brought into the public domain by Hilda, the community gossip. The resulting tension, culminating when Mike turns up on Deirdre's doorstep to take her away (happily ever after?), is such that the referential frame is broken (Liebes and Katz, 1986, 1990), and the viewer inserts both her own response and that of the nation as a whole (viewing figures for this episode, as she was aware, exceeded half of the British population).

Once again, having hooked its audience the genre offers an anticlimax, although as the cursory nature of this viewer's concluding paragraph reveals, this is unimportant. The build-up of tension and the viewers' involvement, not the events, is what counts. In contrast to the openness of the beginning, possible because the focus was on the rather dull Ken/Sally story, the dramatic tension of the retelling generated from the Deirdre/Mike story is resolved by the imposition of closure onto the ending of the narrative. Although "Ken and Deirdre ended up going away for a holiday to patch things up" sounds plausible, in the programme, the holiday actually occurred in the middle of the narrative. This was during the lack of communication between Ken and Deirdre, being intended to establish that nothing was really wrong, and was, of course, a dismal failure, barely interrupting the continued marital crisis. Further, the events in the programme tailed away as vaguely as they had begun, satisfying genre conventions if not viewer expectations.

Structurally, this retelling falls neatly into the categories of a traditional, romantic or heroic, folk tale (van Dijk, 1987; Propp, 1968). The first paragraph outlines the setting, location and characters, and generally orients us towards the romantic concerns of the narrative. Paragraph two elaborates the problem, or challenge to the status quo, namely the difficulties of a shaky marriage. Next, we have the complications resulting from the community context within which events are located, as other characters with their own problems become involved, adding different perspectives on the central events. Fourthly, a resolution attempt is made, as Mike and Deirdre begin their affair. This, it is hoped, redresses the inequity of Deirdre's rejection by rewarding her (and us, the viewers) with true love and allowing her to escape an unsatisfactory marriage and create a new, happier marriage. Finally, the resolution attempt fails, the original

marriage is restored, the 'other woman' is removed, and the reestablishment of order is celebrated: "honour was satisfied".

In fact, for 'facts' have their place in analyzing viewers' interpretations, Deirdre and Mike's affair pre-dated that of Ken and Sally by several years in <u>Coronation Street</u>! Plausible and morally satisfying though the above account is, it would be more true to say that Ken considered his affair with Sally as a result of Deirdre's famous affair with Mike, possibly from revenge or hurt pride. Not, of course, that this is more true for our viewer. For her, the affairs occurred in reverse sequence, and thus Deirdre's affair was justifiable rather than reprehensible: the misused wife gets her own back. The moral force of a retelling, with its implications for justice, victims, and social conventions, has a logic of its own.

Genre, romance, and the soap opera

The analysis of audience reception has typically focused on two main genres, the news or current affairs programmes and the romance or soap opera. Corner (this volume) argues that, as different issues are addressed in analysing these two genres, two separate, though related, projects may be said to exist, a 'public knowledge' project and a 'popular culture' project respectively.

Both the fictional and nonfictional forms have been seen, initially at least, to exemplify textual closure. In the case of the news genre, a traditional focus for research, this closure may be construed as either ideological or didactic in motive, and so reception issues concern whether or not people's readings match those intended, and if not, how the different readings are to be explained. In the case of romance and soap opera, the main subject of this paper and a relatively recent research topic, the importance of textual (and ideological closure) is much debated. Traditionally, this genre (or cluster of related genres) has been seen as ideologically closed, in that it is concerned to indulge fantasy, to redirect attention from the political to the personal, to legitimate normative or conservative judgments and expectations, and so forth. More recently, however, in order to account for its immense appeal, especially to women, some authors have argued for the openness of the genre and, additionally, for the subversive or alternative feminist subtext of the genre (Allen, 1985; Fiske, 1987; Livingstone, 1990a; Seiter, 1981). As Corner (this volume) notes, this reevaluation of popular culture brings advantages in reconceptualizing the text which could fruitfully be applied also to the public knowledge project, but it introduces an uncertainty regarding the long-standing problem of influence, for this issue becomes confused when texts become more open and viewers more active, a point to which I return in my conclusions.

The soap opera genre has been considered open insofar as its narratives are unbounded, weaving in and out of each other over time, its narratives are multiple, with no single hero and hence no prioritized moral perspective. Consequently a diversity of readings are legitimized and the interplay and contradictions between them form part of the appeal. More broadly, both the romance and the soap opera have been considered as countering or undermining the 'masculine' ethos of most popular culture, especially primetime television with its certainties, consistencies and plot linearity, by providing a female voice and a feminine or feminist form (Ang, 1985; Curti, 1988; Fiske, 1987). For Kuhn (1984), soap operas construct a 'gendered spectatorship' which may transcend patriarchal modes of subjectivity in a way compatible with a feminist aesthetic. As a consequence, reception research in both the news and romance genres has been concerned with revealing multiple or alternative readings of supposedly normative texts. The research has focused on issues of narrative structure, openness and closure, identification and the subject

position, active and passive constructions of meaning, realist and romantic conventions, social contexts of viewing, pleasure and, implicitly at least, effects.

We should note at this point that the genre of soap opera is itself a complex hybrid of several older forms. Feuer (1984) stresses the similarities between the genre of melodrama and that of soap opera, noting the role in both of such features as moral polarization, strong emotions, the personalization of ideological conflict, interiorization, female-orientation, and excess. Consideration of the literary romance reveals a further origin, as this emphasises "the themes of love and adventure, a certain withdrawal from their own societies on the part of both reader and romance hero, profuse sensuous detail, simplified characters (often with a suggestion of allegorical significance), a serene intermingling of the unexpected and the everyday, a complex and prolonged succession of incidents usually without a single climax, a happy ending, amplitude of proportions, a strongly enforced code of conduct to which all the characters must comply" (Beer, 1970, p.10). Some, although not all, of this can be applied to the television drama, including the soap opera. However, Beer also notes that "all fiction contains two primary impulses: the impulse to imitate daily life and the impulse to transcend it" (p.10). These are often confused, so that, for example, the ways in which soap opera conforms to the romance genre, transcending everyday life, are often misinterpreted as biases when using content analysis to reveal programme meanings, for this method focuses solely on the realist or referential aims of soap opera. These latter aims are nonetheless important. The ways in which soap opera represents everyday life, frequently perceived and appreciated by its audience (Livingstone, 1988), support Jordan's analysis of the soap opera as importantly influenced by the British social realist tradition. The influence of the 'kitchen sink' dramas of the 1950s and 1960s, which originated at the same time as the long-running British soap operas, helps to account for the differences between the British and American soap operas (Livingstone, 1988; Liebes and Livingstone, in press). This social realist influence also accounts for the differences between soap opera and present-day continuations of the popular romance tradition, for example the Mills and Boon or Harlequin romance novels (Radway, 1984), for in soap operas there are no knight in shining armour, or happy ever after endings and there is, instead, a heavy emphasis on contemporary social problems, particularly in the British soap operas.

The issue of genre is an important one for reception theory (see Corner's discussion of genre, this volume). Grant (1970) discusses realism in terms of the contract established between the writer and reality. One might also consider the contract established with the reader. For Dubrow, genre "functions much like a code of behaviour established between the author and his reader" (1982, p.2). It sets up expectations, it bears complex and possibly contradictory relations to other genres or codes, its conventions are historically and socially located. Dubrow argues that reader-response criticism may profitably reveal the expectations which specific, located readers apply to different genres, thus undermining the critic's tendency to see genres as absolute, consistent and deterministic. The analysis of readers' expectations of genres is important not only for our understanding of genre, but also for understanding the role of the reader in interpreting texts. Genre knowledge is one resource on which readers draw. It frames their general approach to the text, determines the types of inferential connections to be made, and establishes the paradigms of possibilities at each narrative choice point. Viewers' retellings of the soap opera narrative discussed above reveal the use of genre knowledge. For example, viewers drew inferences about the characters' motivations to lend coherence to their narratives, using frameworks which, whether construed as romantic or cynical (Livingstone, 1990b), are typical of this genre and which provide an account of characters' actions, intentions and moral

position:

> "there's nothing like another man on the scene [Billy] to make the first man [Ken] suddenly realise what he's missing"

> "maybe she [Deirdre] thought Ken was trying to get back at her (Deirdre) for having had a scene with Billy"

> "She [Deirdre] was determined to end the incipient affair [Ken/Sally] but was still feeling guilty over her own with Mike Baldwin"

Not only may genre expectations help account for the approach which audiences take to texts from particular genres, and indeed, for the different approaches they take to different genres, but they also account for discrepancies between actual readings and predicted or 'correct' readings, as identified by text analysis. Central to the method of retelling is the assumption that genre-consistent false intrusions in viewers' readings can reveal the genre knowledge and expectations which guide their interpretations. In the case of the soap opera narrative analyzed above, the viewer who recalled the two 'affairs' in reverse order is adhering to the female voice of the genre, redressing the moral balance in favour of the misused wife. Two examples from other viewers also illustrate this point, for neither event described actually happened, but both are consistent with the genre:

> "Deirdre found out [about Ken and Sally] and confronted Ken. He broke down as Deirdre was about to leave (for her mother's home no doubt)"

> "Ken managed to get close emotionally to Sally, and this developed into a lusty affair!!"

Such 'inaccuracies' in the retellings may result from a desire to add to the dramatic excitement of the narrative. Others may result from a kind of teasing by the text in which paradigmatic choices are manipulated so as to heighten dramatic tension (Barthes, 1975). When in the programme, Ken and Sally kiss or discuss an affair in the office, and when on other occasions, Deirdre enters the office unannounced yet without any compromising discovery, it is not surprising that a tension surrounding the notion of interruption and interruptability is set up such that one viewer, at least, 'remembers' how "Deirdre walked in on them in the middle of an embrace".

Of course, viewers may not always respect the conventions of a genre, but may instead rework the material according to different concerns, for example by heightening the drama, as above, or by closing down on areas of openness. In the first of the following retellings, the open beginning of a soap opera narrative is mirrored in the beginning of the viewer's own account. In the second, closure is imposed by the viewer:

> "Ken and Billy have had a rivalry between them for quite a while. As the affair developed between Billy and Sally, Ken started to take more and more notice of Sally as a woman..."

"It started with a kiss in the office"

Similarly, viewers may accept or rework the open ending of the narrative. Compare an open account, which leaves unresolved the state of Ken and Deirdre's marriage and permits gradual change for the better (or worse) in the background of other events, with a closed, resolved, 'happy ever after' ending:

"In the end I think Billy Walker left and Sally moved on to another job. This made things easier for all concerned, especially Ken and Deirdre"

"However, it ends with them both agreeing to forget, and make a go at their marriage, so everything is back to how it was before; you know, boring, lovey dovey, blah blah. Oh, and Billy leaves I think!"

Such reworkings of the text, while not text-lead, are nonetheless plausible, and do not actually contradict any actual happenings. These readings reflect the extent to which the text is amenable to the insertion of audience concerns or desires. Other such readings may involve reading 'against the grain', as in the oppositional readings of Morley's viewers. However, as I have argued elsewhere (Livingstone, 1990a), divergent readings need not be oppositional in the sense of rejecting the normative or ideological frameworks of the text: viewers may make different interpretations from each other while retaining a generally normative perspective. For example, in one study (Livingstone, 1990b), viewers made either romantic or cynical interpretations of a soap opera narrative, seeing a father's opposition to his daughter's marriage as either an expression of stubborn jealousy standing in the way of true love, or as mature wisdom seeing through an ill-fated infatuation. What the viewer does to the text here is active in the sense of requiring interpretative work and knowledge resources, but not active in the sense of negotiating any ideological distance from the text or generating any critical appraisal of it.

The analysis of genre inevitably draws upon psychological assumptions about the reader or viewer. Beer (1970) writes of the romance: "it absorbs the reader into experience which is otherwise unattainable. It frees us from our inhibitions and preoccupations by drawing us entirely into its own world--a world which is never fully equivalent to our own although it must remind us of it if we are to understand it at all" (p.3). Romance "expresses the lost or repressed emotional forces of the imagination" (Beer, 1970, p.59-60). As romance "depends considerably upon a certain set distance in the relationship between its audience and its subject-matter" (p.5), in order to understand the success of the romance, an account is required of the audience in addition to one of the text. This audience account must surely be an empirical one: we must discover the actual cognitions and circumstances of the viewer if we are to understand the relationship between reader and text. Similarly, the form of the romance, or of the soap opera, bears a close relation to the forms of everyday life: "the rhythms of the interwoven stories in the typical romance construction correspond to the way we interpret our own experiences as multiple, endlessly interpenetrating stories, rather than simply as a procession of banal happenings" (Beer, 1970, p.9). As Modleski has argued in relation to the structure of the housewife's day, it is this parallel which accounts for the popularity of the genre, as well as explaining the lack of appeal, or perceived banality, of the soap opera or romance for those whose days are spent in the linear, goal-oriented, public world. This parallel is revealed through analysis both of the viewers' lives and the structure of the genre. As I have argued, the former analysis requires empirical investigation. In the case of the latter, we may note, for example, the traditional narrative techniques of romantic prose, all of which are seen in the soap opera, such

as "the apparent prolixity, the easy way of calling back into activity episodes and characters long abandoned, the burgeoning of story out of story...the infinitely supple tension, the prolific and apparently disorderly inclusiveness, the way in which events engender a whole range of disconnected happenings whose connections are yet felt though never pointed...these narrative methods make the experience of reading the romances close to the experiencing of life" (Beer, 1970, p.76-77).

Some of the interpretative processes required to respond to these narrative methods or textual devices were illustrated by the retellings of a soap opera narrative. For example, apparently disconnected happenings may be connected through retrospective or 'retention' processes (Iser, 1980). Thus viewers draw selectively on their memories of past events, which are themselves constructions, in order to infer motives which will integrate present events:

"it seemed that Ken was a little unsettled in his marriage at the time"

"Ken was interested in Sally before her affair with Billy"

"As far as I can remember Sally had 'liked' Ken for quite a while (secretly so)"

Similarly, viewers draw upon prior knowledge or expectations of the characters in order to make present events meaningful:

"When Deirdre told Ken [about the holiday] he didn't exactly jump about with joy (but does he ever!)"

"This made Ken jealous, as his wife Deirdre was associated with Billy Walker some years ago. Sally also had an association with Mike Baldwin, who Deirdre had had an affair with during their marriage (Ken and Deirdre's)"

"Bet got a bit peeved--she was always jealous of Sally"

"Billy's male ego was hurt (serve him right!)"

In order to make these connecting inferences, viewers may have to adopt a position of involvement in the narrative happenings--they cannot always stand at a distance. This notion of involvement may take different forms, such as identification or empathetic recognition (Horton and Wohl's, 1956, 'parasocial interaction'). In other words, viewers may interpret events from the perspective either of a character perceived to be similar to themselves or from that of a character recognisable and familiar, as if one of their acquaintance. Empathetic or identification-based inferences are themselves associated with emotional responses. While noting the difficulty of interpreting the viewers' interpretations, we can suggest that inferences such as the following imply particular empathetic stances on the part of the viewers:
"Sally and Ken's affair did not get off the ground as he did not want to wreck his marriage"

"Sally's interest in Billy was on the rebound--and he was also 'fun'"

"Mike thought it quite amusing, but was upset that it was hurting Deirdre, who he still had a soft spot for"

In the study which revealed viewers' romantic and cynical readings (Livingstone, 1990b), I show that identification with, liking of, and sympathy for key characters in a narrative may all determine the interpretative stance which viewers take. This affected the inferences they made to connect the soap opera events and resulted in the adoption of, in this case, a broadly romantic or cynical perspective.

If viewers sometimes become involved in soap opera events, they may also stand back and observe from a critical distance. In Liebes and Katz' sense of critical (1986), this involves an awareness of the constructed nature of drama as a product, focusing on the conventions, intentions or constraints according to which the programme was produced. In this sense, viewers' genre expectations are not simply used implicitly to frame the reading, but also allow the viewer to reflect upon the mechanisms of the genre. This position too is illustrated in the retellings:

"This incident became a focal point for the gossip-artistes for several weeks, mostly centering around the public house whenever any two of the parties involved were present"

"I think things were mentioned about Deirdre's 'fling' with Mike Baldwin, at the time, which was perhaps designed to even things out between them"

"mainly a study of a conniving younger woman (Sally); a rather wishy-washy acceptance of admiration by Ken and a means to cement marriage between Ken and Deirdre when Sally departed. That's it, folks!"

Audience involvement and pleasure

The complex relationship between genre, involvement, interpretation and pleasure is illustrated in the reception study referred to above (in which romantic and cynical viewers diverged in their readings of a Coronation Street narrative where a father opposes his daughter's marriage to the local 'baddie'). One might argue that the viewers who make the more extreme readings, one romantic and the other cynical, have in some sense missed the point of the narrative, for soap opera works to undermine simple, polarised readings through recognising the ambivalent and contradictory meanings of events. Eco (1979) goes further, arguing that open texts play on the meanings which emerge from the relation between different readings, for example irony and allegory. Other viewers in this study adopted intermediate positions ('negotiated romantics' and 'negotiated cynics'). These readings would seem closer to the 'feminine' conventions of the genre, resisting clear and extreme moral positions, seeing the point of both sides of a debate, negotiating a compromise reading. That this process of negotiation is part of the text structure can be seen by comparison with narratives in the action-adventure genre. For example, Fiske (1987) maps out the different ideologies represented by the central characters in the crime series, Hart to Hart. Here, the contrast between the hero and heroine and the villain and villainess is marked by the former being more educated, more family oriented, of higher social class, happier and, of course, 'better' people. The text thereby constructs a unified subject position for the viewers, so that viewers may unambivalently identify with the hero/ine and view the events from their perspective. As Fiske notes, by making identification so easy and, hence, invisible, the genre mystifies any contradictions which in fact exist between these different social categories.

In Coronation Street narratives, as in soap opera generally, no such unified position is offered. Contradictions between different positions are central to the genre, to the viewing experience, and to the sense of soap operas being 'realistic' rather than fantastic idealizations. When Ken contemplated an affair with his secretary, Sally, viewers were faced with aligning their sympathies with either Sally or with Ken's wife, Deirdre. Studies of viewers' representations of television characters show that, in this instance, viewers see Sally as young and sexy, yet immoral and cold, while they see Deirdre as moral and warm, yet as rather older, staid and less sexy (Livingstone, 1989). Hence, they are posed with a real conflict. The viewers' decision not only frames their interpretation of subsequent events, but also reinforces more generally their particular choice or resolution adopted. A similar conflict exists for my other example from Coronation Street: viewers' romantic or cynical readings result, in part, from the choice to interpret events from the perspective either of Ken or of Mike and Susan. When Ken opposed his daughter Susan's marriage to Mike, Mike was typically perceived as dominant, sexy, modern, masculine and immoral, while Ken was weak, traditional, moral and intellectual (Livingstone, 1989). These characteristics are clearly evaluative, so viewers had to decide, for example, if power was more important to them than intelligence, since Mike personified the former and Ken the latter. Other choices depended on preferences in outlook in the viewers' own daily lives. For example, should one side with a modern or traditional approach to life, again as personified in the characters of Mike and Ken respectively. Still other choices depend on one's motives for viewing--does one empathise with the excitingly sexy and immoral Mike, or prefer the good but staid Ken?

As the text demands choices and involvement from the viewer, the interpretative process may involve acknowledging some of the contradictions between the different discourses, for example that of power and intelligence, or of attraction and morality. Identification, in the sense of losing oneself in a character, of being taken over, rarely happens with soap opera. Rather viewers talk of recognising the realism of characters, considering them 'just like us', empathising with their circumstances so that they may play with the contrasts and choices offered. Further, no harmonious resolutions or simple perspectives are offered by the text, particularly as the narratives never end, but merely merge into further narratives. In this genre, unlike action-adventure, one character never remains consistently happier or more valued than another. While in this story, Ken banished Sally and returned to Deirdre, months later he started another affair with his next secretary and left Deirdre. But is this forever? In any case, maybe Deirdre is happier without him.....

Both involvement and critical distance require active choices and the use of knowledge resources on the part of the viewer--knowledge of the genre, the programme, the world referred to in the text, and so forth. Different genres can be seen as specifying particular text-reader relationships, thus implicating these resources in different ways--compare the soap opera to the action-adventure drama or to the documentary. Genre thus constitutes one of the determinants of audience involvement (Katz, 1988), where involvement describes the experiences and roles taken by the viewer in relation to the text which then mediates television effects. The complex relation between genre, involvement and effects is suggested by the work of, for example, Himmelweit et al. (1958), which showed how television has most influence on children when the text is perceived to be realistic and the children feel involved with the events portrayed. One might note here that soap opera in particular is seen as realistic by viewers and is watched with considerable involvement (Livingstone, 1988). In general, we must be careful to discriminate between reception studies carried out on different genres. The meanings of such aspects of the

text as, for example, critical distance, textual openness, subject position, and divergent or oppositional readings, will vary across genres, as will the role of the viewer, the viewing context and the audience's knowledge and motivations.

The concept of pleasure, like that of involvement, serves to discriminate between genres and an analysis of pleasure is thus also central to our understanding of the viewer's role. Traditionally, it has been argued that realism and pleasure are oppositional, as pleasure is seen as associated with being escapism. In this context, the romance (and the soap opera) may be criticised because: "it drowns the voice of reason, it offers a dangerously misleading guide to everyday life, it rouses false expectations and stirs up passions best held in check...[it has a] lack of intellectual power" (Beer, 1970, p.14-5). However, the pleasure of soap opera is problematic, for it includes not only the pleasures of escapism and vicarious emotional experience, but also the pleasures of recognition and validation of one's own everyday experiences (see Fiske, 1987). This dilemma regarding the apparently contradictory pleasures of the soap opera may be understood when we identify the dual origins of the genre in both the romantic and realist literary traditions, fostering the pleasures of escapism and of recognition and validation respectively. Audience reception, then, need not depend on a straightforward relation between text and reader: viewers may seek different pleasures from the soap opera. Indeed, the movement between romantic and realist conventions may itself account for the genre's appeal. Viewers may find pleasure in the 'realistic illusion' (MacCabe, 1974), the pleasure of denying textuality, of 'letting it flow over you', or they may enjoy becoming 'soap experts', learning the textual manipulations and conventions (Barthes, 1975) and becoming critically aware of the text as product.

Ang(1985) discusses the emphasis which viewers place on the perceived genuineness of the characters. She shows how perceptions of realism in Dallas concern not a statistical correspondence with the viewers' world (indeed, for escapism, it must not show this correspondence) but rather an 'emotional realism', a recognition of the 'tragic structure of feeling' in Dallas, where feelings fluctuate between the opposed poles of happy and sad, and where happiness is always transitory. The drama provides not only an interpretative role for the viewer but also an empathetic, emotive role. Analysis of the reception of soap opera shows that the genre gives rise to ambiguous, contradictory, and varied experiences. In accounting for their pleasures in watching soap opera, viewers distinguish between fantasy and escapism (Livingstone, 1988), where the former involves the release of one's imagination--a part of one's own experience. For example, in Dallas and Dynasty, one may find a pleasure in 'seeing how the other half lives', thus enjoying the glamour of a rich world. On the other hand, escapism involves the avoidance of one's present experience, with its worries, doubts and problems. Maybe also escapism does not so much reflect a desire to avoid everyday realities as a pleasure in playing with the boundaries between reality and fiction where within the safe limits of the viewing experience, one may explore the tension between real-world constraints and possible fantasy worlds. In this connection, Liebes and Katz (1990) compare the referential and ludic or playful keyings within which viewers discuss soap opera happenings.

As mentioned above, Modleski (1982) discusses the parallels between the structure of soap opera (particularly the daytime programmes) and the routine of the housewife's day. The pleasures of the daytime soap operas are, she argues, participatory in a way that primetime programmes are not. They depend not on action but on reaction and interaction. The characters are not superior in skills or glamour, but are on an equal footing with the viewer ('just like us'), and the visual pleasure is not the masculine one of fragmentation and fetishization of the female

body but a holistic one of reading the person and being sensitive to unspoken feelings. Just as women must, in their role as housewife and mother, be ready to drop things, to be interrupted, to juggle multiple tasks and to enter into the problems of others, so too does the soap opera involve multiple plots, plot switching, mood changes, and invited intimacy. These pleasures are not, however, without their costs. Modleski argues that soap opera habituates women to interruption and fragmentation: through narrative redundancy and repetition they make it easy, through dramatic tension and delayed gratification, they make it pleasurable.

The role of the viewer

The viewers of television drama continually surprise us in their interpretations of programmes. As no corpus exists of programme interpretations made by ordinary viewers under everyday circumstances, empirical research is required to understand the role of the viewer in making sense of television. I have tried in this paper to consider what these readings look like and to point to some of the issues they raise about audience reception.

Jensen and Rosengren (1990; see also Curran, 1990) compare reception analysis to other major traditions of audience analysis--effects research, uses and gratifications research, literary criticism and cultural studies--along the broad dimensions of history, theory, methodology and problems. Elsewhere (Livingstone, 1990a) I have argued that research on audience reception could be taken to include both issues of interpretation and of comprehension. By comprehension I mean, for example, whether viewers receive specific programme information or whether specific textual biases are mirrored by the viewers. These are the concerns of both cognitive psychologists asking, for example, whether children can decode a narrative to discover 'who done it' or which was the baddie and which was the goodie (e.g Collins, 1983; Reeves et al., 1982), and also with researchers checking the validity or 'psychological reality' of content analyses, asking whether particular content patterns are accurately received by viewers. However, a focus on comprehension remains within the information-processing approach, conceiving of meaning within the text and only giving viewers the power to agree or disagree with this meaning. This match/mismatch conception of the role of the viewer, which often re-emerges in the guise of interpretative research, conflicts with the reception approach (see for example the debate in Cohen, 1989). As Mancini (1990) outlined recently, in reception work the message is seen as fundamentally polysemic and open, interpretation is seen as organised through superthemes or schemas, rather than fragmented, as motivated by identification processes rather than disinterested, and in which meanings are actively constructed by viewers rather than passively received or misperceived (although Corner, this volume, identifies some confusions about meaning in recent writings).

Of course, a range of criticisms can be made of the reception approach, and further theoretical development is called for. Firstly, an often lauded eclecticism in methods masks real epistemological differences (familiar from many social science versus humanities debates). Secondly, the concept of interpretation tends to be reduced to a singular and untheorized process, masking the many diverse modes of text-reader interaction (critical, involved, oppositional, parasocial, etc). There has been a related tendency towards pluralism, seeing all viewers as equally powerful, although the role of social and cultural divisions among audiences is increasingly recognised. Finally, there is a problem of locating the text-reader interaction in a wider political context (Curran, 1990), a problem which is increasingly avoided as researchers home in on the specificities of audience interpretations in local viewing contexts. Without this political context which would place audiences within broader social and economic processes, there is a tendency to romanticize the audience, celebrating the supposed autonomy of the viewer to the neglect of issues of power and social structure.

We can only speculate about the possible role of audience interpretations even as regards processes of media influence or effects. For some, the point of reception analysis has been to critique the assumption of strong effects, by emphasising instead the power of the viewer to construct meanings. Others would still argue for media effects, although not necessarily conceiving of effects simply as the imposition of textual meanings on an audience. For example, Modleski emphasises the role of form, suggesting that the fragmented interrupted nature of the

soap opera genre, and hence, of the viewing experience, has an ultimately reactionary effect: "daytime television plays a part in habituating women to distraction, interruption, and spasmodic toil" (1982, p.100). Katz and Liebes see the different cultural readings not as evidence for null effects, but rather likely to validate or reinforce the different perspectives of the viewers: the Russians who perceive and reject the capitalist ideology behind Dallas may be confirmed in their criticism of Americans after watching the programme, while the Americans who focus instead on the intricacies of unfolding personalities and motivations may be reinforced in finding pleasure in a problem-solving approach--'why did she do that?'--which they can also apply to decoding real-life events. Maybe we can conceive of television effects broadly as the ways in which television constructs, prioritises, undermines, or elaborates the interpretative frameworks with which the viewer makes sense, not only of television, but also of everyday life. According to this approach, theorizing the role of the reader takes centre stage and as it is empirical readers, unpredictable and multiply determined as they are, rather than ideal readers who constitute a key moment in the production of meanings (Hall, 1980), researching the role of the reader demands continued empirical work.

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