CULTURAL
STUDIES

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Time stood still while Bruce and I kissed

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CULTURAL STUDIES

CULTURAL STUDIES is an international journal, dedicated to the notion that the study of cultural processes, and especially of popular culture, is important, complex, and both theoretically and politically rewarding. It is published three times a year. Its international editorial collective consists of scholars representing the range of the most influential disciplinary and theoretical approaches to cultural studies.

CULTURAL STUDIES is in the vanguard of developments in the area worldwide, putting academics, researchers, students and practitioners in different countries and from diverse intellectual traditions in touch with each other and each other's work. Its lively international dialogue takes the form not only of scholarly research and discourse, but also of new forms of writing, photo essays, cultural reviews and political interventions.
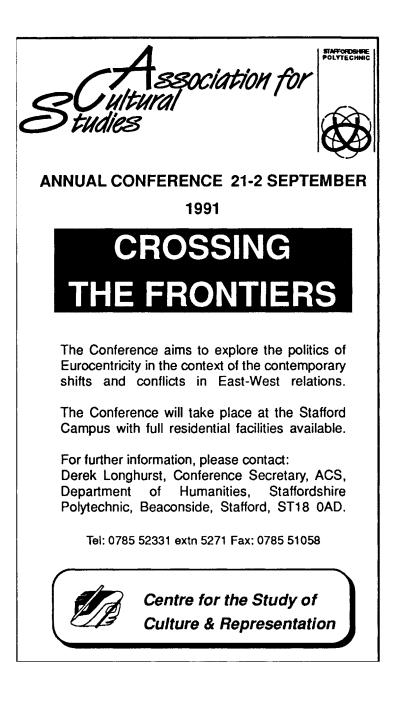
CULTURAL STUDIES publishes articles on those practices, texts and cultural domains within which the various social groups that constitute a late capitalist society negotiate patterns of power and meaning. It engages with the interplay between the personal and the political, between strategies of domination and resistance, between meaning systems and social systems.

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Centre for the Study of
Culture & Representation

EDITORIAL STATEMENT
LAWRENCE GROSSBERG AND JANICE RADWAY

Cultural Studies seeks to foster more open analytic, critical and political conversations by encouraging people to push the dialogue into fresh, uncharted territory. It is devoted to understanding the specific ways cultural practices operate in everyday and social formations. But it is also devoted to intervening in the processes by which the existing techniques, institutions and structures of power are reproduced, resisted and transformed. Although focused in some sense on culture, we understand the term inclusively rather than exclusively. We are interested in work that explores the relations between cultural practices and everyday life, economic relations, the material world, the State, and historical forces and contexts. The journal is not committed to any single theoretical or political position; rather, we assume that questions of power organized around differences of race, class, gender, sexuality, age, ethnicity, nationality, colonial relations, etc., are all necessary to an adequate analysis of the contemporary world. We assume as well that different questions, different contexts and different institutional positions may bring with them a wide range of critical practices and theoretical frameworks.

'Cultural studies' as a fluid set of critical practices has moved rapidly into the mainstream of contemporary intellectual and academic life in a variety of political, national and intellectual contexts. Those of us working in cultural studies find ourselves caught between the need to define and defend its specificity and the desire to resist closure of the ongoing history of cultural studies by any such act of definition. We would like to suggest that cultural studies is most vital politically and intellectually when it refuses to construct itself as a fixed or unified theoretical position that can move freely across historical and political contexts. Cultural studies is in fact constantly reconstructing itself in the light of changing historical projects and intellectual resources. It is propelled less by a theoretical agenda than by its desire to construct possibilities, both immediate and imaginary, out of historical circumstances; it seeks to give a better understanding of where we are so that we can create new historical contexts and formations which are based on more just principles of freedom, equality, and the distribution of wealth and power. But it is, at the same time, committed to the importance of the 'detour through theory'

as the crucial moment of critical intellectual work. Moreover, cultural studies is always interdisciplinary; it does not seek to explain everything from a cultural point of view or to reduce reality to culture. Rather it attempts to explore the specific effects of cultural practices using whatever resources are intellectually and politically available and/or necessary. This is, of course, always partly determined by the form and place of its institutionalization. To this end, cultural studies is committed to the radically contextual, historically specific character not only of cultural practices but also of the production of knowledge within cultural studies itself. It assumes that history, including the history of critical thought, is never guaranteed in advance, that the relations and possibilities of social life and power are never necessarily stitched into place, once and for all. Recognizing that 'people make history in conditions not of their own making', it seeks to identify and examine those moments when people are manipulated and deceived as well as those moments when they are active, struggling and even resisting. In that sense cultural studies is committed to the popular as a cultural terrain and a political force.

Cultural Studies will publish essays covering a wide range of topics and styles. We hope to encourage significant intellectual and political experimentation, intervention and dialogue. At least half the issues will focus on special topics, often not traditionally associated with cultural studies. Occasionally, we will make space to present a body of work representing a specific national, ethnic or social tradition. Whenever possible, we intend to represent the truly international nature of contemporary work, without ignoring the significant differences that are the result of speaking from and to specific contexts. We invite articles, reviews, critiques, photographs and other forms of 'artistic' production, and suggestions for special issues. And we invite readers to comment on the strengths and weaknesses, not only of the project and progress of cultural studies, but of the project and progress of *Cultural Studies* as well.

ARTICLES

THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF *BEST:* ENTERPRISE MEETS DOMESTICITY IN THE PRACTICAL WOMEN'S MAGAZINES OF THE 1980S
JANICE WINSHIP

'Selling Kinder and Küche?'

If one were looking for signs of postfeminism[1] in the 1980s, the new practical and domestic magazines for women would not seem the most fruitful cultural texts to scrutinize. Indeed, it is indicative of the cultural hierarchies and priorities in play for intellectual commentators that whilst the so-called style and youth magazines (for example, *The Face, i-D, Just Seventeen*) and the slicker women's magazines *(Cosmopolitan, Elle* and *Marie Claire)* feature in critical discussion of postfeminism (usually yoked to postmodernism)[2] there has been a veritable silence on the subject of the boom which has, in fact, most shaken the magazine market. In this article it is this slighted culture in its unlikely relation to postfeminist developments, and this boom, that I wish to investigate.

In the old camp are *People's Friend, My Weekly, Woman's Weekly, Woman's Own, Woman,* and *Woman's Realm;* in the new camp, *Chat, Best, Bella, Hallo!* and the latest recruits, *Me* and *Take A Break.*[3] Since the 1950s a large number of women's magazines have been launched[4] but until 1985, just two of them, enjoying only brief life-spans, were weeklies.[5] For many in the industry the demise of the *mass* weeklies was inevitable. To survive they would have to target editorial at a focused band of readers, in the way of the monthlies' narrow casting (*Advertising Age's Focus,* May 1984). After all, circulation figures indicated that, while total sales of all women's magazines had declined, the

weeklies had been worst hit, with sales falling by almost half (from approximately 9.3 million in 1958 to 5.6 million in 1985.[6]

First the tabloid magazine *Chat* from the publishers of TV *Times* and then, more dramatically, the 'European invasion' of magazines (*Best* and *Bella* are owned by two arch-rival German giants in publishing, Gruner and Jahr, and Bauer, respectively, *Hallo!* by the Spanish company Hola, SA) challenged the insular British view. The new weeklies, *Best* and *Bella* especially, have been remarkably successful. The latter, admittedly with the aid of a massive advertising campaign ('an unprecedented £1 million a month' during 1988, *Observer,* 21 May 1989), has achieved a circulation of 1.3 million and *Best* 950, 000. These launches, together with the spate of new monthlies[7] has meant that by 1988 women's magazines were reaching more than 60 per cent of all women as compared to 42 per cent in 1986 (*Observer,* 30 October 1988). This is well down on the 1950s when it was reckoned that '5 out of 6 women saw at least one women's magazine every week' (cited in White, 1970:216), but the increase is still worth comment.

The expanding number of titles and increased readership have several explanations. One view is that by the 1980s women's magazines had lost sight of where women were at, and what they wanted from a magazine. New magazines with different editorial formulae were therefore attractive to women who had stopped buying, or never had bought, a magazine. (Research on *Prima* suggests that over half of its readers are in that category, White, 1986.)

Another view highlights a favourable economic climate and availability of advertising, encouraging expansion on the part of producers and increased consumption on the part of readers. Yet what has been innovative about the German launches has been their determination to go ahead without first securing advertising, a strategy anathema to UK publishers. Gruner and Jahr's conviction that spend hard enough to get editorial right and advertising will soon flow in, has rubbed off on to an ever cautious IPC, whose ill-fated up-market weekly, *Riva* (1988), closed after just seven weeks. They are currently allowing *Me* four or five years before its 'red ink turns black' (*Observer,* 21 May 1989.)

More cynically, it can be argued that regardless of women's objective requirements for their light reading matter, large conglomerates have their own insatiable economic needs. No less in publishing than in other industries, companies need to be strengthened to maintain steady profit margins. Diversification of products and a move into international markets are part of the process.

The form of the latter by European publishers is interesting. Until *Chat* appeared, *Cosmopolitan* was the only women's magazine in the UK which had its roots elsewhere—in the USA. Owned by the Hearst Corporation, *Cosmo* is published under a franchise system allowing the *Cosmo* recipe to be modified for local tastes under local control. *Prima, Best* and *Bella,* however, are editorially organized and run in Britain but owned and managed by German publishers who also direct operations in other European countries. There is a German and French

Prima, while *Best* is based on a French magazine, *Femme Actuelle,* which also has a Spanish version, *Mia.* More than that, all three of these magazines are printed in Germany and then sent back to the UK. In a similar way *Hallo!* (a cloning of the Spanish *Hola!*) is printed in Spain. Spreading the net wider, Rupert Murdoch's News International has gone into partnership with Hachette to deliver Elle and has brought the US title *New Woman* to the UK. Not to be outdone, IPC have joined forces with Groupe Marie Claire (as European Magazines) to offer *Marie Claire* to British readers.

Until recently, language and custom as well as government regulations have tended to keep the various national media markets apart. Hamish McRae suggests that, in contrast, cars, for example, are manufactured within a more integrated industry, 'in that you cannot tell in which country the car you are buying is made…Buy a Peugeot and it may be made in Coventry', but 'up to now, it simply has not been worth trying to build a cross-European media group because it has been possible to add value by passing experience across borders' (*Guardian,* 24 June 1988). One exception to that, Rupert Murdoch's News International, has worked not because of cross-border fertilization of ideas but 'because of the personality of its chief executive'. If amidst noisy publicity, but as yet with little cultural impact, satellite television is in the throes of undermining national sovereignty over our TV screens, the new women's magazines represent a comparable trend. For the first time in the magazine industry, 'Continental magazine skills [are] being let loose on the British marketplace' (*Guardian,* 24 June 1988). Publishing concepts have become transnational, though like many a current commodity exchange, the movement was initially one way— into the depressed UK market only. As Maggie Brown asked, only half facetiously: 'Where…is the [British owned] magazine…which will have German *hausfrau* knitting their own fish fingers?' (*Independent,* 12 August 1987) Late off the starting blocks, IPC has been playing European publishers at their own game in France, Spain, and Italy, where IPC claim *Essentials* is already the top selling monthly (*Independent,* 19 June 1989).[8]

The transferability of publishing concepts rests on the premise that 'women have common areas of interest across national frontiers' (*Campaign,* 1 July 1988). But therein lies the issue on which I primarily want to focus. Whereas *Hallo!* is a photo-news and *paparazzi* magazine, *Best* shares with *Chat, Bella* and *Me,* as well as with the monthlies *Prima* and *Essentials,* a practical emphasis in its editorial approach. Journalist critics have tended to regard this return to recipes, patterns and household tips (or as Deidre McSharry describes *Prima:* 'It tells you all the things you can do with dead mince', *The Sunday Times,* 5 February 1989) as, necessarily, a return to old-fashioned femininity. 'Selling Kinder and Küche' proclaimed one headline: *'Bella* is a soft-centred, soggy traditional read' (*Independent,* 30 September 1987). These are 'wholesome, housewife-and-mother' maga zines, insists the *The Sunday Times* article. They 'bring homecraft out of the closet' maintains a *New Society* piece (White, 1986:

15). And in a stinging review, 'Why the total woman is a real turn-off, Michele Hanson inveighs:

> A new woman has emerged: she who brandishes her knitting patterns and makes her jam shamelessly. She is not so much Superwoman as Mrs Totality, unashamed of any aspect of herself, even the ordinary-homey-embroidering-a-cushion part… Naturally, enraged feminists have accused these magazines of setting women back 50 years. Is this the way to treat grown-up ladies? (*Guardian,* 22 January 1987)

Such comment does not allow that the 'grown-up ladies' might just *like* these magazines.[9] The question then is why? What is their appeal? It is too glib to equate magazine content that foregrounds doing things in and around the home, with any necessary ideological backwardness on the part of either magazine or reader.

One simple, but not to be underestimated, attraction of these magazines is their value for money. But we also have to move beyond the obvious. Research by Valerie Walkerdine (1984) on girls' comics *(Bunty* and *Tracy)* provides some useful pointers in thinking about a complex appeal. The views expressed by Hanson and other commentators about what women's magazines *should* be doing, echo what Walkerdine calls a 'politics of rationalism' (Walkerdine, 1984: 167): do away with the biased, bad, unreal ideas about women (Kinder and Küche) and put in their place an undistorted reality (women juggling and struggling with home and work, maybe?). But Walkerdine warns:

> If new content in whatever form does not map on to the crucial issues around desire, then we should not be surprised if it fails as an intervention. (182)

The success of these new magazines suggests that their content does indeed 'map on to the crucial issues around desire'. Notwithstanding their allegedly Germanic, no-nonsense editorial mix, do 'they engage with the very themes, issues, problems, fantasies (of escape, of difference) which the realist "telling it like it is"' (168) magazines, that Hanson and others implicitly seem to be advocating, do not?

In the remainder of this article I shall argue that the 'Kinder and Küche' label attached to these magazines is misplaced. Clearly magazines of 1980s' enterprise culture, yet they are more than the sum of their obsessively practical and rational parts. They tell of women's uneasy desires and their still-prevalent feelings about the impossibilities of womanhood.[10]

But first the mass weeklies in the 1950s, the period to which critics suggest that the new magazines are trying to return women.

Beyond a trade press

Writing about the weeklies of the 1950s, Mary Grieve, long-time editor of *Woman,* was in no doubt that, 'Because woman has this pre-occupation with, and responsibility for, material living, she feels the need for what is virtually a trade press' (Grieve, 1964:138). Over twenty-five years later Iris Burton, editorial director of *Prima* and *Best,* suggests that her magazines are 'centre of interest'. By the latter she means:

> Shared by you and me, by your mother, my sister, the lady down the road, the girl in the office next door. It doesn't matter what you are doing by way of a career or lifestyle, there are certain elements that you still like to maintain and they tend to be the practical elements…But the other thing is that there are very few women, whether they are living on their own or have huge families or working or not, who don't maintain a home and who don't have the interest in it to want it to be lovely, who want to be creative with their homes. (Personal interview, 1988)

Despite a similarity in these two statements there is a difference between the idea of a 'trade press' and that of 'centre of interest' magazines. 'Trade press' and the perpetration of what Marjorie Ferguson has critically referred to as 'the cult of femininity' (Ferguson, 1983:5) go hand in hand, whereas there is no *inevitable* yoking of 'centre of interest' magazines and femininity. This argument rests on a further one: that 'trade press' depends on the operation of a dominant ideology of femininity; 'centre of interest' presupposes its dissolution. The dissolution involves a change in the magazine text and in readers' relation to that text.

The term 'trade press' is sign of how woman's housewife role was 'professionalized' in the 1950s as her trade, or career. The language of paid work transferred to unpaid work upheld the prevailing belief that women were equal but different from men.[11] In weekly magazines it was skills around consumption that were paramount to women's success in trade or career (Winship, 1981; Partington, 1989). Mary Grieve believed that:

> The professional man's wife struggling to manage her money so that her children could get a better education was just as glad of the practical recipes, the well-designed clothes, the hints on value-for-money, as was the welder's wife who found that she too could benefit from that kind of service and information in her weekly magazine. Furnishing schemes and attitudes of mind which were hopelessly out of her reach and experience before the war were within her ken now. (Grieve, 1964:135)

As printing restrictions were lifted (1951) and supplies of goods filtered onto the domestic market (all rationing finally ended in 1954), the number of pages in the weeklies expanded and advertising blossomed into full-page colour. More

dispersed throughout an issue than clustering at front and back, advertising's design and aesthetic seemed to lead the way for editorial spreads, with which it also shared a similar ideological framework. White is critical of such advertising copy:

> It was calculated to focus attention on their domestic role, reinforce home values, and perpetuate the belief that success as a woman, wife and mother, could be purchased for the price of a jar of cold cream, a bottle of cough syrup or a packet of instant cake-mix. (White, 1970:158)

But, like successful advertising at any historical moment, it encapsulated values that were appealing to potential female consumers. After the drabness of war and austerity the possibility of once again buying, and in plenty, promised the selfish pleasures so long denied in the cause of nationhood (Winship, 1984). For women, the assumption was that 'normal' housekeeping could be resumed after years of disruption, and the availability of goods contributed towards making that an attractive proposition.

The weeklies educated working-class women to choose and spend wisely, 'to help people towards their best use of rising standards' as Mary Grieve put it (1964:139). Proper engagement in consumption work, on the person and on the domestic front, was held out as a source of pleasure and of success, and feminine desire and identity were bound by those parameters, what elsewhere I have described as 'that oppressive nexus of femininity-desire-consumption' (Winship, 1987:161).

In a 'Spring Wedding Number—Everything here for happiness' (*Woman,* 2 March 1957), one bride, on her 'trousseau hunt', is reported as saying, I'll be coping with a full-time job as well as housework so I plumped for nylon: no trouble at all and such pretty things to choose from. My nightie's a dream'. But femininity could also be undone by inappropriate consumption, as the magazine warns: 'With so many lovely things in the shops, trousseau-hunting can be a dangerous pastime'. And in the same issue of *Woman:* 'Elegant women the world over know the importance of the *Underneath* Look. They know that the prettiest dresses, the loveliest gowns are made or marred by what is worn beneath' (advertisement for Bear Brand 'loveliest of nylons'). An editorial item in another issue—'Edith Blair Tests and Tells'—featured the 'Bra Apron':

> Frilled plastic apron that does an excellent 'cover-up' job, is boned so that its bib top stays up without the need for a tie. This means that party cooks stay unspattered and tidy in an apron that's whipped off in seconds as the guests arrive. (*Woman,* 5 January 1957)

Retrospectively it is doubtful there were takers for this one: the bra apron is risible, too close a relation to the kinkier merchandise in (later) sex shops. This item is useful nevertheless in raising the issue of readers' relation to the

magazine text. For it is one thing to describe the construction of femininity in magazines, another to suggest that readers identified with or behaved in the ways advocated. In The designer housewife in the 1950s' Angela Partington argues that women withstood the ideological messages beamed in their direction by magazines and—her particular interest—by design professionals:

> Women's consumption of designed objects in the fifties was profoundly equivocal. 'New ideas' in design, which usually embodied Functionalist principles, were well represented in women's magazines…But very often the deployment of these ideas ran contrary to the ideals and principles they were supposed to represent. (1989:211)

Highlighting women's autonomy with respect to domestic design concurs with wider theoretical attention focusing on readers' active appropriations of media texts (e.g., Morley 1980, Radway 1984, Ang 1985, Fiske 1987, Gray 1987). Such studies reject the concept of ideology where it might be inferring that subjects are its passive dupes. Along these lines Elizabeth Frazer, writing about 'Teenage girls reading *Jackie'* proposes, first, that we dispute there is

> one valid and unitary meaning of a text. Second, we may care to check whether, even if we grant there is one meaning it does have…an ideological effect on the reader. (1987:411)

Her own study suggests that:

> the kinds of meanings which are encoded in texts and which we might want to call ideological, fail to get a grip on readers in the way the notion of ideology generally suggests. Ideology is undercut, that is, by these readers' reflexivity and reflectiveness. (419)

Frazer introduces the concept of 'discourse register' to help conceptualize the means by which readers may be reflexive in their relation to a text. She defines discourse register 'as an institutionalised, situationally specific, culturally familiar, public way of talking' (420). Thus a reader commenting on a text may, so to speak, switch hats in terms of the discourse register she is deploying: from 'literary criticism' to 'feminism' to 'tabloid press' in the case of the teenage girls reading *Jackie*. Such switches, which are dependent on the topic and forum of discussion, most significantly involve a change of ideological premises and hence of what can and cannot be said. ('Discourse registers both *constrain* what is sayable in any context and *enable* saying', 421.) Frazer illustrates that within a 'feminist' register a group discussion around the double standard of sexuality between girls and boys is initiated:

Jane   I dislike the way boys treat girls in the sense that they've got the front to call them slags

Stella when they're sleeping around more than you are

Jane   yeah and they think that they're hard if they go out and do something, like…but if a girl does it she's stupid and things like that

Janine if a girl wants to do the same job as a boy it's too hard

But this 'feminism' is followed up by a 'tabloid press'-style tirade against mothers who abuse their babies:

Janine that's what gets me they beat up their kids and get about six months, especially the mothers right, cos you know in the [local newspaper] there was this woman she picks up her baby and hit his head on the banister and it was just born it was most probably three months and she was most probably still giving it milk still and it was hungry still so she picked it up right and she goes it was after feeding and she hit it across the banister and it died. (422–3)

What I want to draw attention to here is the possibility that in the 1950s, although the reader of women's magazines can be regarded as active in her meaning-making, available discourse registers did not offer alternative ideologies to allow the reflexivity Frazer points to. There *was* a dominant ideology of femininity, and the women's weeklies were contributors to the cultural processes by which hegemonic consent around women's position was strived for, if never finally won. As Elizabeth Wilson has described:

> The orchestration of consensus on the position of women…was the achievement of a deceptive harmony out of a variety of noisy voices… [but] in the end the attempt failed, and something broke through that was called women's liberation. (1980:3)

The dominance of the ideology was reflected in the paucity and weakness of alternative and oppositional views on women's position. Betty Friedan's attribution of 'the problem that has no name' to their situation (1965:13) gives credence to how difficult any formulation of dissatisfaction with the housewife role was for women. Within the prevailing terms of the debate, despite their difference from men, women were regarded as equal: within marriage the roles of husband and wife were complementary. It was thus virtually impossible to articulate the view that difference was less sign of equality than manifestation of subordination. As Wilson indicates, many middle-class women writers at that time

> chose to locate their novels in the past, or wrote of obviously abnormal marriage relationships, or of madness as a female response to life… because in the modern world it was not possible to suggest that a woman's

normal lot was captivity, sexual frustration, and the battle with patriarchal authority. (1980:151)

Readers of women's magazines may not have been committed to their domestic text but where else was there to go except into madness and 'failure'? Like one of Barbara Pym's single women characters, Dulcie Mainwaring: 'Once again Dulcie felt…that she was somehow a *woman manquée'* (Pym, 1961:250, my emphasis).

The material effects of twenty years of feminism sometimes seem negligible when hard evidence shows that, 'in almost 90 per cent of households, women do the washing and ironing, in 75 per cent they do the cleaning and in 70 per cent they make supper' (Neustatter, 1989:223). Nevertheless, as radical barrister Helena Kennedy comments: 'The great advance has been in women's perceptions of themselves' (Neustatter, 1989:225). Trade press' to 'centre of interest' magazines perhaps less presupposes changes in the magazine text than these changes in readers. Suzanne Moore insists of contemporary magazines that:

> Although the content of women's magazines may be exactly that of marriages and mortgages, we need to separate pleasure from the text and commitment to the text. We can enjoy browsing without necessarily buying everything on offer. (1986:10)

Or as Mica Nava puts this argument, 'women can read glossy magazines critically and selectively and yet not disavow more traditional feminine identities and pleasures' (1987:207). This seems to me to be a right we have won. It rests on the dominant ideology of femininity having been disrupted and on the availability of discourse registers, including feminist ones, that allow criticism and reflectiveness on the themes for which 'Kinder and Küche' is shorthand. In yoking 'centre of interest' magazines necessarily to femininity, Hanson and other commentators entrap readers in a 1950s time warp.

I shall return to the issue of reading these 'centre of interest' magazines later. For the moment I want to contemplate their text whose similarity to a 1950s content is, in fact, skin deep.

The domestic face of enterprise

From peak sales in the late 1950s for *Woman* and *Woman's Own* to the depressed mid-1980s the route was troubled. Cynthia White blames an editorial conservatism in the 1960s on dependence on advertising revenue. Yet as she notes there were attempts to update the weeklies. In 1964, Ernest Dichter, an American 'motivational researcher' brought in by IPC, advised four kinds of change for *Woman's Own* (White, 1970:220): 'a more realistic' editorial approach reflecting 'the broadening horizons of women's lives'; 'improvements

in format, type, and art-work to bring them into line with modern tastes' (one could read graphic-design taste as created by advertisers); 'the acquisition of a special character and stated purpose with which groups of readers could identify' (an early formulation of niche marketing/narrow casting); a fostering of ' "reader-involvement" and a "dialogue" between magazine staff and their readers'. Implementation of these changes in the weeklies, however, was 'too drastic and too abrupt, and had an adverse effect on sales' (White, 1970:228) with the result that, with the exception of a bolder presentation, transformation was gradual until the mid-1970s when the impact of feminism achieved some public legitimation (for example, in 1975, the operation of the Equal Pay and Sex Discrimination legislation[12] and its ideas produced the kind of shifts Dichter had recommended, first in *Woman's Own,* under the editorship of Jane Reed and then Iris Burton, later in *Woman.*

By the time of the 'Euro-invasion' however, a combination of Thatcherite policies—engendering unemployment, cut-backs in local-authority control and a shift in ideological focus from group and social needs to those of the private individual—and a fractured and softer feminism had virtually eliminated the campaigning element around the position of women which had characterized *Woman's Own* and *Woman* for almost a decade. (Winship, 1987) When Burton left an uncertain *Woman's Own* in 1985, Bridget Rowe began to wield a tabloid brush (she had worked on the *Sun* and the *News of the World* magazine) in an attempt to invigorate the magazine.[13] Richard Barber (who went on to edit *TV Times*) did likewise for *Woman.* This was partly a matter of journalistic style— profuse use of exclamation marks, and a vocabulary of excess emphasizing fun, entertainment, pleasure on the one hand, melodrama and tragedy on the other— partly a matter of a similar reliance on scoop stories and on royalty and television as the shared reference points for readers and the subject matter around which an extraordinarily large number of features revolve. The contrast between the forced hedonism of a tabloid style (even conceding that *Woman's Own* and *Woman* do not adopt either the viciousness or the intemperance of the *Sun*) and the busyness promoted by the Euro-magazines could not have been greater. Meanwhile, other weeklies, most notably *Woman's Weekly* as the unlikely leading weekly, held to a more traditional mix of 'practicals' and a heavy dose of (romantic) fiction.

The new magazines eliminated the tabloid-style journalism and considerably increased practical coverage. The latter, in the form of knitting, had always been a steady earner for *Woman's Weekly* but had been drastically pruned in *Woman's Own* and *Woman* as a more 'progressive' edge had informed their editorial.[14]

The titles and uncluttered typefaces of the logos of *Prima, Best, Essentials* and *Me* made clear where they stood: no reference to women and femininity, giving support perhaps to them not endorsing a conventional femininity and a self-promotional thrust.[15] The titles have echoes of the sales pitch for the *Sunday Telegraph,* 'Cut through the waffle' (Iris Burton claims she tells her writers: Pack it with facts. No waffle'), combined with that of the Department of Trade

and Industry's enterprise initiative scheme (that advertisement where all the paper 'whooshes' out of the office in a blue streak).

On inside pages, *Woman's Own* often adopts a help-line approach to cookery, fashion and beauty. A way of involving readers, this also means that women are invoked as wives, partners, mothers. Thus: 'Help! How do I feed a little fusspot!' is accompanied by a photo of mother and toddler. The copy begins: For all mums with youngsters it's a worrying problem' (*Woman's Own,* 14 March 1989). But *Best's* pages confirm that domesticity does not have to imply femininity and it does not involve readers in a participatory way. When 'ordinary women' are included (in 'Woman of the week', 'Career of the week', 'Talking point') there is no indication they are readers and they are more likely to be recounting paid working lives or discussing ways of reconciling domestic responsibilities with a career. As far as cookery is concerned, only rarely are assumptions made about who is going to produce or consume the cooked items as in: 'Delight friends with these tempting cocktail canapés' (6 January 1989). Interestingly, in 'Kids kitchen' the warning that children should be supervised is addressed to 'Mum and Dad'. In addition, *Best* sometimes widens the domestic sphere: mopeds and motor cycles in a 'Home equipments' slot. Singly none of these points amounts to a shift but cumulatively their effect is significant in contributing to an ideological framework which binds women less to traditional femininity than that of *Woman's Own* where marriage, motherhood and heterosexuality provide the consistent reference grid. Femininity is further tempered in *Best* by its forceful 1980s-style work ethic, imbued through design and content.[16]

More a formula magazine than *Woman's Own,* in that slots regularly appear in the same position and with the same layout, *Best* adheres tightly to a 5-column (sometimes 4-column) ruled grid. Short items are boxed off, photos—many small ones—are framed and placed in orderly layout on the page. Abhorring white space, the overall effect is busy, dense and newsy, having none of the hallmarks of the advertising-led design which I mentioned in the last section. Rather than merging, advertising and editorial in *Best* are counterpointed, enhancing each other. Whether it is tackling the several word puzzles, dress-making from the free pattern, or following instructions on building a garden pond, as one IPC executive described *Essentials,* these are magazines for 'active doers'. There is also a firm strand of utilitarianism, the notion of a useful and practical knowledge, with much informative reporting, little discursive writing. Asides about reducing time spent: 'One pan meals' save on washing up (*Best,* 7 April 1989) signal time as a commodity in short supply. Even time saved should be dutifully filled while leisure is to be worked at or hastily taken. Thus travel is more guide of things to do than alluring holiday brochure hyping that which can be consumed. And 'Games' are to be played: no passive enjoyment in tackling 'Crosswords', 'Arrow-words' and Fig-jigs'. Light relief takes the form of quirky, and brief, news items or cartoons and 'Laughter Lines'. Fiction is no lengthy and self-indulgent read but '5-minute fiction'.

The language that *Best* uses to describe slots also cultivates a brisk efficiency. Where *Woman's Own* has 'Extra' in each issue, *Best* has a 'Six-page dossier' (from hair problems to 'Know your biorhythms…and plan success and happiness'). *Woman's Own* carries several interview-based features with television and film celebrities; *Best* offers a Profile' on the likes of Stephen King, Patty Hearst and Robin Day. 'Cookery' in *Best* is labelled 'In the kitchen' carefully sub-divided into 'Kitchen notes', 'Step by step', 'Recipe cards'. Such headings stress food production. Likewise, 'Knitting' in *Woman's Own* becomes 'To knit, *to* sew *to* make' (my emphases).

Women have always torn pages from magazines and stored up useful tips, recipes and advice, but this process has been formalized. *Prima* offers sturdy red boxes to file away relevant items. *Essentials* gave a ring binder, complete with topic dividers, free with its first issue, and every month the (practical) sections that editors believe suitable for reference are perforated to make removal easier.[17]

A report on the launch of *Essentials* (*Woman in View,* Channel 4, January 1988) suggested that it had some of the characteristics of a part work: each month readers were buying one magazine but adding to several 'works'—cookery, dress-making, etc. Maybe. But, as the domestic face of 1980s enterprise, a stronger idiom for these magazines is fax sheet cum personal organizer.[18] Whether it is the pages of Oracle or a company's databank, the fax sheet presupposes a glut of information in relation to which the user must fittingly choose for her own ends. The ethic of the personal organizer also demands that individuals select and order information appropriately. For people with demanding jobs and too-full lives who need the right information, in the right place at the right time, the well-devised personal organizer requires methodical devotion; without it the striver is flailing.[19]

The possibility of so *much* information at the touch of a few keys and the infinite capacity for its rational organization belies an underside: human life's messiness. Classifying and filing electronic information or bits of paper can persuade us that all is under control in situations where our capacity for control is on a knife edge. It is the latter, it seems to me, that the overbusy and ordered *Best* points to.[20]

However, before I properly explore *Best's* underside I want to return to the issue of reading and readers' relation to their magazine. To follow through with the analogy of fax sheet and personal organizer, they suppose a different mode of reading and a different relation to the text.

Reading strategies: `Kept strictly for the potato-watch'?

Suzanne Moore suggests that:

Unlike books, magazines can be read in a whole number of ways—there is no correct order we have to follow in order to obtain meaning. (1986:10)

One implication of the multiple narrative form of a magazine as opposed to the single linear narrative of (some) novels, is that the text has a less compulsive pull and the reading process is more under reader's control.[21] Yet magazines are not alike in the reading strategies they encourage. Burton maintains that *Best's* bitty approach supports the busy 'dip in and dip out reader' whereas the long features in *Woman's Own* invite a relaxing and

absorbing read:

> In the *Woman, Woman's Own* area women will curl up with a cup of coffee and their magazine, maybe in the afternoon or the morning. With *Best* they will dip into it. You'll find that they'll read it last thing at night just as they go to bed, something quick and fast. Maybe in the bath even, or on the tube. It's a very useful magazine to have when you're travelling to the office. It's a useful magazine when you're sitting on a bus. It's the dip in and dip out reader: 'I haven't got much time to read, but I want to read something that is not trivial.' (Personal interview, 1988)

If the dip in and dip out reader suggests a fairly disinterested reader, curling up with a magazine carries a stronger association of reader-involvement. For Jill Churchill the absence of the latter in the new magazines —'There is no answering back, apart from the letters' page' (*Independent,* 12 August 1987)—as well as their lack of attention to campaigning over issues, is cause for concern. But this overlooks that *Best* predisposes readers to relate to their magazine in other ways.

My own characterization of women's magazines has been that they stand as paternalistic friend to readers but encourage a reader-involvement in which the magazine occupies the authoritative position. In *Best* the paternalistic friendship role is overlaid by a more detached relation to readers and the balance of power between editorial text and reader has shifted towards the latter.

Best operates with a market-place definition of individuals with different consumer needs. The two-page 'Your rights' slot, including housing, money, legal and consumer issues, gives some sense of the ground on which *Best* operates and its mode of attracting different constituencies (*Best,* 2 June 1989). An item on the implications for tenants of opting out of council control takes a *married* couple as its case study. The consumer piece tackles the raw deal meted out to *single* people when they book hotel rooms or obtain mortgages. Money matters, on 'the new Capital Bond', discusses investing *£1,000,* while another item addresses itself to the question asked by a woman bringing up a large family on a *low* income: who still qualifies for a free eye test? Whether it is 'Your rights' or health (a substantial element in *Best,*[22] or more obvious consumer areas like fashion and home, readers, like consumers going to the shops, are likely to dip in and dip out of different items, as well as use them in their own way, depending on individual interests and social position.

The mass media's popular appeal is sometimes critically attributed to its offering a 'lowest common denominator' content. White, for instance, maintains that:

> In the past publishers fastened upon this 'lowest common denominator' [a domestic focus] in writing for women as the surest way of building and maintaining multi-million readerships. In the 'forties and 'fifties it was possible to be 'all things to all women'—the deprivations of war and the restrictions of peace were great levellers. (1970:287)

This view assumes that diverse readers are responding to the same textual elements in the same way. More recent theoretical approaches that I mentioned earlier (see p. 137) hold that the popular text is characterized by its 'potential of meanings' whose realization depends on the activity of readers. In *Television Culture* John Fiske suggests that

> these groups actively read television in order to produce from it meanings that connect with their social experience…the television text is a potential of meanings capable of being viewed with a variety of modes of attention by a variety of viewers. To be popular, then, television must be both polysemic and flexible. (1987:84)

Further:

> Its popularity among its diversity of audiences depends upon its ability to be easily and differently incorporated into a variety of subcultures: popularity, audience activity, and polysemy are mutually entailed and interdependent concepts. (107)

Yet if there is variability in the relation between text and reader Fiske also warns that 'this variety is not anarchic, but is delimited by the structure of the text' (117).

What I have already suggested is that the position of women and the available ideological fields have changed so that they may be the uncommitted reader Moore and Nava refer to (see pp.138–9). Now I want to indicate how 'the structure of the text', specifically in *Best,* facilitates that uncommittedness but also allows for a diversity of readings. In this respect *Best* is, I think, potentially more flexible than *Woman's Own.*[23]

There are two formats in *Best*—fashion and the problem page—that I want to examine to further substantiate this argument. Both adopt multi-narratives (offering a necessary 'consumer choice') and in both, though through different mechanisms, the reader is placed so as to appraise the text.

Fashion is one editorial area relying on large images. But its rhetoric is not that of much advertising, nor indeed of much other fashion coverage. Juliet

Askew (fashion editor of rival *Woman's Own*) implied that its imagery was bland and boring; it was 'cataloguey' (personal interview 1989). From *Best's* point of view this catalogue look is deeply intentioned, partly in order to provide what Mary Weaver (*Best's* fashion editor) described as a 'visual relief' to otherwise hectic editorial pages (personal interview 1989). But there is another aspect to it.

Writing about *Picture Post* in the 1940s, Stuart Hall contrasts the magazine's visual exposition with that of the Sunday colour supplements. *Best* is hardly a photo-news magazine and yet, to some extent, the rhetoric of its fashion pages can be similarly counterpointed to that of advertising (and of other fashion photography). Hall suggests that 'No one in the Colour Supplements is interested in looking hard or straight: everything is angled, posed, framed, prettied up, cocooned' (1972:84) such that readers are caught up in the glossy images of the 'good life'. Whereas in *Picture Post:*

> The layout is straight-forward, the pictures disposed on the page within an uncomplicated aesthetic. They are square-on to the reader, speaking straight *at* or *to* him…photograph size is not dictated by exaggerated blow-up, fancy blocking or cutting. The photographs are large but remain life size…We are not invited *into* the picture…Margins, for the most part, remain, and frame the photographs, distancing them. (Hall, 1972:79)

Best's three fashion spreads, having working titles of 'Everywoman', 'Young' and 'Classic', the latter regularly alternating with 'Outsize' and 'His and hers' or at times children's and older women's fashion—something for everyone—are also characterized by a straightforward visual presentation. They less seduce or catch us in connotations of the 'good life' than present. With a camera angle slightly tilting upwards, models are life size and lifelike and the high quality printing provides a clarity of detail augmented by more verbal information than in most magazines: price, range of sizes, colours, materials, stockists.

The catalogue look thus enables and positions us as readers to contemplate and adjudicate as seasoned consumers. Are these fashion looks for us? What are the merits of a garment worn this way, or that way?

The problem page is a very different slot, yet it too positions readers to make assessments. Borrowed from *Femme Actuelle, Best's* problem page departs from the usual format where reader writes in, agony aunt responds. In 'A problem shared, You reply' the agony aunt has been done away with and instead reader writes in, other readers respond. Some weeks later, a resumé of the problem letter appears together with a selection of edited replies (the original letter-writer is sent all the mail *Best* receives).[24]

Discussing the more usual problem page Rosalind Coward has pointed out how the letters

> always offer a narrative in certain distinctive ways… Certain information is vital in problem page stories which is not vital in other advice … They

[problem pages] incite women to reveal and read about how an individual reached a certain point in her life… The ideology behind this is clear. Speak out. It will make you feel better, Organize your crisis into a narrative, be honest and perhaps then you will see the causes, the reason why you feel like this. (1984:137–8)

Erica Carter points to the autobiographical aspect to the narratives:

The conventions of problem-page writing demand an encapsulation of complex thoughts and emotions in minuscule autobiographies, hopelessly compacted. Each letter briefly details age, sex, marital status; then a handful of intimate confidences, tersely formulated.

But the narrator in these 'minuscule autobiographies' is not that of 'the full blown autobiography':

While in the latter, the writer is free to imprint a retrospective coherence on collected images of her past selves, the 'I' of the problem-page correspondent necessarily remains fragmented. There must remain a residue of fear, anxiety, resentment—'I can't forget', 'I live in fear'. Each letter is edited to end on a question: 'What use is it?' 'Where will it all end?' Through this opening in the narrative, the agony aunt is called upon to enter; the writer looks to her for the solution that allows narrative closure. (Carter, 1989:71–2)

The narrative closure offered by the agony aunt's solution lays the basis for the re-establishment of a coherent sense of self for the correspondent, as well as providing a satisfactory resolution for readers.

In *Best,* however, several answers means several narratives which rub against each other in the advice they offer and in the ideological assumptions they make. Rather than agony aunt stepping in with her authoritative words of wisdom to effect ideological and narrative closure and put the 'I' together again, the reader must plunge in to assess for herself the merits of conflicting advice and divergent ideologies. If narrative closure does occur and the fragmented 'I' is made coherent, it is the reader who achieves that in the way she sees fit.

More generally, the 'structure of the text' in *Best* is then sufficiently 149 flexible to *encourage* different appropriations of it. Michele Hanson suggests, mockingly, of *Prima* readers that they

want to be dibble-dabbling into the bits and pieces of *Prima.* This is reality. To read about cherry stencils while your potatoes boil.

That's what my neighbour does. 'When you don't want to tax your brain,' she says, 'but you don't want to be doing nothing, then you read *Prima, Bella* and *Best…*But they're a waste of time if you've got anything else to do. I

don't keep them in the living room any more.' They're kept strictly for the potato-watch in a corner of the kitchen. Not in an embarrassed or shifty way, you understand. Just for convenience. That's where they're read. (*Guardian,* 1 January 1987)

Whether Hanson's neighbour exists or is a figment of journalistic licence, she illustrates the critical distance a reader *may* adopt. But while the magazine may be kept for the potato-watch and have little significance beyond that, it should not be forgotten that *Best's,* as well as *Prima's* contents may also be incorporated into a traditional femininity or be read and used in more serious vein.

But assuming for the moment a potato-watch reading mode which does not tax the conscious brain, can *Best* still speak to and nurture the unconscious mind?

Some day…

Taken at face value, the new practical magazines are exhausting to contemplate. Their readers, it appears, hold down a job, look after children, run a household *and* find time to do all this domestic craft activity: a driven lifestyle unrelieved by real time off. But does such an emphasis in these magazines mean readers *are* into practical home-making in a big way? Doubtless some are. Yet Iris Burton commented that:

> For the most part, even with *Prima* readers, the magazine is a kind of wish fulfilment thing. It's, 'I think I'm capable of doing this. I want to because I'm a loving wife, mother.' Etc. etc. And, 'I'm sure I'd be very, very, good at it.' But, you know, finally, 'I'm not going to have any time to do it so I'll look at the pictures, put it away, save the magazine.' In the case of *Prima* there are probably people with two years worth of *Prima* and they're still saying, 'One of these days I'll do that pattern for the trousers and I'll stipple that vase.' (Personal interview, 1988)

Burton may not be correct in imputing to women the association between engagement in these activities and a successful femininity ('I'm a loving wife, mother') but what is raised is the idea of magazine as wish-fulfilment. That these magazines have found a response from women because, as Walkerdine puts it, their content maps 'onto the crucial issues around desire' (1984:182). If the latter is the case then:

What we have to examine is the materiality of the fantasies created in these [magazines], in terms of what is spoken, what is understood, and how it is resolved. (Walkerdine, 1984:167)

In examining fantasy in the areas of craft/practical home-making and fiction I shall not adopt wholesale Walkerdine's psychoanalytic framework but I do want to borrow the notion that our feminine identities are constantly being struggled

over. According to Jacqueline Rose, 'the unconscious constantly reveals the "failure" of identity'. She argues that:

> 'Failure' is not a moment to be regretted in a process of adaptation, or development into normality, which ideally takes its course… Instead 'failure' is something endlessly repeated and relived moment by moment throughout our individual histories. It appears not only in the symptoms, but also in dreams… Feminism's affinity with psychoanalysis rests above all…with this recognition that there is a resistance to identity which lies at the very heart of psychic life. (Cited in Walkerdine, 1984:181)

The 'failure' of identity is most evident in *Best's* fiction which clearly speaks of women's unease about an identity defined in relation to men's demands on them, yet narratively has trouble in delivering the longed-for, but vaguely specified, alternative.

As far as craft and practical home-making is concerned, there is an irony in the situation whereby a domestic craft revival occurs at the juncture where there is no longer either a practical or ideological need for women to do it. The amounts of money saved are negligible and anyway the woman doing it is not likely to be someone who needs to be a prudent housekeeper; similar products could be purchased and it is no slur on her femininity simply to go to the shops. But then craft and practical home-making cannot be the nub of a certain kind of fantasy until those practices are no longer part of the daily grind. If, as Burton outlines, women are not largely engaged in these tasks, only wish that they were, what is it that the doing and the made objects represent?

To try to answer that I want to make a slight detour to consider the meaning of artefacts in our lives. In *Material Culture and Mass Consumption* Daniel Miller (1987) discusses how artefacts provide fine discriminations—more easily perceived than verbally expressed—about our values and interests. He suggests that:

> Divisions which may appear important in language and ideology may be absent from object differentiations while distinctions within the domain of artefacts may constitute important divisions which would elsewhere be ignored or denied. (106)

In their assembly on our person or in our homes artefacts are proof of who we are; they carry our histories. (Such that sitting amongst packed-up tea chests, no longer buttressed by carefully arranged belongings, our sense of self may crack. Moving house is often one of life's crises.) But the expressive environment we have created can also silently signify tension, differences and the fragmentation of self.

In an article concerned with taste and aesthetics in Western thought and culture, Dick Hebdige (1987) also deals with the meaning of artefacts. He

illustrates his complex and theoretical arguments by reference to an American Thunderbird car, owned and lovingly cared for by a Turkish Cypriot, Mr H, who lives in a terraced street in Hackney and for twenty years has worked on the night shift in a bakery. Drawing on the work of Jean François Lyotard, Hebdige describes Mr H's car as an 'impossible object' and 'sublime', where 'sublime' is

> the socio-political aspiration to 'present the unpresentable', to embody in the here and now the that-which-is-to-be, is deemed untenable: 'paranoid'. The sublime by definition is *das Unform*—that which is without form, hence that which is monstrous and unthinkable. (65)

Lyotard himself emphasizes that the term sublime points to contradictory feelings: 'a feeling of both pleasure and displeasure, together' (Lyotard, 1989: 22). Thus Mr H's car is an 'impossible object'

> not because it encapsulates an unattainable dream of opulence—I don't really think that Mr H craves to join the international jet set or to live inside an episode of *Dallas*. It is impossible because it serves so many different (symbolic) functions, supplies so many diverse needs—the need for recognition and respect, yes, but also the need for something to care for and care about, to bring up, cultivate, stand in awe of. It is impossible because it is a screen on to which so much inchoate yearning and desire are projected that putting them into words is impossible. (Hebdige, 1987:72)

Mr H appears as a humble man and yet his choice of 'impossible object' is the grandiose gesture men, but less often women, can indulge in. Women too have recourse to impossible objects but they are less spectacular, less visible (unless it is the fashion item: stiletto, red lipstick) and 'the impossible' is spread, I suspect, across a diversity of small artefacts.

Arguably, magazines are one. As a mix of the prosaic and the utopian and as small treats women buy themselves, are not they 'a screen on to which so much inchoate yearning and desire are projected'? Iris Burton was surprised at the 'love affair' *Prima* readers had with their magazine:

> Once they have the magazine they can't stop handling it, talking about it and one *Prima* reader will try and convert the rest. It's an extraordinary phenomenon. (Personal interview, 1988)

Craft and practical home-making is 'the impossible' because it too 'serves so many different (symbolic) functions, supplies so many diverse needs'. Bringing it out of the closet in the late 1980s is neither actual return to, nor symbolic hankering for, the good/bad old days of the 1950s. But it does mark tensions around femininity and women's relation to mass consumption. At one and the same time there is a desire for a more leisured life with time and space to allow

pursuit of these activities, *and* a defiance about 'independence', which currently means doing it all: child and husband care, paid work.[25] At one and the same time there is a desire to personalize and 'undo' mass consumption (even if it is only a soft toy made from a kit, courtesy of magazine, the object becomes more emotionally loaded, made with love, than one bought over the counter) *and* an increasing dependency on the tastes shopping provides: mix 'n match from Laura Ashley or BHS.

Meanwhile, in the absence of spare time, looking at pics, reading instructions is sublime (pleasurable and unpleasurable) surrogacy for practices that might construct another self; another place for women?

The fantasy of *Best's* fiction is striking: an unconscionable number of men are literally bumped off in what Burton aptly calls 'oddball' fiction.[26] Feminine narratives in that they deal with relationships between women and men, they diverge from an earlier genre in which, as one *Woman's Own* fiction editor put it, they would not leave readers 'at the gas oven door'. In this respect short stories had much in common with problem-page letters. The positive narrative closure associated with agony aunt's resolution of problems also characterized their denouement. In story as on problem page, in the terms Carter suggests, the fragmented 'I' is coherently reassembled. Evidently made of sterner stuff, readers of *Best's* fiction as well as its problem page are left more troubled. Story endings defy optimism and the final narrative equilibrium tends to throw up, not resolve, ideological problems: the 'I' remains disturbed.

There are, however, certain devices that distance readers from events: an element of being over-the-top; the advanced age of protagonists given that 81 per cent of *Best* s readership is under fifty-five. Nevertheless, the lives of the elderly do also link back to those of the young.

In The Waiting Game' (John Mount, *Best,* 26 August 1988) there are three women: a middle-aged woman who quietly observes life in her coffee shop; Penny, a visitor that morning; and an old and sad woman, a regular frequenter. Most of the story is Penny's who, young and hopeful, awaits the one-time and no-good boyf riend. When he does not turn up Penny leaves but seeks reassurance from the woman behind the counter: 'I'm sure that it's next week he meant us to meet. Don't you think so?' The woman, at this late point in the story, now named, replies 'Oh I certainly hope so'. And it is her observations on the old lady that resolve the narrative:

> Kathy Stevens closed the door of the Copper Kettle behind the old lady and watched as she shuffled away, clutching her two crumpled carrier bags. In the twelve years that she had been running the coffee shop she had watched the old lady go through this ritual every Friday without fail, and every week Kathy found herself wondering just who it was that had caused the old lady so much pain all those years ago. Where was he now? Had he any idea what he had done? She wiped a glass with her tea towel and watched

as she crossed over the road and disappeared among the throng of shoppers. Kathy shook her head sadly and went back to her work.

The splitting of the female subject in this story hardly offers readers security. Penny may come to her senses or she may continue to be fooled. Kathy is wise—has she already been in Penny's shoes?—yet is represented alone and outside of the action. And the old bag lady is in a world of her own. Does she come to the coffee shop to day-dream about what might have been? Or is she still trying to come to terms with the pain? Either way it is not a cheering thought.

Longevity of marriage is also common, facilitating a more convincing portrayal of women's weariness. Marcia in 'A House with Potential' (Anne Goring, *Best,* 7 April 1989) reflects on her life with a selfish husband and day-dreams about their retirement home:

> Home. She'd stared that morning around the dark kitchen with its battered furniture and the damp flagged floor that tortured her chilblained feet in the winter. She'd felt hope rise like a fledgling bird in her breast at the prospect of leaving… A warm house with a kitchen full of gadgets that would be so easy to use that she would never be tired again.

Emma in The Legacy' (Valerie Edwards, *Best,* 17 March 1989) muses on how, now that Bert, with his 'smelly pipe', 'the eyes…brilliant with spite and malice', and 'that peculiarly penetrating voice', is dead 'she could have an after-lunch snooze every day if she chose'.

Both Marcia and Emma contrast their youthful romantic dreams, when their menfolk were heroes, with the later harsh realities of their shared daily lives. Both look on as their men lie dying, actively choosing not to call the alarm or lift the finger that would prevent death. These self-conscious moments differ from the acts of fate pushing the narrative to its resolution in more conventional short stories. In the latter, protagonist is victim of the outside chance; in the former she takes destiny, though in a passive mode of deciding *not* to do something, into her own hands. From the window of the property she is being shown around, Marcia watches her husband drown. She reflects that he had not helped her (when she was losing her baby); why should she help him? Turning to the estate agent who has not noticed the drama, she comments thoughtfully: 'D'you know, Mr Dale, I do believe you're right about one thing. This is a property with a great deal of potential.' Now she can spread *her* wings.

Domestic imagery is recurrent. In The Perfect Wife' (Monica Porter, *Best,* 22 May 1988), Veronica's dreams of being an actress are 'buried somewhere beneath all the years, beneath the pink mounds of smoked salmon' on the dinner table she has so perfectly prepared. Celia puts the finishing touches to a sampler, 'Behind every man…there is a woman' (Buzz Rodwell, *Bella,* 11 March 1989). As her boss hangs it on the wall and stands back admiringly, she stabs him to death with her scissors. It then transpires that she is in a psychiatric institution

for murdering an earlier boss-cum-lover who had risen to fame on the back of her unacknowledged efforts. Just as she feels her *doctor* has now done. (Did the 'Needlecraft Book Society', whose adjacent advertisement Picture it in Cross Stitch' shows a sampler of a smiling family, appreciate quite what it was rubbing shoulders with?) Emma's dreams of

what she will do with The Legacy' lovingly revolve around home:

> She'd be able to afford the re-thatching now, and a decent bathroom. Pink, she thought. She'd always favoured a pale pink suite, a good-sized bath and washbasin; maybe she could even have Bert's room turned into a nice cloakroom, with a proper modern loo and everything. And she'd make a special-occasion trip into Tiverton to order one of the Dralon velvet suites she'd always coveted. If she moved the china cabinet to the right-hand side of the fireplace…the settee could be squeezed against the wall with an inch or two spare…
>
> Perhaps she'd treat herself to some new curtains too. It had been years since she'd treated herself. Surely she deserved it. 'Yes,' she thought to herself, 'it's about time I considered my needs.' (*Best,* 17 March 1989)

As a loaded terrain for women the domestic provides an evocative vocabulary that most readers will recognize.

Emma's dreams are in fact foreshortened. As she enters her cottage after the funeral, Bert (her brother, though he may as well have been her husband) returns to haunt her. His parrot, Pegleg, has finally learnt to mimic the penetrating voice which pierces her eardrums:

> 'Oh no,' Emma breathed, covering her ears. 'I could put up with any revenge except for this!'
>
> But even as she said it, she knew that Bert wouldn't be listening to her. After all, he never had.

Emma, like other protagonists, has not won; she and reader are left troubled. The 'I' remains with 'a residue of…anxiety, resentment— "I can't forget"' (Carter, 1989:72). Whereas a conventional happy ending tends to leave the reader complacent and with problems temporarily massaged away, the sad ending tends to provoke self-reflection. Happiness does not require explanations, misfortunes do. Why have events turned out like this? Does it have to be this way? Without a closure of the conventional sort, feminine behaviour is less easily kept in place. The final word *is* Emma's and her reflections are an indictment of Bert and maybe of men more generally: 'Bert wouldn't be listening…he never had'.

What readers actually make of these stories will depend on their situation. But the themes of romantic hopes dashed; of women having little space or time to cultivate their own lives when bending themselves all ways to fit in with family interests; of being at others' emotional and domestic beck and call, but

themselves able to demand little; and over the years getting very weary of it all, can appeal to a much wider constituency than the domestic emphasis in these stories might first suggest.

That these stories so often centre on women killing or allowing death is a sign of desperation. Especially since they are also characterized by a degree of fatalism and pessimism about women's position and men's behaviour ever being different. The resistance to patriarchal relations is, in the end, a 'passive dissent' (Clarke cited in Roman and Christian-Smith, 1989:13).

A terse coda

At the time I was beginning to think about *Best* and *Prima* and bought the first issue of *Essentials,* the annual statistics from *Social Trends* were published. One item, reported in the press, but not commented upon, caught
my eye:

> The Samaritans received 2.5 million calls for help in 1986, with the largest number of callers being women aged between 25 and 39. (*Independent,* 14 January 1988)

In real life women do not bump off husbands (even if they do divorce them in large numbers).[27] But is the reality and underside of what is representationally dealt with in *Best* these pleas from women for someone to listen to *them?*

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Notes

1 By postfeminism I am not referring to the notion that feminism has been and gone, like some passing fad, but to political and cultural shifts whereby:

a) some of the presuppositions of a feminist practice and its aims are less oppositional than taken for granted, and

b) feminism has burgeoned into a rich if sometimes contradictory mix of feminisms such that the boundaries between feminist and non-feminist have become fuzzy. Furthermore,

c) a postfeminist cultural practice seems to allow the possibility of a *play* around modes of femininity not simply antagonism towards, or an evacuation of, this oppressive territory.

2 See for example, Evans and Thornton (1989), especially chapter 4, 'Women fashion and postmodernism'; Hebdige (1988), 'The bottom line on Planet One: squaring up to *The Face';* McRobbie (1989), Introduction and chapter 2, 'Second-hand dresses and the role of the ragmarket'; Mort (1988); Winship (1985).

3 Launch dates are: *My Weekly* 1910; *People's Friend* 1869; *Woman* 1937; *Woman's Own* 1932 and *Woman's Realm* 1958; *Chat* 1985 (*Chat* began life as a tabloid but by 1990, after it had been bought by IPC, was looking much like *Bella* and *Take a*

Break); *Best* 1987; *Bella* 1987; *Hallo!* 1988; *Me* 1989; and *Take A Break* 1990. There is also *More!* 1988, a fortnightly, for the graduates from *Just Seventeen.*

4   Pre 1985, and omitting publications intended largely for the under sixteens, there have been at least twenty births.

5   The two exceptions were *Candida,* brought out by IPC in 1972, and *Eve,* launched the following year by Morgan Grampian. Neither magazine survived a year.

6   Figures are an estimate based on the Audit Bureaux of Circulation figures. The estimate is rough because in 1958 a circulation was not available for *People's Friend.*

7   New monthly magazines' launch dates are: *Chic* 1984; *Elle* 1985; *Prima* 1986; *Essentials* 1988; *Marie Claire* 1988; *New Woman* 1988.

8   *Essentials* is published under the title of *Avantage* in France (which edition it is worth noting is printed in Italy), *Práctica Mujer* in Spain and *Pratica* in Italy (*The Independent,* 19 June 1989).

9   Table refers to women readers only. Taken from the National Readership Survey, January to June 1988 (JICNARS, Joint Industry Committee for National Readership Surveys).

	Age						Social Grade					
	15–24	25–34	35–44	45–54	55–64	65+	A	B	C₁	C₂	D	E
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Estimated % of population 15+	18	17	16	13	13	22	3	15	23	25	17	17
Woman's Own	20	21	17	15	11	15	2	13	25	29	18	13
Woman	18	23	18	15	11	14	3	14	27	28	17	12
Best	29	23	17	12	10	8	2	11	27	31	20	8
Bella	27	22	18	11	10	11	1	12	22	31	22	11
Family C.	13	24	22	17	12	12	5	18	28	28	12	8
Good Housekeeping	12	20	19	15	17	17	8	26	29	19	9	8
Woman & Home	8	12	16	18	20	26	5	22	29	21	12	11
Prima	26	29	20	12	7	5	3	16	29	29	16	7
Essentials	32	25	17	13	10	4	3	17	28	29	17	7

This table shows well both the younger and more down-market profiles of thenew launches compared with those of the longer-established competitors. Forexample, 52% of *Best's* readers are under 34 as compared to 41% of *Woman'sOwn's* and *Woman's.* 53% of *Bella's* readers are in social grades C₂D ascompared to 45% of *Woman's.* Likewise 55% of Priwa's readers are under 34as compared to 32% of *Good Housekeeping's* and 46% of *Essentials'* readersare in social grades C₂D compared to 33% of *Woman and Home's.*

10   Although I draw examples from, and refer to, the range of new practical magazines, the arguments I am making apply best to *Best,* which I have researched more closely than the others.

11   As Elizabeth Wilson points out, for middle-class women the process was more one of 'proleterianization': having lost her servants, like her working-class counterpart, she too now had to perform domestic drudgery. (Wilson, 1980:12–13) Somehow, though, the vacuum cleaner and refrigerator improved the status of housework and of the housewife (from manual, i.e., dirty and heavy work, to mental, i.e., clean and supervisory work).

12   The Equal Pay Act was passed in 1970 but not enforced until 1975.

13   Bridget Rowe has kept up a campaign around rape but the emphasis is on increasing sentences for rapists. A suitably Thatcherite, and tabloid, aim?

14 Since the launch of the Euromagazines, *Woman* and *Woman's Own* have begun to increase their practical coverage and tried to offer greater value for money. At the same time, by summer 1989 *Best* seemed to have edged its way just slightly towards its older rivals, so that by the time this is in print it is likely that the differences I am suggesting between the two sorts of magazine will have blurred.

15 IPC apparently has copyright for most of the titles denoting or connoting femininity. That might explain why European publishers have adopted newstyle titles, but not why IPC itself has chosen similar ones.

16 For a more detailed comparison of *Best* and *Woman's Own* than I can engage in here see Winship (1990).

17 IPC has again adopted this plan with *Me.* It has 'tip strips' to be used in the kitchen with a hanging clipboard (also a launch-issue freebie) which can also be used as an ordinary writing clipboard, as I regularly do.

18 Young magazines like *Smash Hits* and *Just Seventeen* also adopt something of a fax approach (20 fax about favourite pop stars) and they too are certainly busy magazines. But they do not combine that with the personal-organizer work ethic. Rather, there is a humour running throughout the magazines; nothing is to be taken too seriously (McRobbie, 1988).

19 I have purposely not wanted to suggest the stylish filofax which has yuppie associations (Campbell and Wheeler 1988), although Braithwaite and Barrell refer to *Essentials* and its give-away ring binder as 'a sort of magazine Filofax' (1988: 113). The personal organizer, by contrast, is the more mainstream copy. A clumsier artefact, it is owned by provincial businessmen, not London Trendies.

20 *Best* and the other practical magazines were launched before the explosion of concern about green issues. What seems like the escalating scale of environmental damage and ecological imbalance would suggest that at the macro level as well as at the micro and personal level I am talking about we are in serious danger of flipping out of control. Since in my view the two are connected it will be interesting to see in which direction these magazines shift as green issues dominate the social and political agendas.

21 It should be noted though that sometimes even the most compulsive of texts, for example, romantic fiction, which the non-enthusiast might consider to be spoilt by reading the end first, is not read as its linear narrative dictates. Janice Radway details how women readers check out the last pages to make sure it is going to provide the resolution and satisfaction they want (Radway, 1984:70). It is also worth noting that it is only relatively recently and partly because production processes now make this easier, that women's magazines recognize that the reader can as well flick backwards as forwards, and therefore keep going as much interest in their back pages as in their front.

22 Rosalind Coward has noted that 'health has stepped into the fading arena of sexuality'. That would certainly seem to be the case in *Best* where sexuality is notable by its relative absence. Coward argues that 'previously it was through sexuality that individuals were required to make decisions about how to use their bodies and exercise the greatest degree of self-determination…[now] it is health which has picked up the discourse of traditional religious morality'. (Coward, 1989: 31)

23 In Iris Burton's view one sign of *Best's* flexibility was its appeal, judging from letters she had received, to older women. They did not feel that the magazine

concentrated on those topics of interest only to young, upwardly mobile women. Yet you would be hard put to find one photo of a woman over fifty let alone of retiring age. And the readership figures do not suggest that *Best is* read by a large proportion of older women. See note 9.

24 By Spring 1990 *Best* had in fact installed an agony aunt, Elizabeth John, but without getting rid of the 'You reply' format.

25 Between 1971 and 1987 the proportion of married women in employment grew from 47% to 60%. There was a large rise in the economic activity rate of the 25–44 age group: in 1971 it was 52.4%; in 1987 68.6% and the projection for 1991 is 72. 5%. Between June 1983 and June 1988 the number of employees in employment rose by over 1 million, with virtually all the rise accounted for by females, both full time and part time (*Social Trends,* 1989).

26 When *Best* opted for this kind of oddball story they were few and far between. But once authors, mainly female, realized this was what the magazine and its readers relished they began writing them in large numbers.

27 Seven out of ten divorce petitions are filed by wives (*Social Trends,* 1989).

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CONSUMERISM RECONSIDERED:
BUYING AND POWER

MICA NAVA

Consumerism has become a powerful and evocative symbol of contemporary capitalism and the modern Western world. Indeed, in the climate of 1991, faced by the crisis of the environment and the radical transformations in Eastern Europe, it is perhaps the most resonant symbol of all. Highly visible, its imagery permeates the physical and cultural territories it occupies. Modern identities and imaginations are knotted inextricably to it. This much is clear. However, intellectually and morally it has not been easy to make sense of, and troubling questions have been raised both for the left and for the right. Within the social sciences and cultural studies it has been a recurring concern, particularly since the consolidation of the consumer society in the aftermath of World War II, and investigations of it have spanned a range of disciplines and theoretical debates. It will not come as a surprise to hear that these accounts offer no consistent explanations or responses. Some authors have condemned consumerism, others have welcomed it. Less predictable, perhaps, is the conclusion that the different arguments are not easily categorized politically. In fact, theories about consumerism (they are of course not unique in this respect) appear to owe as much to the general cultural climate of their formation, to their intellectual genealogy and to personal disposition, as they do to a consistently worked out political critique.

My project in this paper then is to trace the history of these different theorizations in order, first of all, to draw attention to the influence of the political and intellectual contexts from which they emerged, and secondly, to show how they in turn have shaped and placed limits on the way in which consumerism has subsequently been thought. More specifically, I want to show how, during the 1950s and 1960s, both Marxists and conservative critics expressed their condemnation of mass consumption in similarly élitist terms, and how, partly in reaction, this produced during the seventies and eighties a very different body of work in which the consumer and consumption are defended and even celebrated. I shall go on to argue that these very distinct perspectives have in combination prevented us from recognizing the potential *power* of consumerism —and here I am talking about power in a quite orthodox pre-Foucauldian sense— a power which has been brought into focus latterly by the acceleration of Green activism, by South African boycotts and other instances of consumer sanction

and support. Finally, I shall propose that consumer politics is able to mobilize and enfranchise a very broad spectrum of constituents, and moreover that it is productive of a kind of utopian collectivism lacking from other contemporary politics.

In order to arrive at this point in the theoretical narrative it will be necessary to transverse what may be fairly familiar terrain. But this will be more than the routine recitation of what has already been thought and said, because it is only through mapping out the debate and its historical and textual context that it becomes possible to identify the theoretical and political implications of certain routes.

Masses and manipulation

It is worth starting, therefore, in classic vein, with a few lines on Marx, who set the parameters of subsequent debate by centring his analysis on production. Within this framework, consumption and markets were relatively neglected and the twentieth-century integration of the producers of commodities into capitalist society as consumers was not anticipated. For Marxists and socialists since Marx, political consciousness and political organization have been concentrated at the point of production, around labour. The potential of activism at the point of consumption has barely been addressed. Instead it is Marx's less-developed ideas about the relation of commodity fetishism to false consciousness that have proved most influential in this intellectual field and have laid the groundwork for twentieth-century thought not only about consumption, but also about 'mass culture' and 'mass society' more generally.

From the 1930s onwards, some of the most significant contributions to this general area were made by the group of cultural theorists known as the Frankfurt School and one of the best known of these is the essay by Adorno and Horkheimer on the culture industry (1973). Although written in 1944 during the authors' exile to the United States, and containing detailed references to specific American cultural forms, its roots are, in fact, firmly embedded in the inter-war period of Europe, especially, as Swingewood has pointed out, 'in the failure of proletarian revolutions…during the 1920s and 1930s, the totalitarian nature of Stalinism' and the rise of fascism (1977: vii). Hence their despair and contempt for what they see as the stupidity and malleability of mass society. They are deeply pessimistic not only about the power of the working class to resist control and indoctrination but also about the nature and quality of the capitalist culture industry itself, and their essay is a relentless invective against this. Products of the culture industry, like cinema, radio and magazines, are distinguished from 'art' and are condemned repeatedly for their uniformity, falseness, vileness, barbaric meaninglessness and much more. Although Adorno and Horkheimer offer more nuanced versions of their thesis elsewhere (Held, 1980) this is probably their most influential piece and is significant not only for its critique of the culture

industry as deliberately anti-enlightenment, but also for its expression of the authors' profoundly élitist attitude both to popular culture and to the consumer.

Their élitism was not unusual during this period, nor were they alone in referencing this model of the easily manipulated subject. Their European formation and experiences are likely to have influenced various aspects of their theorization, not just their perception of the working class, and are probably implicated in their anti-Americanism and their intellectual and cultural snobbery. European critiques of American democracy and its impact on culture were of course not new and date back to de Tocqueville who was among the first to publish his trepidation about this question. From the 1930s onwards, a nostalgic defence of high cultural forms and contempt for mass culture and mass consumption becomes a recurring theme in cultural criticism of both the left and right; it appears in the work of Adorno and Horkheimer as well as, for example, in that of the conservative English critic F.R.Leavis, though expressed in very different language. America, as the country where these cultural transformations are most clearly taking place, poses the greatest threat in this respect and becomes itself a kind of metaphor for all that is disturbing about modernity and democracy.

This process is accelerated in the post-war period. Dick Hebdige in his analysis of its specific British manifestation has called it 'the spectre of Americanisation' (1988). He draws attention to the way in which a number of significant authors of the forties and fifties from quite different political perspectives (he singles out Evelyn Waugh, George Orwell and Richard Hoggart in particular) use similar imagery to express their anxiety about the advent of a vulgar and materialistic American-inspired consumer culture. He then goes on to explore aspects of this anti-Americanism among official arbiters of taste within the institutions of design and broadcasting. The pervasiveness of these sentiments during this period are attributed in part to the GI presence in Britain during and immediately after the war, and to the public mythologies this generated about American affluence and style.

The mythologies must also be set in the context of wartime and post-war austerity. As Frank Mort has argued (1988) 'austerity' consisted of more than just the inevitable wartime constraints; it was part of a socialist ideology, articulated by the Labour Party, in which Fabianism blended with Evangelicalism to form a moral as well as economic rejection of consumerism. In fact, Walvin (1978) has pointed out that the immediate post-war period saw a boom in popular leisure activities despite austerity measures, and that mass consumption for the working class was increasingly seen by them as an entitlement after the deprivation of the war and post-war years. Richard Hoggart, twenty years earlier, was certainly not willing to see the picture in this light (1957). Influenced by the socialist culture described by Mort, he saw the mass consumption which emerged with fifties affluence as a deeply destructive force. It represented an erosion of the authentic elements in working-class life. Like Adorno and Horkheimer, he considered it largely a consequence of American influence

(though unlike them he barely touched on capitalism as a force) and he deplored its hedonism, materialism, 'corrupt brightness', 'moral evasiveness' and 'shiny barbarism'. Like Leavis and others to the right of him, he feared a 'levelling down' of cultural standards. His view of the ordinary person and of the effect the reviled new culture would have on him or her is however harder to place; on the one hand he bemoans the passivity and corruptibility of the people; on the other, though less often, he refers to working-class cynicism and what he calls the 'I'm not buying that' stance. Perhaps it is familiarity with his subjects that prevents him from altogether suppressing the notion of working-class agency.

This can be compared with Adorno and Horkheimer's far more sealed off version in which the amorphous acquiescent masses appear to possess no resources that can enable them to escape the repressive and manipulating powers of capitalist consumer culture. They are almost as vulnerable as Orwell's satirized proles in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* which was first published about the same time. Herbert Marcuse, also a member of the Frankfurt School in exile but a more significant figure in American intellectual history because of his influential contributions to political thought and the radical student movement during the 1960s, emerges from the same camp. He too has a deeply pessimistic view of the ability of the masses to resist the encroachment of consumer culture.

In *One Dimensional Man* (1964) Marcuse argues that liberal consumer societies control their populations by indoctrinating them with 'false needs' (analogous to false consciousness). People are manipulated through the media and advertising into believing that their identities will be enhanced by useless possessions. In a much quoted passage which encapsulates his position, he writes:

> People recognize themselves in their commodities; they find their soul in their automobile, hi-fi set, split-level home…social control is anchored in the new needs which (the consumer society) has produced. (Marcuse, 1964: 24)

Thus the desiring and buying of things creates social conformity and political acquiescence. It militates against radical social change. In similar vein, Betty Friedan, author of *The Feminine Mystique* (first published in 1963), a seminal text for the early women's liberation movement, reports on an interview with an executive of an 'institute for motivational manipulation' whom she is outraged by, but clearly believes:

> Properly manipulated ('if you are not afraid of that word', he said), American housewives can be given the sense of identity, purpose, creativity, the self-realization, even the sexual joy they lack—by the buying of things…I suddenly saw American women as *victims* of…[their] power at the point of purchase. (Friedan, 1965:128; original emphasis).

We see then that Marcuse and Friedan operate with a similar set of assumptions about ordinary men and women whom they see as victims of conspiratorially constructed and deliberately wielded capitalist powers of manipulation.

With hindsight this seems like a rather crude theoretical perspective but, as I have argued elsewhere (Nava, 1987), the position of these two influential authors must be understood in the context of the political and cultural climate in the United States during the previous decade. The fifties saw an unprecedented growth of the consumer society, a term which signifies not just affluence and the expansion of production and markets, but also the increasing penetration of the meanings and images associated with consumption into the culture of everyday life. This was the moment of the consuming housewife—whose 'problem with no name' is the object of Friedan's study—locked into femininity, motherhood, shopping and the suburban idyll. During this conservative period marked by the Cold War, 'consensus' and conformity, the free choice of goods came to symbolize the 'freedom' of the Free World (Ewen, 1976). This period also saw a general shift to the right among US intellectuals, many of whom expressed support for American affluence, the 'end of ideology' and the political status quo (Ross, 1987; Brookeman, 1984). J.K.Galbraith was among the exceptions here; a liberal critic of capitalism, he also distinguished himself from Marxist economists by criticizing their exclusive focus on production, an important point in the context of this argument to which I will return. Along with the Marxists, however, and many to the right of him, he believed that advertising could create demand—in Marcuse's terms 'false needs'—and that desires could be 'shaped by the discreet manipulations of the persuaders' (1958).

We see here the influence of Vance Packard, whose book *The Hidden Persuaders,* first published in 1957, enjoyed both popular and academic success. He argued that advertisers, drawing on the specialized knowledge of 'motivational analysts' and using methods like 'psycho-seduction' and 'subliminal communication', were able to 'manipulate' people into making particular purchasing decisions. Packard's thesis slotted into widely held anxieties about conspiracies, brainwashing and thought control which were boosted by right-wing alarm about communist influence during the Korean War. This reached its cultural apogee in the film *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962) in which the Soviet professor in charge of 'conditioning' the American hero declares portentously that his victim's brain 'has not only been washed, as they say, it has been thoroughly dry cleaned'. Despite the fact that there has been no serious substantiating evidence for the existence of 'brainwashing' or even of the 'manipulation' described by Packard and picked up by some of the other theorists I have referred to (indeed, it is estimated that as many as 90 per cent of new products fail despite advertising; Schudson 1981; see also Sinclair 1987), its association with the unknown and unconscious elements of the mind seems to have given it a continuing if uneasy credibility both at popular and more academic levels, on the left as well as on the right.

The pertinent features for my argument which emerge from this picture of the cultural theorists of the fifties and sixties are then first of all a lack of respect for the mentality of ordinary people, exemplified by the view that they are easily duped by advertisers and politically pacified by the buying of useless objects. Their pursuit of commodities and their enjoyment of disdained cultural forms is cited as evidence of their irrationality and gullibility. The idea that certain sectors of the population are particularly vulnerable to the deleterious effects of cultural forms, namely women, children and the less educated, is an assumption running through Packard's book and repeated elsewhere. Stuart Ewen has drawn attention to the way in which one of the recurring comic figures in American television dramas during the 1950s was the wife who grossly overspent on a useless item of personal adornment like a hat (1976). It is interesting in general to compare cultural representations and theorizations of the (female) consumer with those of the (male) producer. The activity of the consumer ('labour' would be considered an inappropriate term here) is likely to be constructed as impulsive and trivial, as lacking agency, whereas the work of the producer, even if 'alienated', tends to be 'hard', 'real', dignified, a source of solidarity and a focus around which to organize politically. This is partly a consequence of the peculiar privileging of production within the economic sphere to which I referred earlier, but in the light of the fact that women control 80 per cent of buying (Scott, 1976), it must also be interpreted as part of a wider misogynistic view of women's reason and capabilities. Indeed, the ridiculing of women shoppers may be a way of negotiating the anxiety aroused by their economic power in this sphere.

Another characteristic of these texts is the assumption that a distinction can be made between 'true' and 'false' needs. The common position here is not that desires and longings (of the masses in particular) are denied, but that they are considered less authentic and 'real' if they are gratified by material objects and escapist TV rather than, say, political or 'creative' activities. There is a failure to recognize that all desires are constructed and interpreted through culture, that none exist independently of it, and that a hierarchy of authenticity and moral correctness is quite impossible to establish (for a further discussion of this see Kellner, 1983). In addition, almost all the theories I have been discussing are tainted in some measure by a distaste for 'vulgar' display and 'low' culture; there is a lack of perception of the subtle — and not so subtle—meanings that shopping, commodities and popular cultural forms are capable of offering. Finally, many of these analyses also contain an entrenched belief in the monolithic and determining nature of capitalism and hence in the power of state institutions and the culture industries. Combined into a general approach, these elements have created a commonsense way of looking at consumerism, a dominant intellectual paradigm, which has continued to shape thinking in a range of related fields from media studies to feminism, despite the advent of alternative analyses which are critical of all these perspectives.

Thus, more recent work in the area which continues to operate at least in part with similar assumptions includes Haug's *Commodity Aesthetics* (first published

1971, reissued 1986) which 'contains distinct echoes of F.R. Leavis' (Frith 1986); Judith Williamson's *Decoding Advertisements* (1978) which, although innovative in its semiological analysis of ads, hangs on to a notion of production as a much more 'real' aspect of people's identity than consumption; Gillian Dyer's *Advertising as Communication* (1982) which condemns advertising for manipulating attitudes and distorting the quality of life, and, like Galbraith, refers to 'basic' needs (though the particularly virulent critique of Dyer's book by Myers (1986) strikes me as unjustified); and *All Consuming Images* (1988), the latest book by Stuart Ewen, US theorist of consumer culture for whom 'conspiracy' and 'manipulation' remain important concepts. Jeremy Seabrook also fits into this camp. A popular author in the tradition of Hoggart, he has written often and polemically over the last decade about the way in which capitalism and the materialism of the consumer society have corrupted the young and the working class. He describes the process as one of 'mutilation' in which children are 'carried off in the fleshy arms of private consumption…to be systematically shaped to the products which it will be their duty to want, to compete for and to consume' (1978:98). Within media studies as well as among politicians and pressure groups like that of Mary Whitehouse, the continuing debate about 'effects' (of sex and violence in particular) addresses many of the same theoretical questions.

Certain strands within feminism must also be included here. Thus the idea of 'positive images', a widely pursued cultural strategy of feminists, apart from containing rather simple notions of what is positive, also reproduces the belief that images persuade in an unproblematic fashion. More important though in its consequences, is the very topical debate about pornography. Those feminists who argue for censorship and the suppression of certain kinds of images base their demands on the assumption that images work in specific and predictable ways to produce specific forms of behaviour, and that there are no mediating factors, like context, desire and knowledge, that determine our interpretations and affect our actions. In this version of the argument it is men who are perceived as the cultural dopes, as particularly vulnerable victims of indoctrination, because it is presumed (in an odd *non-sequitur* fashion) that if they see pictures of sexualized bodies they will be persuaded to go out and commit violent acts against women.

There are very definite echoes in this particular debate of several of the elements I outlined earlier. Apart from the belief that people (men) can be easily manipulated, there is also an élitist evaluation of the quality of representation in which some sexualized bodies are aesthetically and morally more acceptable than others. One could go on. But this is not the point of the article. What I want to draw attention to are some of the general conventions in the theorization of consumerism, which also extend beyond consumerism.

Pleasure and resistance

Despite its pervasiveness however, the general approach outlined above has not been the only way of understanding these issues. Over the last twelve years or so a growing number of authors have insisted on rereading and reinterpreting the component elements of consumerism and have produced work in which the buying of things has been explored within a quite different framework. Among the forerunners here was Ellen Willis who, in a little-known piece, wrote a succinct defence of consumerism in which she stressed the labour, the rationality and the pleasures involved, and criticized authors such as Marcuse for their élitism and sexism (1970). At about the same time, Enzensberger criticized Marcuse's notion of false needs (1970). However, it was not really until the late seventies that work structured by this new critical perspective began to emerge in quantity, along with the discipline of Cultural Studies of which it forms an integral part.

The pertinent studies here have taken as their subject matter aspects of popular culture like youth styles and fashion, popular TV and cinema, romantic fiction and women's magazines, advertising and shopping (examples include Hall and Jefferson, 1975; Hebdige, 1979; 1988; Morley, 1980; McRobbie, 1989; Wilson, 1985; Steedman, 1986; Mort, 1988; Mercer, 1987; Carter, 1984; Radway, 1987; Winship, 1987; Nava and Nava, 1990). There are, of course, significant differences between these contributions, differences of emphasis and level of analysis, but what this body of work has in common is a reassessment and revalorization of popular cultural forms and popular experience, of the meanings consumption produces. Formed in part out of a reaction against the earlier body of work, it constitutes a kind of intellectual and political break, part of a wider loss of confidence in the primacy of the economic and the correspondence between class and class consciousness. This is despite a general allegiance to the left among these authors. Extremely significant here has been the influence of Stuart Hall who, as director of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham and more recently as a member of the *Marxism Today* editorial board, has played a major part in setting the critical agenda. Of particular relevance to this article has been his insistence over the last twelve years that we understand how it is that Thatcherism has managed so effectively to harness popular desires and discontents (Hall, 1988). These questions have found a renewed importance over recent months with the political developments which have taken place in Eastern Europe and the centrality to these of consumer imagery.

Thatcherism is then one feature of the context in which the Cultural Studies approach has developed. Another has been feminism. Over the last decade feminism has been transformed from a narrow movement to an extensive presence—recognizable but not always identified by name—which has permeated cultural production from *EastEnders* and *Cosmopolitan* to the curricula of academe. The feminist concern in the work I have been describing

has been to undermine earlier perceptions of women as cultural victims and to examine what is rewarding, rational and indeed sometimes liberating about popular culture. This ties in with the Cultural Studies emphasis on experience, an important component in emerging audience studies. Radical literary theory has also contributed to the general climate in which this approach has developed by asserting that literary value exists not in any absolute sense, but as a construction of the discipline of literary criticism (Eagleton, 1983) and the high culture/low culture divide has been challenged both within this perspective and from a number of other directions (see e.g., Jameson, 1979). Semiotics and psychoanalysis have also been influential: semiotics through its emphasis on the sign and the symbolic nature of commodities; psychoanalysis in its attention to the unconscious processes in psychic life and the contradictory nature of identity.

More specifically, then, David Morley has done important work on TV and audience in which he stresses the diverse ways in which messages are read; identity, cultural and political background and viewing context all contribute to the range of possible meanings that any particular text can produce (1980; 1986). Feminist work on romantic fiction and TV soaps has explored the progressive elements in these popular forms and has also insisted on acknowledging the complex ways in which the texts are understood, as well as the ambiguous pleasures that they offer (Modleski, 1982; Radway, 1984; Radford, 1986). Erica Carter, in her study of consumer culture in post-war Germany, has explored the symbolic meanings of nylon stockings and how wearing them to work could operate as a form of protest and confrontation in a dreary and routinized existence: 'Consumerism not only offers, but also continually fulfils its promise of everyday solutions…to problems whose origins may lie elsewhere' (Carter, 1984:213). Thus it can indeed provide women with the 'sense of identity, purpose and creativity' claimed by Friedan's advertising executive, and should not for this reason be condemned. This question is also addressed by Carolyn Steedman (1986) who understands her mother's desire for commodities in post-war Britain as a form of defiance, a refusal to remain marginalized in class terms:

> From a Lancashire mill town and a working-class twenties childhood she came away wanting: fine clothes, glamour, money; to be what she wasn't. However that longing was produced in her distant childhood, what she actually wanted were real…entities, things that she materially lacked, things that a culture and a social system withheld from her. (Steedman, 1986:6)

My own recent research into the way young people watch TV commercials is another example of this general approach (Nava and Nava, 1990). The argument here is that young people are not easily duped, that they consume advertisements independently of the product which is being marketed, and in the process bring

to bear sophisticated critical skills; the advertisers respond to this appreciation by frequently directing their ads at young people—as the most literate sector of their audience—regardless of what is being sold. Frank Mort (1988) and Angela McRobbie (1989) have similarly focused upon the agency of the consumer in their respective studies and the way in which young people, far from simply waiting for the latest fashions to appear, play an active part through the creation of their own street styles in what is manufactured and marketed.

Dick Hebdige's work (1979; 1988) has had a seminal influence on the development of this general perspective in (among other things) its attention to the symbolic meanings of style and to the way in which the image constitutes not only an integral aspect of contemporary identity but also a form of power and resistance: 'commodities can be symbolically repossessed in everyday life and endowed with implicitly oppositional meanings' (1979:16). Kobena Mercer has explored similar questions in relation to black hair-styles, which he has argued should be seen as 'aesthetic "solutions" to a range of "problems" created by ideologies of race and racism' (1987:34). Poststructuralist and postmodernist analyses which stress the overwhelming significance of the sign have of course been very influential here, particularly Baudrillard's work on consumption and the political economy of the sign (1988) in which he argues for a notion of the social 'as nothing other than the play of signs which have no referent in "reality" but only derive their meanings from themselves and each other' (O'Shea; but note also Alan O'Shea's interesting argument about the similarities between Baudrillard and the Frankfurt School in their view of the masses). Much of the work that falls into this second intellectual paradigm, however, has been quite historically and experientially rooted and hence is not postmodernist in the sense referred to above.

Much of it has also drawn quite heavily on psychoanalysis. There have been different influences here, all fairly diffuse, but in a cumulative way all emphasizing the complexity of culture and our interaction with it. Lacan's work has been important, particularly his stress on the subject as fragmented and incoherent. We are simultaneously both rational and irrational; we can both consume and reject what we are consuming; desire permeates everything but is by definition never fulfilled. Melanie Klein's emphasis on the relationship between the child and mother has also been influential; Gillian Skirrow, for example, has drawn on Klein's insights about the child's fascination for the internal working of the mother's body in order to explore the particular appeal of video games to boys (1986). Another application of psychoanalytic theory to consumerism, this time from the object-relations school, is offered by Robert Young (1989) who celebrates the pleasures and comforts of sound systems and computers as transitional objects comparable to the teddy bear.

What all these texts have in common is a legitimizing of the consumer and of the commodities and cultural forms that are *actively* consumed by him or her. Also in common they stress the *materiality* of the symbolic. Explorations of power are confined to this level, to the symbolic and discursive (Nava, 1987). In

this intellectual paradigm, the proximity of consumption to production, and hence to the economic, remains unaddressed.

Consumerism and power

It is paradoxical that the orientation of this second paradigm towards fantasy, identity, meaning and protest, although productive in uncovering the agency of the consumer, has, in its flight from the economic, succeeded in obscuring the radical potential of consumption almost as much as the earlier paradigm in which the consumer was so denigrated. What I want to do now is to retain the insights about the popular and imaginative appeal of consumption and combine them with an exploration of the possibilities of political activism at the point of consumption.

   As I have already pointed out, traditional Marxists and socialists have tended to ignore this general area both theoretically and politically. Their concentration has been uniquely centred on *production* as the motor and therefore also the Achilles heel of capitalism. The 'new movements', like feminism and gay and black organizations, have tended, on the one hand, to orient themselves towards changing consciousness through cultural interventions and, on the other, to demanding a greater share of state resources. Although politically all these groups are likely to have been involved in the boycott of South African goods (for example), within the conceptual framework that I am examining, the potential of activism at the point of consumption has been largely neglected. It is ironic therefore that among the first to point the way at the theoretical level to these possibilities have been liberal economists like Galbraith, through their emphasis on the importance of the consumption process within capitalism. The progressive implications of this intellectual avenue are considerable. Galbraith argued in *Economics and the Public Purse* (accessibly summarized by himself for the less knowledgeable in *MS* magazine, 1974) that women's labour in the management and administration of consumption was as integral to the continuing existence of capitalism as the labour involved in production, but that in neo-classical economics its value was concealed. Here is a point that can yield a considerable amount for feminists (see e.g., Weinbaum and Bridges, 1979) but it is not one to be pursued right now. What is useful for the argument that I am developing in this paper, is the emphasis on the significance of the consumer, and hence by implication, on her potential power.

   There is, however, no consideration of this potential in the standard consumer literature. What is referred to as 'consumerism', particularly in the United States, is a movement which had its political heyday there during the sixties (Nader, 1971; Cameron Mitchell, 1986) when it was bracketed with communism and other dangerous 'isms' by some of the giant corporations. It now exists throughout the Western world (see e.g., the Consumers Association and *Which* magazine in Britain) albeit in more moderate form, and continues as before in its task of disseminating information and increasing regulative legislation through

the exercise of pressure on government agencies. Its object has consistently been to protect and enlighten the consumer by monitoring the quality of prices and goods, encoding and publicizing consumer rights, and so forth. In political terms the movement has engaged activists but only in pursuit of the goals identified above. There appears to have been no extrinsic political purpose, no exercise of a more general political power.

Consumer co-operatives from the time of Sydney and Beatrice Webb onwards have also focused predominantly on securing low prices and good quality for their members, although they have done this not only by increasing restrictive legislation and consumer rights, but also by developing their own manufacturing and retailing bases. This has sometimes included the establishment of self-help networks. However, as with the consumer rights movements, objectives have normally been restricted to the protective; there has been no attempt to wield political power over a wider range of issues.

Consumer protection then must be distinguished from consumer boycotts which have specific political goals that do not necessarily operate to the material advantage of the consumer. Boycotts date back to at least the eighteenth century and have historically been employed as a political tactic where other forms of struggle are blocked or seem inappropriate. A notable example has been Cesar Chavez who, inspired by Gandhi and frustrated by corrupt and racist American trade union practices, successfully mobilized (during the 1960s and 1970s) what eventually became an international boycott of Californian grapes and other farm produce in order to improve the working conditions of Mexican-American labourers. As he put it, The boycott is not just grapes and lettuce, essentially it's about people's concern for people' (Levy, 1975:256). Product boycotts are a more common form of protest in the United States than in Britain and have increased in recent years (Savan, 1989). Economic sanctions against South Africa and boycotts against firms with interests there, like Barclays Bank, have also proved successful. Consumer boycotts have become one of the most effective weapons available to the black population in South Africa. Disenfranchised in terms of the conventional democratic processes, consumer boycotts enable them nevertheless to wield a measure of direct and instantaneous power. A recent example reported in the *Guardian* (Ormond, 1990) involved a white shop-owner who entered the political arena on behalf of the Conservative Party and whose business, as a consequence of the ensuing boycott by blacks, dropped by an extraordinary 90 per cent within two days.

Until recently this form of political activism has involved relatively small numbers of people. However, during the last year or so we have seen an extraordinary growth in a consumer practice which encompasses not only boycotts but also selective buying (i.e., the buying of products which conform to certain criteria). This has undoubtedly been stimulated by the global environmental crisis, and fuelled by government inaction. Concern about these issues and the conviction that consumer activism can be an effective form of protest has resulted, according to *The Times* (30 June 1989), in an estimated 18

million Green shoppers in Britain. According to the *Daily Telegraph,* 50 per cent of shoppers operate product boycotts of one kind or another (*Ethical Consumer* 3, 1989) and, to date, *The Green Consumer Guide* (Elkington and Hailes, 1989) has been on *The Sunday Times* best-seller list for almost a year and has sold 300,000 copies. Green consumerism has clearly captured the popular imagination to an unprecedented degree. This is because it offers ordinary people access to a new and very immediate democratic process: 'voting' about the environment can take place on a daily basis. People are not only *not* duped, they are able through their shopping to register political support or opposition. Furthermore, they are able to exercise some control over production itself, over what gets produced and the political conditions in which production takes place.

This is facilitated through the type of information researched and disseminated by magazines like *The Ethical Consumer* (first issue published in March 1989, as yet with a small circulation) whose objectives are 'to promote the use of consumer power' and to expand the democratic process. Another example is *New Consumer,* 'the magazine for the creative consumer', which was launched in August 1989. These magazines include both analytical articles and reviews of products and services. Instead of assessing items in terms of value for money (as *Which* does) the criteria used are whether or not manufacturing companies have involvements in South Africa or other 'oppressive regimes'; whether they recognize trade unions, have decent work conditions and responsible marketing practices; whether they are involved in the manufacture of armaments or nuclear power; and finally what their record is on women's issues, animal testing, land rights and the environment. Articles in back issues of *The Ethical Consumer* include an evaluation of the politics of Green consumerism (their position here is that the Green focus on particular items detracts attention from the overall profile of producer companies) and a review of the US magazine *National Boycott News* in which all organized boycotts are reported. At a more general level the argument is that consumer activism occurs where normal democratic processes are inadequate and where there are 'widespread feelings of powerlessness'. It is clear from reading *The Ethical Consumer* and *New Consumer* (as well as the less analytical *Green Consumer Guide*) that the consumerism advocated by bodies of this kind is neither liberal nor individualistic. On the contrary, it is radical, collectivist, internationalist and visionary; implicitly socialist in its analysis of capitalism, it differs in the importance it attributes to the point of consumption.

In addition, one of the great strengths of this new consumer activism is its appeal to groups who historically have been marginalized from both the production process and the politics of the workplace and government, namely women and the young. They are, however, central to the process of consumption. I have already referred to women's importance in this sphere: it is not only that they have expertise and confidence here, and that they wield 8 0 per cent of purchasing power; it is also that they are uniquely placed in relation to environmental issues—to food contamination, health care, pollution and, more grandly, the future of the planet—in their continuing capacity as bearers of

responsibility for nurturing and for the details of everyday life. This combination has constructed them as a constituency pre-eminently suited to the new consumer activism. And, indeed, women's magazines regularly run articles about these questions. The Body Shop, which comes out clean on every one of *The Ethical Consumer* criteria, has been one of the most successful shops of recent years. There are many examples which confirm women as political *subjects* in this process, as active, knowledgeable and progressive.

The young constitute another group for whom consumer activism is particularly appealing. As large numbers of celebrated individuals from the music and entertainment industry have become involved in popularizing environmental politics, its sandals-and-renunciation image has given way to something much more exciting and fashionable. Ark, the campaigning organization and production company, is an example of this. Environmental consumerism is also urgent and worthwhile. Perhaps part of its success lies in its appeal to a kind of youthful apocalyptic pessimism as well as, simultaneously, to fantasies of omnipotence and reparation. Utopian and collectivist, it offers something to identify with, to belong to. It is also effective. Although the young may not have as large an income as older members of the population, they—like women—have a disproportionate influence on marketing decisions, as is well known among advertisers. Although relatively powerless in orthodox political terms—many of them are not even eighteen—they too are enfranchised in the new democracy of the market-place.

However, the political left appears to have ignored the potential of this kind of politics and has excluded it from its repertoire of popular activism (despite the emphasis in certain sectors on the political importance of consumerism's appeal, Hall and Jacques, 1989). There are various reasons for this. First of all, at a general level, the formative traditions of Marxism, trade unionism and the Labour Party seem to have rendered the left incapable of imagining political struggle outside the workplace, the local state or Parliament. This is ironic, because, of course, in its extreme and 'terrorist' forms, consumer activism is far more effective and much easier than striking and picketing. An example which highlights the vulnerability of the point of consumption (as well as the greater take-up of consumer politics in the United States, perhaps because of their weaker labour history) is the case of the cyanide painted on two Chilean grapes which resulted in the loss of $240m and 20,000 jobs (Jenkins, 1989). This apart, where the left has looked specifically at consumerism (see e.g., Gyford, 1989) it has tended to be in terms of the collectivity versus the individual; the liberal and defensive consumer rights movement has not been distinguished analytically from the mass exercise of consumer power. Yet another factor which may well have inhibited the serious attention of the left to consumer politics is the degree of crossover between the Green movement and the alternative health movement. Criticisms of individualism, essentialism and mysticism which have been levelled against the health movement (Coward, 1989) are likely to have spilled over on to consumer activism. Then of course there is the continuing saga of

moralistic distaste—with resonances of the Hoggart/Marcuse/ Seabrook paradigm —for too much emphasis on acquisition and the buying of things and for what is seen as the licensing of consumer hedonism by, for example, *Marxism Today.* Finally, on the political left as elsewhere, shopping continues to be trivialized through its (unconscious?) association with women's work and the feminine.

Theorists of consumption and the consumer society have also been at fault here. They too have failed to consider these questions (see e.g., Featherstone, 1990). But as I argued earlier in this article, cultural theory cannot be easily disentangled from its wider context, and some of the political points listed in the previous paragraph have also deflected a more academic scrutiny of these issues. Yet current world developments have made this a particularly urgent matter: we are confronted not only by the crisis of the environment, but also by the frailty of socialism in Eastern Europe and the apparent expansion of capitalism into a global system. In this climate it has become all the more imperative to investigate consumerism: to look at how historically it has linked up with other forms of politics; to tease out its contradictions and limits; to examine more closely the proposition that its theoretical marginality owes something to misogyny; to explore its relation to identity and desire; and of course also to develop a sharper understanding of its economic operations and its potential power. It may well be the case that late twentieth-century Western consumerism contains within it far more revolutionary seeds than we have hitherto anticipated. It has already generated new grass-roots constituencies—constituencies of the market-place—and has enfranchised modern citizens in new ways, making possible a new and quite different economic, political, personal and creative participation in society. The full scale of its power has yet to be imagined.

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POPULAR MUSIC AND POSTMODERN THEORY

ANDREW GOODWIN

The debate about postmodernism now intersects popular music at a number of distinct levels:

1 MTV/music television In the work of Tetzlaff (1986), Fiske (1986), Aufderheide (1986), Wollen (1986), and Kaplan (1987), the postmodern nature of MTV and music television is identified through diverse criteria such as: the fusion of modernist high art and more popular cultural discourses; the abandonment of grand narrative structures, including the deconstruction of both realist and modernist regimes of representation, and the deconstruction of the TV schedule itself; the presence of intertextuality and pastiche; and in what Kaplan sees as a 'schizophrenic' posthumanist address.

I have criticized these ideas elsewhere (Goodwin, 1987a), and do not wish to take up much space here to repeat my argument. The objections to the postmodern interpretation of music television can engage with its reading of the relation between film theory and music videos, its near-total neglect of the music itself, its failure to locate the clips adequately within the context of pop-music culture, or its superficial understanding of pastiche. Here I will just note one of the major *empirical problems:* MTV itself has spent the years since the emergence of postmodern theory blatantly defying the terms of postmodernity. While there are superficial parallels, such as the creation of a category of 'postmodern video' (which I will discuss later), the organization of both the video clips and the MTV text itself has been increasingly traditional and convention-bound. Most notably, it is strange to discover that a media form whose postmodernity was supposedly secured partly through its 24-hour 'flow' and abandonment of traditional scheduling practices, has—over the last five years—progressively established rigid program slots and begun utilizing the routine practices of TV scheduling, often around the deployment of conventional broadcast-TV genres.

2 The music itself Pop music artists and texts have also been employed as textual 'examples' which are used to illustrate theories of the postmodern (Jameson, 1984 and 1988). In relation to the music itself, I will try to show later in this essay that while it is possible to discover categories of postmodern music and perhaps practices of postmodern consumption, the grand claims of

postmodern theory remain insubstantial as an account of the current state of popular music.

3 *Technology* Technological developments within the popular music industry suggest interesting parallels with some postmodern theses, although these correspondences have only been taken up by advocates of postmodern theory in passing. Specifically, these critical strategies miss both the historicizing function of sampling technologies in contemporary pop (Goodwin, 1988) and the ways in which textual incorporation cannot be adequately understood as 'blank parody'. We need other categories to add to pastiche, which demonstrate how contemporary pop opposes, celebrates and promotes the texts it steals from (see Goodwin, 1987b). I have also noted that the technologies of sampling and musical theft are not used only to construct images that speak of fakery and forgery (McRobbie, 1986); they are also used to invoke history and authenticity—the most obvious recent example being the collaboration between sixties soul star James Brown and eighties rappers Full Force, in making a record significantly titled *I'm Real.*[1] We need to know how pastiche actually relates to the blurring of historical periodization, where it has often been overlooked that the 'quoting' of sounds and styles acts to historicize contemporary culture (although Lipsitz, 1986/7 and Straw, 1988 are atypically careful on that question).

4 *Structures of Feeling* Postmodern theory has provided one interesting entry point for understanding the consumption of popular music, and this lies in Fred Pfeil's (1985 and 1988) deployment of Raymond Williams' notion of 'structures of feeling'. Pfeil argues from a sociological and psychoanalytic point of view, delineating the material base of the post-war American 'PMC' (professional-managerial class) in the break-up of urban centres, the (related) decline of patriarchal authority, the rise of television at the core of a public sphere, and the growing importance of leisure consumption in the construction of identity. This sociological account of a structure of feeling suggests rich possibilities for a historical materialist account of postmodern culture (see Grossberg, 1988)… although it also alerts us to what may be its limited social purchase.

This, ultimately sociological, project remains underdeveloped empirically but suggests a mode of analysis that is less concerned with identifying postmodern texts, in favour of looking at the emergence of reading formations which celebrate pastiche, and ahistorical modes of consumption. (The account has the merit of also explaining the popularity of postmodern theory amongst those American academics who hail from precisely that reading formation.)

5 *'Postmodern rock'* 'Postmodern rock' has itself emerged as a sales category within the music industry, and within music television (for instance, in MTV's programme *Post Modern MTV*).

This essay confronts these developments with the aim of clarifying what is at stake. Here I share Hebdige's (1988) carefully qualified view that the term 'postmodernism', while hampered by its incoherence, is so wide-ranging that it must be describing something. (Other, more cynical, observers have suggested that the label is the fanciful creation of critics and scholars, but that this process

brings into being a 'real' cultural category, through its effects on producers, critics and consumers.) My central argument is that the debate is currently confused by the presentation of binary polarities within limited fields of reference, and through the mixing up of two categories that need to be distinguished—cultural capital and aesthetic form. I will begin by examining two aspects of the debate about postmodernism and pop music, which have their roots respectively in arguments about aesthetic form (see Lukacs, *et* al., 1977) and in the analysis of cultural capital most eloquently developed by Pierre Bourdieu (1980 and 1984). I will proceed to show that confusion between these two debates has led to incoherence in the postmodern analysis of pop and rock music. Finally, this paper will consider the emergence of 'postmodern rock' as a generic category within the music industry.

In search of the postmodern text

Confronted by the divergent nature of postmodern accounts of culture, scholars have tended to work very ineffectively with the specific empirical demands of understanding popular music. The debate about postmodernism is certainly not notable for the precision of its definitions; as many commentators have observed, it is often unclear whether postmodernism is a cultural condition or new theoretical paradigm. There is also confusion around the question of whether postmodernism deploys irony, or a post-ironic discourse of 'blank parody'. And in the analysis of cultural capital, postmodernists have often confused *intertextuality* with the mere blurring of generic categories, and then gone on to read the collapse of aesthetic distinctions into these processes, as if they necessarily imply the latter, which they do not.

Some writers argue that rock music is postmodern by virtue of its eclecticism, through its foundations in interracial, intercultural and intertextual practices (e.g., McRobbie, 1986; Hebdige, 1988; Weinstein, 1989). Lipsitz (1986/7) provides the most fully empirical version of this position. His argument is acute and important, although in my opinion its references to postmodernism are largely redundant. Empirically, Lipsitz cannot be faulted for his observation that rock music is characterized by extraordinary eclecticism and intertextuality: specifically, his argument relates postmodern concepts to Mexican-American musics developed by musicians in East Los Angeles, including the internationally popular band Los Lobos. But, like all accounts which use eclecticism as their founding postmodern motif, it is hard to see what is being *explained* here. The logic that one typically finds is this: postmodernism employs eclecticism and intertextuality; rock music is eclectic and intertextual; *ergo,* rock music is postmodern. But what does this tell us about rock music or postmodernism, other than that they might explain *each other?* (In other words, postmodernism might as well be a parasite *description* of post-war pop, rather than an explanatory paradigm.)

If the textual specifics of pop's genres are merely redundant (if, in fact, one believes that rock, pop and contemporary music *tout court* are postmodern in some more general sense), then what is the point of analyzing them? There is an urgent need to clarify the terms of this debate. Unsurprisingly, given the confusion of its terms, the identification of postmodern texts has ranged across an extraordinarily divergent, and incoherent, profusion of textual instances: John Cage, Steve Reich, Laurie Anderson, Philip Glass, Brian Eno, Talking Heads, Prince, punk rock, Madonna, Bruce Springsteen, the British 'New Pop' (Thompson Twins, Scritti Politti, Duran Duran, Thomas Dolby, etc.) Sigue Sigue Sputnik, rap, hip-hop, Los Lobos, and World Beat music have all been cited as quintessentially postmodern.

This *edecticism of theory* is extremely unhelpful. It stems in part from an initial confusion of two debates, which postmodern theory fails to distinguish. Firstly, there is a debate within 'serious' avant-garde circles about the trajectory of modernist music in the age of Philip Glass, Steve Reich and Terry Riley (see, for a brief and accessible account, Jones, 1987). Secondly, there are debates within popular music about pastiche and authenticity. 'Modernism' means something quite different within each of these two fields, for in the first area it has been the dominant aesthetic strategy, while in the latter it remains—within different genres—everything from utterly marginal to coexistent with older, realist forms. Hence the term 'postmodern' not only describes different musical (and extra-musical) strategies, it also relates quite differently to the field of cultural power, and to the possession of cultural and economic capital in each area.

This confusion is obvious in an early formative attempt to understand rock music in postmodern terms—Fredric Jameson's (1984) deployment of rock and roll in the initial moment of bringing postmodernism into the cultural studies academy (a position which has recently been restated without revision in Jameson, 1988).[2] Commenting on Jameson's analysis of architecture, Mike Davis has recently written that 'Jameson's postmodernism tends to homogenize the details of the contemporary landscape, to subsume under a master concept too many contradictory phenomena which, though undoubtedly visible in the same chronological moment, are none the less separated in their true temporalities' (Davis, 1988:80). The same can be said of Jameson's analysis of music, which offers a reading of rock history that places The Beatles and The Rolling Stones, on the one hand, as examples of 'high modernism' and The Clash, Talking Heads and the Gang of Four, on the other, as 'postmodern'. What this broad classification of music elides, however, is the necessity of identifying musical differences within the two historical moments which suggest more specific, if still crude, parameters of rock 'realism' (The Clash) and rock 'modernism' (Talking Heads, Gang of Four), and of rock 'authenticity' (The Stones) versus pop artifice (The Beatles).

Historically, the music of The Beatles and The Rolling Stones articulated the social and political currents of the 1960s counter-culture. The Clash and The

Gang of Four (the latter being explicitly Marxist in orientation) addressed political questions from a standpoint associated with the emergence of punk rock —a quite different counter-cultural form which eschewed the love and peace message of The Beatles or the nihilistic hedonism of The Stones in f avour of blunt left-wing critiques of life in Britain in the late 1970s.

Looked at from the point of view of aesthetic form, The Beatles and The Rolling Stones need to be differentiated: if the development of modernism is at issue here, the increasingly artificial (up until the last, posthumous 1970 LP *Let It Be*) of The Beatles is modernist (self-conscious, ironic, knowingly artificial), in contrast with the 'authentic' rough-edged blues inflections of The Stones and their lyrical themes of sexuality and violence. The Beatles, it might be argued, typified a notion of musical 'progress', where The Rolling Stones (with the exception of their Beatles-influenced album *Their Satanic Majesties Request*) simply repeated a rhythm and blues formula which typifies a form of rock realism (e.g., in both the social content of their lyrics, and in the transparent, unselfconscious nature of the music itself). That The Stones have mined this groove almost unrelentingly is apparent in the critical responses and marketing strategies which framed their 1989 LP *Steel Wheels* — an album that was reviewed and discussed in terms of its 'truth' to an older rhythm and blues aesthetic. (Paul McCartney, in contrast, spent 1989 and 1990 on tour with a band who play extracts from The Beatles' inaugural art-rock album *Sgt Pepper*.)

When we move on to the music of the late 1970s, there is another very clear distinction to be made between realist and modernist musics. The Clash are, in this context (and in many other ways) the Rolling Stones of the punk era with their 'realist' raw sound, their incorporation of 'black' musical genres (R&B for The Stones, reggae for The Clash), and in the effort to be transparent in their musical and lyrical communication with the audience. Talking Heads[3] and The Gang of Four are explicitly modernist in orientation—offering such classic modernist techniques as ambiguity, self-reflexivity, use of shock effects and deconstructions of song structure and tonal rationality.

Jameson's first efforts to grapple with rock music from within an account of the postmodern condition remain, then, empirically quite unconvincing-a criticism that has often been made of the *detail* of the textual illustration deployed in what must now be considered the founding essays of a Marxist postmodernism. But while later efforts to work with this theory in relation to popular music are certainly better informed about the music, there is a noticeable shift in orientation, away from Jameson's concern with the relation between social formation and aesthetic form, in favour of an emphasis upon cultural capital and the apparent dismantling of distinctions between art and mass culture.

But is it Art?

In recent debates about postmodernism, it is often quite casually assumed that we are now living in an era where distinctions between art and mass culture have collapsed. Popular music is sometimes used to establish this argument, and in postmodern writing on pop the elision of high art and pop culture is usually taken for granted. A central problem in these accounts, as I will show, is the conceptual tension that exists between postmodernism's insistence on eclecticism in contemporary culture, and its focus on the apparent conflation of art and mass culture.

Much of this work suffers from two debilitating limitations. Firstly, it often misreads the argument about cultural capital as though the presence or absence of particular aesthetic discourses could be discerned through the identification of timeless historical features, instead of undertaking a conjunctural analysis of the mobilizing categories of cultural power. As Andrew Ross has reminded us, via Bourdieu: 'Cultural power does not inhere in the contents of categories of taste. On the contrary, it is exercised through the capacity to draw the line between and around categories of taste; it is the power to define where each relational category begins and ends, and the power to determine what it contains at any one time.' (Ross, 1989:61). Within the field of contemporary popular music, the processes of selection, exclusion, celebration and denigration are used by critics, fans and the musicians themselves in ways that continue to sustain the operation of forms of cultural capital. In particular there remains a tendency to identify as 'serious' those acts who subvert and undermine the conventions of the pop song, often in ways that are classically modernist. This process operates *within* generic categories as well as across the whole field of pop, so that art/pop distinctions can be made (and *are* made, by fans and critics), respectively, in mainstream pop (Pet Shop Boys/New Kids On the Block), soul (Prince/Michael Jackson), rock (Sonic Youth/U2), heavy metal (Metallica/Def Leppard), and rap (Public Enemy/MC Hammer). The briefest of conversations with almost any fan of one of the above acts would confirm that arguments about art versus trash remain rampant within today's pop.

Secondly, postmodern theory establishes its categories too easily, by defining discourses of art and mass culture through the use of extremely limited terms of reference. A standard strategy is the presentation of two bi-polar opposites which are held to signify art, on the one hand, and mass culture, on the other. The writer will then show how they have increasingly converged, thus magically bringing the truth of postmodernism to light. What is usually missing are all the various genres of pop music which lie *outside* the binary opposition, and which may run counter to the analysis.

Jon Stratton's (1989) account of three key moments in rock history and their relation to aesthetic categories pays much closer attention to musical meanings and is more historically specific in its arguments than Jameson's early typology. Yet it, too, contains a curious flaw. Stratton identifies a convergence of popular

and high cultural discourses in rock's third 'moment', *circa* 1975–9, when a 'postmodern' aesthetic (Stratton's description) of minimalism in form, combined with excessive affect, straddles both popular culture (the punk rock of The Sex Pistols, for instance) and the art-music of Brian Eno, Laurie Anderson and Philip Glass. This makes sound musicological sense, but its usefulness is diminished by the sociological realities of pop consumption. Eno, Anderson, and Glass *are* consumed as high-art, with the exception of Eno's work with the pop group Roxy Music (and even there he was portrayed as the freakish, arty boffin, to Brian Ferry's populist neo-Sinatra), and Anderson's freakish 1983 hit single 'O Superman'. For many pop fans, Eno is known as someone who helps to produce the rock group U2 (and perhaps Talking Heads), not as an avant-garde or postmodern composer. In that area his work is closely associated with art-rock; so much so that a recent musicological account of Eno places his solo work firmly in a tradition of 'progressive rock' (Tamm, 1989)—a category which should be (as I will demonstrate later) anathema to postmodernism. Musicologically, Stratton's account is persuasive; sociologically it demonstrates the limits of text analysis (however well-grounded historically) when confronted with the actual practices of pop consumption.

What the postmodernists frequently miss in their accounts of popular music are the continuing presence of the categories of the popular and the artistic. There are, in a sense, two Brian Enos: Eno the avant-garde musician and Eno the popular record producer—and the audience for *both* Enos is probably infinitesimal. Scholars accustomed to listening to Laurie Anderson, Philip Glass and even Talking Heads run the danger of greatly overestimating their impact in pop culture, and—most importantly—the crucial elements of cultural capital that attach to them.

It seems to me almost redundant to have to point out the sociological specifics that place, say, Philip Glass in the category of art-pop, but in this context it seems important to spell out the details: Glass does not produce music which is recognizably like a pop song; lyrics, where they are used, deviate from the conventional modes of address of pop[4] and the structural and (poly)rhythmic content of his pieces deviates from rock convention. For instance, while much has been made of the superficial resemblance between the music of Philip Glass and rock through their shared emphasis on *repetition,* this misses the point that Glass's music takes this technique to extremes that are rarely deployed in pop. Because he defies the recognized forms of rock and pop music, Philip Glass albums are usually found in record stores under headings such as 'Classical', 'Jazz' and (a telling insult) 'New Age'. His concerts take place in halls associated with classical and modern music performances, rather than rock clubs or stadia. In solo performance, the staging of his music reflects the 'serious' conventions of the venue (e.g., the absence of dramatic use of lighting, stage set or visual effects). When the Philip Glass Ensemble performs its operatic works, the staging is highly visual—but the conventions are those of the art-rock 'concept' performance (Pink Floyd, Genesis, etc.), not a rock and roll show.

Glass (1987:3–26) himself makes the influence of modernist artists like Beckett, Brecht, Pinter and Godard quite explicit here—influences that are also very clearly at work in the performances of Laurie Anderson.[5] The behavior of the audience is in either case reverential and distanced, listening attentively to the music, rather than moving, cheering or singing along.[6] Artists like Glass, Eno and Laurie Anderson in fact occupy a space within contemporary pop that reproduces the position of progressive rock and art-rock in the 1960s and 1970s. It is music for college students and middle-class graduates who have the cultural capital to decode the significance of its heightened use of repetition, its minimalism, and its shifting of attention away from the pop star and towards multi-media contextualization. The music may share an abstract principle with rock and roll (a basis in the use of repetitive structures), but its sound and staging hardly resemble that world at all.

I want now to develop these criticisms, by making two points, which operate at discrete levels. First, empirically speaking, each of the different attempts to substantiate the legitimacy of postmodern theory operates by bracketing out vast areas of contemporary pop that contradict the theory. Secondly, and more fundamentally, each of these approaches establishes the category of postmodernism by setting up binary oppositions from within extremely limited (and quite divergent) fields of reference. Categories of the postmodern which are constructed around oppositions such as punk/pop, authenticity/artifice, rock/New Pop, modernist rock/postmodern pop and so forth each leave out too much— indeed, the *absences* are precisely what allows each account to seem coherent. (This problem in its turn derives partially from the fact that analysts have tended to focus on just one or two aspects of the debate about postmodernism, thus generating entirely different, and sometimes contradictory, positions using the same conceptual field. The problem, in other words, is that the conceptual field is itself unstable.)

A way out of this confusion is suggested, in my view, by Susan McClary's (1989) careful analysis of avant-garde and postmodern musics. McClary's definition of the postmodern is tight and focused, centering on art-music which abandons the 'difficulty' of high modernism (e.g., Schoenberg) in favor of popular, pleasurable devices such as tonality, melody and simpler rhythms. It thus represents an account of the postmodern which (reasonably, if unusually) relates that category to modernism itself. For McClary, the quintessential postmodern composers are Philip Glass, Steve Reich and Laurie Anderson. Her account offers a definition of postmodern music which has the merit of being clearly argued and coherent. However, in revealing the limited appeal of postmodern music (none of these artists are mass sellers) amongst audiences for 'serious' music, McClary's arguments undermine a central tenet of postmodern theory— the notion of a convergence of art and mass culture.

The confusion arises because postmodern theory has mixed up two different issues—the identification of eclecticism (which pervades rock and pop) and the collapse of distinctions based on cultural capital (which remain pervasive,

especially *within* the field of rock music, as Frith and Horne (1987) have shown). When this mistake is laid over the misapprehension that modernism operates in the field of pop music just as it does in 'serious' modern music, the result is conceptual chaos. Whatever its inroads in the visual codes of television (Brechtian devices in prime-time programming, modernist jump cuts in soap-powder commercials, etc.), the much neglected *aural* codes of music are a different matter. While modernist techniques are accepted by the gatekeepers of high culture, in the market-place of commerce the sounds of dissonance are not so welcome. Today's rap music, like punk rock before it, encounters extraordinary difficulty in gaining airplay and media exposure precisely because its *sounds,* as much as its sentiments, are not conducive to a commercial environment. The music is, in classic modernist tradition, *disruptive.* It would be interesting to consider further the reasons for this disjuncture between visual and aural modernism in the market-place. For my purpose here, I simply wish to note the pertinence of Georgina Born's comments:

> It is odd and significant that music is so often cited as the success story of postmodern reintegration… Effectively, these cultural theorists collude in asserting that the postmodern *rapprochement* has been achieved… It is not only by ignoring the hegemonic 'other' of powerful, contemporary high culture, and failing to deconstruct its rhetoric of *rapprochement,* that writers have arrived at their optimistic and utopian postmodern perspectives. The assertion that modern music culture is moving beyond the modernist/populist divide to achieve a postmodern synthesis or reintegration must be based on empirical study…rather than making facile assertions, it is necessary to analyse real socio-economic and aesthetic differences that exist. (1989:70)

This seems to me to be the problem, for instance, with Lawrence Levine's (1988) tendency to see the collapse of cultural categories in the work of The Kronos Quartet (a San Francisco act who have worked with Philip Glass, and whose repertoire includes string quartet arrangements of Jimi Hendrix songs) as an example, along with numerous instances where jazz has been incorporated into high cultural institutions. It might be possible to cite The Kronos Quartet as postmodern, but as with Philip Glass, they clearly have very little to do with popular culture as it is actually lived by fans of rock and pop. And the argument about jazz was countered in the late 1970s by Roger Taylor (1978), in an essay written against what he saw as the *incorporation* of a radical musical form via its integration into the category of 'Art'.

There is a parallel with Taylor's account of jazz within rock music itself. It is noticeable, for instance, that postmodern accounts do not, as they might be tempted to do, invoke the development of art-rock following the 1967 release of The Beatles LP *Sgt Pepper,* or the subsequent flowering of 'progressive rock', which had both modernist (Velvet Underground, Henry Cow, Soft Machine,

Hatfield and the North) and neo-classical (Emerson, Lake & Palmer, Genesis, Pink Floyd, Yes) aspirations. There is evidence for an art/mass culture fusion in a variety of elements here: the specific use of texts from high culture (beginning with Procul Harum's appropriation of Bach's Suite No. 3 in D major in 'A Whiter Shader Of Pale' and continuing with pieces such as Emerson, Lake & Palmer's versions of Aaron Copland's 'Hoedown', Ravel's 'Bolero'—which in structure significantly parallels the later work of Philip Glass—and Mussorgsky's *Pictures From An Exhibition*), neo-classical performances featuring rock bands with symphony orchestras (Deep Purple, Rick Wakeman); the use of poetry and prose rendered outside the context of a rock lyric (Henry Cow, Rick Wakeman, David Bowie's use of 'cut-ups'); attempts to expand the pop song to twenty-minute pieces, sometimes linked across more than one side of an album (eg, Yes's *Tales From Topographic Oceans,* Jethro Tull's *Thick As A Brick*)—a trend which reached a peak in ELP's pretentiously titled double album *Works;* the rejection of the gestures of rock performance, in favour of a neo-operatic 'acting out' of the songs (David Bowie, Genesis) or 'serious' strategies, such as having the lead guitarist seated on a stool (King Crimson, Genesis); performances in neo-classical settings (Pink Floyd's album/movie *Live At Pompeii*); and instances of rock musicians citing and using classical and modern symphonic works to 'educate' the rock audience—employing an extract from Stravinsky's *Firebird Suite,* for instance, as an introductory theme to a rock concert (e.g., *Yessongs*).

These instances are not generally cited, of course, because they work against a central premise of postmodernism. Art-music in the pop context confirms the vague notion of eclecticism, and buttresses superficial descriptions of intertextuality, while it *undermines* the postmodern thesis of cultural fusion, in its explicit effort to preserve a bourgeois notion of Art in opposition to mainstream, 'commercial' rock and pop. The genre of progressive rock is clearly a declining (albeit a persistent) one, but my example is none the less instructive, since it is a discourse which persists. Following the emergence of punk rock (which had its own art wing, typified by bands like Devo, Talking Heads, Cabaret Voltaire, 23 Skidoo and Wire), a number of New Wave bands have effectively replaced the progressive rock acts as favorites amongst students and college-educated consumers (Hüsker Du, New Order, The Sugarcubes, The Replacements, Public Image Limited). This is particularly so in the United States, where the most important ideological component of punk rock (a progressive sweeping away of the rock establishment) has had very little lasting effect. Three of the acts mentioned above toured North America in 1989 under a 'Monsters of Art' rubric—a slogan which marks itself out from the 'Monsters Of Rock' label used to promote heavy metal bands. (As I will show in the final section of this paper, that particular definition of art-rock is almost co-terminous with one understanding of the term 'postmodern rock'.)

Indeed, the progressive rock/postmodern rock connection is, as I write, about to be institutionalized in British broadcasting, in a forthcoming program on the BBC's art-music service, Radio 3:

PROG ROCK

Radio 3 chiefs have agreed to roll over Beethoven to make way for a new programme which will bring rock to the classical station. The BBC's hitherto conservative network have enlisted the help of two young(ish) rocking fellows to boost their listenership on a new show *Mixing It.* From next month you can tune in to a meaty musical stew which includes Peter Gabriel, Laurie Anderson, Brian Eno, Philip Glass and the godfather of minimalism, Steve Reich. (*New Musical Express,* 29 September 1990)

Far from constituting a crossover phenomenon, yesterday's prog rockers, like today's postmodernists, explicitly marked themselves out from the field of 'pop' in rejection of the structural form of the pop song, their use of complex, dissonant, forms of tonality, and in the absence of lyrical themes centered on romance, escape or 'the street'. Progressive rock bands aspired to a cultural capital of Art, and anyone who doubts that Steve Reich still does this should read his program notes, which unambiguously locate the music within institutional contexts of serious music, and which describe the music itself with a reverence which is, to my rock fan's sensibility, rather comic:

> *Sextet* for four percussionists and two keyboard players is scored for three marimbas, two vibraphones, two bass drums, crotales, sticks, tam-tam, two pianos and two synthesisers.
> The work is in five movements played without pause. The relationship of the five movements is that of an arch form A-B-C-B-A. The first and last movements are fast, the second and fourth moderate, and the third, slow. Changes of tempo are made abruptly at the beginning of new movements by metric modulation to either get slower or faster… The harmonies used are largely dominant chords with added tones creating a somewhat darker, chromatic, and more varied harmonic language than in my earlier works.[7]

My point is *not* that this description of the music intrinsically establishes Reich's work as art-music. Pop and rock can also be described in these ways; and it frequently is, in musician's magazines like *Guitar Player,* and in the occasional forays made by 'serious' critics into pop (see, for example, Mellers, 1973), My point is rather that this critical discourse illustrates a manner of promoting the music and assumes a mode of listening both of which are the antithesis of popular music.

Another way of arguing for Reich as a postmodernist is in his use of Third World musics. Weinstein (1989), among others, has implied that the phenomenon of

World Beat music is postmodern by virtue of its generic conflations. (As I have already suggested, if this is true, then the whole of rock music must also be postmodern.) A problem here, for the art-pop fusion argument, is that African percussion techniques played in a Western concert hall (Reich's 1971 composition *Drumming,* for instance) where the audience is immobile and the performers enact the music with the gestures and costume of the 'serious' musician can no longer be heard as 'popular' or 'folk' music. (Furthermore, it seems to me it might also be objected that Reich's use of Third World folk music is, in the concert hall environment in which it is usually performed, no more postmodern than is, for instance, Haydn's use of European folk.)

More pertinently, there persists a modernist strand in pop music which continues to draw on masculinist traditions of noise, *music concrete* and Futurism, in both the sounds and the (sometimes neo-fascist or proto-Soviet) iconography used to promote the music. This music has thus taken up the modernist strand of progressive rock; a fact that is made biographically concrete in the career of drummer Chris Cutler, who played with art-rock acts Henry Cow and The Art Bears in the 1970s, and who now performs with one of punk's original art-groups, Pere Ubu. The continuity is apparent in this comment from rock musician Billy Bragg, concerning the transparent connection between Russian constructivism and British electro-pop: 'lf Mayakovsky had been alive today he'd have been in Depeche Mode.'[8] Here I would cite the 'industrial' bands like Nitzer Ebb, Front 242, Laibach and Ministry, and avant-garde rock noise-makers like Sonic Youth (who defy pop codes in part by using a variety of unconventional guitar tunings) as the most obvious examples. There is also the use of politicized *bricolage* and dissonance in American rap music (mobilized around images of drugs, gangs and crime), and a heavy metal/thrash metal wing articulating this same discourse (but with a different iconography—horror and Satanism). Crucially, many of these acts display an unrelenting hostility to mass culture, especially television (Beatnigs, Negativland, Wire, Metallica, Megadeth, Public Enemy, NWA, Ice-T). Their perceived authenticity derives in no small measure from their *antipathy to popular culture,* and this remains a crucial nuance of contemporary pop that postmodern critics consistently overlook.

The music of Public Enemy, for instance *(It Takes A Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back, Fear Of A Black Planet)*, can be seen as postmodern in its use of a modernist dissonance within the framework of mass popularity (via CBS Records). But the debate about rap (which is so often cited as a postmodern musical form, because of the pervasive intertextuality implied by its use of 'sampling') routinely overlooks the continuing presence of an art/mass culture discourse located in resistance to it; i.e., the continuing arguments (which precisely reproduce debates about rock and roll in the 1950s, and punk rock in the 1970s) about whether or not rap 'really' is *music.* These debates can be followed in arenas as diverse as conversations between rock and rap fans, published rock criticism, music-business institutions such as the Grammy awards, and in the arts pages of the élite press. If postmodernist critics paid the

slightest attention to these accounts of popular music they would know that the battle against bourgeois notions of culture is waged, every day, by acts like Public Enemy, whose 'postmodernism' (if it is such) exists in a totally different environment from the music of Philip Glass *et* al., and where the struggle for *modernism* (let alone postmodernism) cannot yet be taken for granted.

Just as social divisions persist and underlie the construction of supposedly postmodern buildings (Davis, 1988; Jacoby, 1987:169–72), so they are also replicated in the market-place for contemporary music. Postmodern music, whether defined tightly as a form which develops in opposition to the difficulty of the avant-garde (McClary's usage, which in my view remains the only meaningful sense in which postmodern *texts* can be identified, since it is the only approach which shows how music might be related to a dominant modernism), or more loosely as an intertextual movement in more mainstream pop, often erases itself on the terrain of cultural capital. The abolition of the art/mass culture distinction is not apparent in either instance, for postmodern pop remains in most cases either an explicitly high cultural form, or a pop form constructed in at least partial opposition to 'inauthentic' popular culture (TV, advertising, mainstream pop).

Coda: hyper-marketing postmodernism

It is not possible to provide a neat 'conclusion' to this discussion. Since I maintain that the premises of postmodern theory are incoherent and that its aesthetic is a grab-bag of interesting observations which do not necessarily belong together, it follows that conclusions about the nature of postmodern music will depend on which part of the postmodern condition we choose to stress. Arguments about *aesthetic form* produce one way of looking at pop music. The concept of *cultural capital* produces quite different results. The relationship between the two is extremely complex. Looked at from the point of view of tonality or narrative structure, it can be argued quite convincingly that modernism persists as an art-rock form within pop, amongst those acts who defy the description of popular music set out in Adorno's classic (1941) article. (Indeed, one good reason for arguing for the continued distinction between pop music and art-rock lies in the fact that the 'postmodern' artists precisely subvert the conventions of pop that Adorno described so well, but failed to understand.) If, however, the focus were on *timbre,* then the noise of rock music (especially in the use of distorted electric guitar sounds) would be modernist in a much more general sense,[9] and the relation between aesthetic form and cultural capital would have to be thought through differently. The notion of *pastiche,* on the other hand, would generate entirely different conclusions—it might form a basis for seeing postmodernism in contemporary acts as diverse as Prince, Transvision Vamp and The Mekons, where it *does* seem that 'blank parody' is an accurate term for the self-referential deployment of 'found' music.

Unless we are committed to demonstrating the coherence or explanatory purpose of postmodern theory (which I am not), there is no need to construct rational order from these confusions. In order to grapple adequately with these issues, we need both a better theory of pop music (which would include, for example, some investigation of the relation between *timbre* and modernism) and more empirical work on today's pop audience. 'More work needs to be done' is however a boring conclusion, even where it is true. I will finish instead by noting one of the most bizarre developments in the brief history of media and cultural studies, in which abstruse French theory has 'trickled down' into the popular consciousness, via the cultural industries, so that the word 'postmodern' reached record stores, magazines and television programmes just a few years after it entered the academy: proponents of postmodernism will no doubt feel that this phenomenon is itself hugely postmodern.

As if to confuse the debate further still, the music industry has now pitched in with its own effort to define the terms of our debate, with the emergence (around 1988) of the new category of 'postmodern rock'. MTV was a pioneer in this trend, labelling its 'alternative' rock program *Post Modern* MTV, in August 1988. Record companies then began to adopt the term, using it to promote records by Thrashing Doves, Pere Ubu and Peter Case. Pop stars like Elvis Costello and Bono (of U2) began to use the term in media interviews. Across these usages, from French theorist Jean Baudrillard (the subject of 1988 articles in both *The Face* and *Rolling Stone*)[10] to the musings of a Christian rock vocalist, there is of course little coherence.

Talking to students about the term 'postmodern rock' I have been able to discover three distinct usages. For some consumers it seems to correspond roughly with categories like 'art rock', 'indie pop' or 'college radio' music— that is to say, acts who define themselves as existing outside the mainstream of the charts, and whose music is supposed to be taken more seriously than the supposedly disposable sounds of pop. (This interpretation butresses my argument above, of course, since it implies the conventional division between rock and pop, with the former having artistic pretensions not deemed appropriate for the latter.) This seems to be the understanding employed in the music industry itself. For instance, in the 1989 MTV *Video Music Awards* program, host Arsenio Hall framed college-radio favorites The Cure thus: 'They're nominees for one of our next categories. That is, postmodern video. In other words, the best video by a performer or a group that's brought an alternative music [sic]'.[11] This understanding of postmodernity has also leaked into the music press. The Los Angeles-based magazine *Hits* now publishes a 'Post Modern' chart and airplay listing (Jane's Addiction, Living Colour, Bob Mould, Sonic Youth, World Party, Depeche Mode), a 'PoMo Picks' review section (Prefab Sprout, Los Lobos, An Emotional Fish, The Cure) and a 'Post Toasted' gossip column! Interviewed in *Hits,* Arista Records Senior Vice-President of Sales and Distribution Rick Bleiweiss offers his definition of a Post-Modern act: 'Post Modern or alternative are wide-ranging terms. The acts I'm talking about

are Urban Dance Squad, Kris McKay, the Church…We're treating Jimmy Ryser in a similar manner. While you couldn't call him alternative like some of the groups I've mentioned, the plan is the same.'[12]

A second definition takes a more literal approach, defining the category in relation to 'modern rock'—a catch-all category used by radio stations in the United States (such as KITS in San Francisco) to promote 1980s music, including the straightforward rock of bands like U2, but with special emphasis on the electro-pop of acts like Erasure and Depeche Mode. Postmodern music, here, refers to those acts who, chronologically speaking, come after 'Modern Rock'. This commonsense usage is not routine in the industry, but it is interesting, since it suggests that the Modern Rock acts have now become established as a genre not unlike 'Classic Rock', in some markets at least, which will generate its own 'alternative'.

Thirdly, postmodern rock can be defined as that music which follows punk, evacuating its articulation of political resistance. Groups like The Smiths, The Cure and New Order can thus be understood as a postmodern response to the 'defeat' of punk and the parallel rise of Thatcherism and Reaganism,[13] which is thus seen to 'explain' what has sometimes halfjokingly been described as this music's 'miserablism'. 'Industrial' music might also fit this pattern. The exact antithesis of what Herbert Marcuse (1968) called 'affirmative culture', this music might constitute a form of postmodern resistance.

The debate about postmodernism in popular music has thus become newly complex in a unique way: since the postmodern is now a sales category/musical genre, in addition to being a theory, cultural condition and artistic practice, further analysis of its relation to music will have to take account of this epistemological feedback loop. But in the dominant usage established by the music industry itself (the first of the three listed above), the term constructs 'postmodern rock' just as I have suggested—as a synonym for 'art-rock'. The debate about postmodernism as it relates to cultural capital therefore continues to chip away at its own conceptual foundations.

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Notes

1 On the album *I'm Real* (Scotti Bros./CBS Records, 1988) hip-hop musicians Full Force use samples (including extracts from James Brown's early career) to create the backing for James Brown's performance, which explicitly historicizes and celebrates his work—see, for example, Tribute' and 'Godfather'.

2 Jameson (1979) suggest a different parallel between pop and postmodernism, when he locates pop music as a 'simulacrum', in which there is no 'original' textual moment.

3   A strictly modernist reading is given of the David Byrne (of Talking Heads) movie *True Stories,* for instance, when it is read as a social parody, a satirical comment on alienation in a post-industrial society (see Coulson, 1987).

4   Even on *Songs From Liquid Days* (CBS Records, 1986), where Philip Glass collaborates with rock songwriters like David Byrne and Suzanne Vega, the musical setting typically undercuts any connection that the words might have forged with pop culture. Fusing the work of Laurie Anderson and the Kronos Quartet with a performance by Linda Ronstadt (on 'Forgetting') is something of a postmodern landmark—but how many Ronstadt fans will have heard it, let alone *understood* it?

5   A cursory glance at Laurie Anderson's performance video *Home of the Brave* will confirm the presence of alienated, episodic modes of presentation.

6   I am obliged to note, however, that at a Philip Glass concert in Berkeley's Zellerbach Hall in June 1989, two members of the audience were seen playing 'air piano'!

7   These notes are taken from a programme for a concert given at Berkeley's Zellerbach Hall, 3 March 1990.

8   Billy Bragg, quoted *New Musical Express* 23/30 December 1989.

9   I am grateful to Paul Kendall for pointing this out to me. However, pop and rock remain so conventional, and—I would argue—realist/naturalist in form, through elements such as tonality, narrative musical development and song structure, that to elevate timbre to such a position of prominence surely fails to engage with the way that contemporary music is actually heard by its audiences.

10 See, for instance, the interview with Jean Baudrillard in *The Face* (Vol. 2, No. 4, January 1989); and the issue of *Rolling Stone* (18 May 1989) in which he is listed at that summer's 'Hot Philosopher King'.

11 *Music Video Awards,* MTV, September 1989. The winners in the postmodern music video category were another 'alternative' rock act, REM (for the clip 'Orange Crush'). The following year, the winning clip was from Sinead O'Connor ('Nothing Compares 2 U'—a cover of a Prince song), the other contenders being Depeche Mode, Red Hot Chili Peppers and Tears for Fears.

12 See *Hits* Vol. 5, No. 209, 17 September 1990.1 am grateful to Keith Negus for bringing this material to my attention.

13 I am grateful to Andrew Pogue for an explanation of this use of the term.

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MARCUS BREEN

A STAIRWAY TO HEAVEN OR A HIGHWAY TO HELL?: HEAVY METAL ROCK MUSIC IN THE 1990S

The re-emergence of heavy metal in 1990 does not signal a rerun of the 1970s but a transformation of music industry marketing and consumer tastes. This re-entry into the pop music scene by heavy metal sees it crushing its humble pop and rock music competitors under a barrage of power. Proof of metal's impact and diversity appears every week as new and established bands recreate a new order on the pop charts.

At the end of the first week of October 1990, the *Billboard Pop* album charts included several bands in the top 20 that were a part of the heavymetal lineage: Queensryche, Poison, Faith No More, Living Color, AC/DC. What makes this reordering of the charts especially interesting is the breadth of interests these bands cover. Only Queensryche and AC/DC fit within the historically established heavy-metal domain, combining metal's conventions of four- or five-piece rock band format with the guitar-hero-screamerbanality-proletarianization of gothic extravagance. In contrast, Poison are a group of pretty boys pretending heavy-metal toughness for cynical marketing reasons. Faith No More use heavy-metal sounds as just one weapon in an arsenal of inventiveness while Living Color is included because of its use of heavy metal's signature—high-volume power chords.

But there are two bands that do not rate a mention in these charts which herald the arrival of something bolder and more troubling in rock music. Metallica and Anthrax stand out from the above-mentioned bands—with the exception of Living Color, which as a black heavy-rock band is truly the exception—not only because they do *not* make the pop charts but because they are the paramount focus for the new era of metal. Metallica and Anthrax (together with Slayer and Megadeth they make up the 'big four' of speed metal) stand apart as the bands that *truly* generate the rock experience in the 1990s—although, as I hope to explain, the 'true rock experience' is, in their case, almost absolutely contradictory to the established expectation of pleasure and fun most often associated with rock music. (*Hot Metal,* September 1990:12). It is, however, closely associated with the disturbing, apocalyptic visions extended into the hyper-realist imagery in the comic magazine *Heavy Metal,* where fun wears a grin and always carries a weapon, where death is like a shaft a pure radiation.

The experience of Metallica and Anthrax in concert is like a trip to hell and back. It is where utterances break from the subconscious like a volanic eruption; where a heart of revolutionary ardour pounds, grabbing the moment and demanding the world. It is a moment of absolute identification with everything and nothing, a complete abstraction involving something untried and unknowable, and yet fully revealed in that moment of artistic, rock and rolling immediacy. It is life in its overwhelming fullness which could be adequately explained by its antonym, death. It is the nihilistic dreamboat to negation. Or as Greil Marcus (1989:9) said in *Lipstick Traces* '…negation is the act that would make it self-evident to everyone that the world is not as it seems—but only when the act is so implicitly complete it leaves open the possibility that the world may be nothing…' The Sex Pistols may have followed the Dadaists and the Situationists into this cauldron, but in the 1990s perspective, death literally parades itself.

Most contemporary discourse is incapable of creating an adequate impression of a heavy-metal concert featuring Metallica or Anthrax. The best, most recent equivalent image is the tortured, passionate faces of the Rumanian people as they spat their hatred of Ceau escu at our astonished television cameras. This image goes some way towards explaining the intensity of the Metallica and Anthrax concert.

One of the difficulties facing cultural studies is that the prevailing academic methodologies, while competent, allow much of the energy of popular cultural forms to be circumvented through the preoccupation with normative academic methodologies. Where objective description and textual analysis may provide most of the grist for the cultural-studies mill, the immediacy of the cultural experience is mediated primarily by passionate identification of the subject with the object, where objectification, in fact, or even experientially, no longer seems to exist. This is especially pertinent to music, even more so with heavy metal. Put bluntly, some of the indulgences of cultural studies as they apply to film and television, for example, fall in inconvenient heaps (around the stacks of Marshall Amps) when applied to music. Identifying 'the links between social formations and cultural symbols-in-action' must, of necessity, exist within the contradictory territories of fact and fiction, becoming a sort of idealized hybrid of both fact and fiction: a faction(?) (Ross, 1990:26). This is a risky business, but necessary, lest the predeterminism inherent within some readings of cultural practice rejoices only in its own empiricism.

Breaking down cultural predeterminism and building up the contradictory territories to create a more accurate representation of a hybrid within the cultural whole is important in developing cultural analysis. Singular textual readings are only part of the solution, as indeed are contextual and intertextual explanations (Grossberg, 1988:19). But all readings must be entertained without falling into a liberal flux that looks and feels like cotton wool.

Mapping popular music

The almost complete banishment of heavy rock, especially the heavy-metal genre, from popular music and cultural studies is no surprise. In many ways its 1970s manifestation was the bastard offspring of rock and roll—electric technology, or high levels of amplification—and showbusiness. Within the general parameters of youth and popular culture, heavy metal of the Anthrax and Metallica style is itself an isolated subgrouping, alienated from the mainstream of rock-music consideration. In a sense, it floats uncomfortably on the edges of a youth-culture parameter, entering through its higher profile relations like AC/DC that make the charts.

Metallica and Anthrax coexist in a specific heavy-metal sub-genre. They are a part of the genre known as heavy metal which incorporates diverse sounds in an ongoing diversification of the genre. Increasingly, moving into the 1990s, every genre and sub-genre of popular music shares a location on the totalized map of popular music culture, where the bridges that form the industrial crossovers from one domain of the popular-music industry to the next are becoming essentially connected. (Although essentialism may not have a high place in the cultural studies methodology I have outlined above, there is a place for describing the 'real' corporate relations and economics of the music industry as 'essential'). This 'industrial crossover' means that while sub-genres can still be identified within major genres, like speed, thrash and thrash-metal within heavy metal, unlike the early 1970s, neither the genre nor the sub-genres can be alienated from the corpus of pop music, nor indeed, do 'quite rigid divisions' across genres exist as comfortably as they once did (Chambers, 1985:115).

In other words, record companies, live performances, band tours, contracts, marketing, publicity, songwriting, image (or anti-image as it could be in some cases) management, support staff and so on are all part of the pre-existing system in which each genre exists. Folk music exists in its domain at, say, Rounder Records, in the same way as rap at Def American Recordings, PIL at Virgin, or Neil Young at Warners, but all exist potentially equally as pop-chart hits in the 1990s.

Nevertheless, heavy metal's very existence suffers from the prejudice of its own history within rock-music industry culture. The heavy-metal genre, including for example, remarkable 1970s heavy-metal bands like Led Zeppelin (which 'officially' launched the heavy-metal genre in 1969), Uriah Heep, or individuals like Ted Nugent, existed within the domain of the pre-punk rock-music milieu, thereby suffering from the prejudice directed at bands that performed in the years just prior to 1975–6 (George, 1988). As a sub-class of rock music, metal was not redeemed by punk, but shown to be a highly formularized, tightly constructed and marketed item, not fit for salvation. Its press has not been good and rightly so. Heavy metal incorporated all the worst indulgences of the male rock-music industry— narcissism and sexism especially. But to deny its musical cogency and mass appeal in such a dismissive way would

be to deny it a place as a genuine vehicle of popular musical expression. Heavy metal was always on the outer edge of the middle-class rock music experience of the 1970s. While Chambers (1985:124) suggests that heavy metal incorporated elements of progressive (blues) rock alongside hippy and counter-cultural elements, he is only partly accurate. Its intense popularity in working-class cities of Scandinavia and the contemporary experience of metal in the Australian concert context, suggests that heavy-metal, as a genre draws its most potent audience power from working-class youth. If it draws its audience from the middle classes, it is not an act of rock-music 'normality' for these people, but an act of transgression against mainstream rock. The clothes, the obvious narcissism and the male bravado (with its attenuated 'female' vocals) allows the music and its performance to find a location within an oppositional rock-music tradition (McRobbie, 1989:26).

In the 1970s, the popular image of heavy metal was of AC/DC, Led Zepplin, Uriah Heep, Ozzy Osbourne and Rose Tattoo blasting already pretty senseless headbangers into a deaf heaven. It seemed to be particularly dumb music and an easy critical target. Even today, the genre is seen as existing outside the realm of a vaguely respectable 'real' rock-music orthodoxy, incorporating 'the sex-drugs-and-groupies heavy-metal lifestyle' (EG, 28 September 1990:1).

The gothic froth and showbusiness of the heavy metal of the 1970s contained none of the moral uplift of the Neil Youngs or equivalent LA rock of the time, while its song narratives were too obvious to be taken seriously by many pop-music consumers, although it certainly achieved commercial recognition with vast album sales.

Although the dumbness of the music and the showbusiness theatrics of the bands' performances was most obvious in the 1970s, it has returned in the form of the all-male groups, Poison, Iron Maiden, WASP, Megadeth, Queensryche and the incredibly brave but hopelessly ineffectual all-girl band Vixen and before them Girlschool. The announcement that Led Zeppelin have re-formed and will tour in 1991 shows how virile the old war horses of the scene can be and suggest that the mood for revival is back.

But just what is the mood? In social terms it would seem that the rise of the heavy-metal genre in general is linked, not to any nostalgia for the 1970s, but firstly, to a search for substance and authenticity in rock-music and secondly, to advanced methods of marketing music for mass consumption. It is the thrust for the genuine article of the rock-music experience that makes this subject important. Part of the explanation of the phenomenon of 1990s metal is a split in the ranks between the bands claiming a link to the ongoing family tree of heavy-metal tradition and the rest. Indeed, it was the increasing evidence of this break within heavy metal that provided the motivation for this article, as changes within heavy metal cause some confusion within the metal establishment.

Metal fans admit, as do metal musicians and specialist metal publications like *Kerrang* that there is no longer a clear definition of heavy-metal. A possible categorical breakdown could see the following: *The commerciall wimpy/glam/*

sleaze (rock) which would include Poison and Bon Jovi. This is followed by *mainstream* metal which would include Stryper, a band that is as incongruous as anything in metal. It began life as an evangelical Christian, even fundamentalist heavy-metal group, but has now moved away from that proselytizing position. Other mainstream bands include: AC/DC, Judas Priest (of more later), KISS, Motley Crue, Status Quo, Guns 'n' Roses, Iron Maiden and Aerosmith.

Then there is *thrash* (also known as speed metal and related to hard core) which includes Megadeth, Slayer, Exodus and Venom. (LA band Suicidal Tendencies is the archetypal hard-core band and could be identified as the precursor of speed metal. They were banned from playing in their home city because their audiences had a tendency to destroy venues and any material object in sight.)

The final category is *Death*. While there may be a few bands overlapping into this category from thrash—simply because the sounds of the bands are similar—nobody outdoes Metallica in the death category, with Anthrax joining in at various intervals. (Thanks to Greta, of 'Metal for Melbourne', who suggested these categories, which are her own.)

Within each of these major categories there may be more than a dozen sub-categories, a fact which merely emphasizes the confusion within the categories. This is a long way from the 1970s, when heavy metal was a barnstorming ritual of Led Zeppelinesque indulgence.

There was plenty of wishful thinking by reform-minded pop-music fans who hoped that punk's scalpel had lanced heavy metal to death by the late 1970s, but that dream has proved ill-founded. The music industry being the huge consumer-oriented machine that it is, the fulsome return of the genre was almost inevitable. Nobody could anticipate that heavy metal would again have broad appeal. More incredibly, who could have dreamed, in their worst metalic nightmares, that heavy-metal and its derivatives could have a role as purveyors of change in musical and social tastes. Sleaze certainly promotes the worst excesses of male sexist fantasy, while death promotes a joy ride into the spirit of post-industrial alienation.

Of course, heavy-metal neanderthals still exist. Most of the commercial and mainstream bands go through the motions of heavy-metal theatre. Flounced hair, massive stage and lighting rigs and lyrics that many people would consider embarrassingly reactionary are their mainstay. *Pump,* Aerosmith's hit album, plunged into this 1990s neanderthal value system, with the title track suggesting, among other things, that 'you'd better keep your daughter inside, or she's gonna get a dose of my pride'. Yet bands touting such lyrics find huge, enthusiastic audiences. At least one explanation is that the theatre of rock and roll is pre-eminent in this commercial and mainstream metal, while there is a loss of faith in alternatives, like morally vigorous rock and roll.

There is also a cheekiness, an assertiveness against what may be seen as prevailing liberal values that benefit women—this is possibly more true in the US than many other places because equal opportunity and feminism has been

more effectively institutionalized among the solid North American middle class than in comparable countries. Reacting against the trend of liberal tolerance comes this mainstream cheekiness, not just of Aerosmith, but the entire sub-genre. Guns 'n' Roses' superbly crafted music in their debut album and hit song of 1989, *Welcome to the Jungle* included lyrics that not only welcomed listeners to the urban jungle but in welcoming a 'baby' girl, the song then says: 'I want to see you bleed'. This could suggest the bloody violence of street life, or the bleeding of menstruation. If it is the latter, then the cheekiness, the contempt for privacy and middle-class values is well entrenched, even in mainstream heavy-metal bands.

Marketing the sleaze

There is now a belief in a rock and roll lifestyle that surpasses or selectively forgets moral everyday experience and launches itself towards the Hollywood lightshow of ecstasy. Listen to Poison's lead singer Bret Michaels:

> The music and lyrics cover all three bases, from the hip to the heart to the head. That's why we called the album *Flesh and Blood.…* For us, the rock and roll is more than just three chords. It's something that actually is your life and you're telling a story in your music. It's almost like an autobiography. (Press Release, 1990)

According to Michaels, rock and roll is who he is. His story, or the stories told by Poison, are real autobiographies. As Michaels added: 'Our music is a soundtrack to everyday life—that's what it's based on.' This doesn't sound like a heavy-metal musician talking, but a social or cultural theorist.

And that is the nub of the issue. The heavy-metal genre has become popular because it is now part of the intelligent, ambitious fraternity of musicians and their managers who thrive in the showbusiness environment of Los Angeles and New York, in fact, the globalized economy of the international music industry. Here, modern marketing and selling methods are refined for increasingly enthusiastic consumers whose conversion to the upward curve of an increasing-standard-of-living ethic is almost complete and universal.

In Poison's case, the Los Angeles euphoria of consumption and the good-times mythology of rock and roll is paramount. With the flounced hair, the torn jeans and prettier-than-thou looks, Poison represents the idealized iconography of the rock'n'roller. Out of reach but achievable.

The image Poison portrays—in the all-important MTV-ish visual sense— is the lifestyle that can be bought at any number of specialist shops along Hollywood Boulevard. The leathers, jeans, T-shirts, bandanas, boots and bangles can be mixed and matched into whatever you want. Never before has music been marketed more successfully than now. Since the introduction of film-clip video, every avenue of the marketing of rock and roll is covered: radio, print media,

film, television, book publishing. No niche market anywhere is left alone and every niche is reinforced by the others.

The categories used above really reflect the strong (identifying) imageconscious efforts of every band to sound and look different—something reinforced by music video and its use of individualistic marketing techniques. In fact, rock and pop music in the 1990s may not be about genres, categories and niche markets anymore, but the use of anything that will effectively deliver an audience to a band and sell records.

And heavy metal is getting the treatment, although Metallica and Anthrax certainly do not appear on high rotation on MTV, while the 'sleaze' and 'mainstream' of Poison and Motley Crue certainly do. While some old hands in the rock-music industry say music is marketed according to the old laws of supply and demand, this is simply not true. Television is now the mediator for music through MTV in the US and its universal equivalents like MTV Australia and MTV Europe and the twice-weekly Australian Broadcasting Corporation Television's *Rage.*

The evidence for the influence of television is not only in the number of metal-oriented bands currently in the US pop charts but the recent history of rock after video television. More recently changes were brought about after the introduction of CDs. (Since the introduction of CD in the mid-1980s, entire rock-music careers have been resurrected. In my own experience, an interview with Levon Helm of The Band, came to something of an uncomfortable end in 1989, when it was suggested that The Band was revived on the basis of its entire back catalogue being reissued on CD. Importantly, the demographics of the people who were fans of The Band in the 1970s would be the people most likely to purchase CD players and buy the new pressings. Frank Zappa is also due to benefit from a CD boon. After suing Warner Brothers Records for misleading accounting in 1983, he now owns the rights to his back catalogue and has begun reissuing his back catalogue of about 50 records on CD) (*Sunday Herald,* 21 October 1990:23).

Women rock-music performers have certainly benefited from MTV. After the introduction of MTV in the US in the summer of 1981, several now famous women were able to launch phenomenally large solo careers. These women included Tina Turner, Cyndi Lauper, Madonna, Pat Benatar, Chaka Khan, and groups like the Pointer Sisters and the Go-Gos. By 1983, a Neilsen survey commissioned by MTV owner Warner-Amex showed MTV to be influencing 63 per cent of its American viewers to buy certain albums (Lewis, 1990:3). While statistics are dubious unless highly scrutinized, the suggestion that women came to have a profile as individual artists on television meant that television suddenly took them into homes in the heart of America. At a different and very male level, WHAM! and George Michael's career have also been major beneficiaries of MTV video 'promos'.

This was a major change. Music careers could be made through the television screen and the recording studio, leaving behind the otherwise male-dominated

career activities that incorporated the unattractive grind and inherent risks of live touring in support of record releases which were to attract attention for radio airplay.

Evidence in support of this argument comes from Lee Epand, Polygram Records' vice-president, who said in 1983 that the MTV (cable) channel in the US was 'the most powerful selling tool we've ever had' (Lewis, 1990:3). Ironically, he was quoted in a *Rolling Stone* article titled, 'Ad nauseum: How MTV Sells Out Rock and Roll'. Perhaps the article should have been sub-titled, 'How *Rolling Stone* fails to understand the modern marketing of rock and roll (because it is a part of it)'. The evidence that MTV music videos would work was not forthcoming overnight. Advertising revenue generated by MTV was just $7 million in its first 18 months, through 1981, but by 1984, it was attracting $1 million a week in revenue (Parsons, 1990:73).

More evidence of the changing nature of music tastes comes from a comment by Steve Tyler of Aerosmith:

> When we first started out we had a lots of boys, and there seems to be more girls interested now. I think in the United States it has a lot to do with MTV, that a lot of people actually get to see what you look like. (EG, 28 September 1990:15)

Although it is claimed by some that MTV is a sort of rock and roll TV Bible in the US, the same is not the case in Australia. Paul Dickson, director of Polydor Records, the only major record company with its head office in Melbourne, has a different story. Dickson told the Australian Teachers of Media conference in Melbourne in September 1990 that ABC-TV's *Rage* was more influential in breaking bands in Australia than MTV.

(Dickson also said that Polydor had moved its head office to Melbourne partly because the country's major television talk shows emanate from here, not to mention the nightly—now defunct—half-hour *Countdown Revolution* and the MCM-FM radio network. These shows and *Hey Hey It's Saturday* and *Tonight Live with Steve Vizard* are another major force in marketing music, with appearances plus performances by artists getting into homes under the guise of a chat show television format. In these cases the personality of the artist is presented in interviews, as well as the musical talents. It has a forcefulness and sense of conviction that only consumer marketing could fully refine.)

Music television's influence is more pervasive for other reasons though. It introduces a broader range of musical styles to a vast audience of viewers who are seduced by the music as well as the filmic visuals. This development has undoubtedly contributed to the intensity of the postmodern experience radiating around the world, generating uncertainty, fear, disorientation and in some cases a sort of resigned desperation to the incomprehensibility of media production.

E.Ann Kaplan, in *Rocking Around the Clock: Music Television, Post Modernism and Consumer Culture* refers to MTV viewers 'desire for plenitude'

(1987). While she is correct in explaining MTV's 24-hour barrage in the US as an endless quest for some sort of entertainment nirvana to be achieved through the television screen, she fails to adequately comprehend the marketing of music through television and its relationship with consumer capitalism. But this is not surprising, given that work on the subject has been preoccupied with textual readings of videos, where a multitude of writings have considered rock film clips as films, as creative endeavour and genre items, social phenomena and textual and intertextual expressions of youth culture, with little detail about marketing and taste manipulation. (Simon Frith (1990) and Reebee Garofalo (1987) are the obvious exceptions.)

How close is death?

While (sleaze and mainstream) heavy metal have become one of a variety of musics being marketed, the MTV explanation for its current resurgence is not sufficient. Anybody who has attended a concert by Metallica, Anthrax or Faith No More, will know that this phenomenon of heavy metal does not sit still. (The thrash and death categories overlap in these bands with disturbing ambiguity.) Their attraction is in their intensity, their contradictory celebration of negation and life.

These bands take notions of existence that made Friedrich Nietzsche's nihilistic concerns into an art form in literary culture and turn them into relentless rhythms that go straight to hell and back. The despair, desperation and sheer forcefulness of the music is unlike almost any other human experience in or outside the concert.

This is music for those that dress in black and mean it. This is music that some people cannot physically tolerate. It is music at the edge, where a concert induces nausea (in ears and viscera like mine) and a disturbing disorientation for a couple of days after the event. Not only is it frighteningly loud, but its appeal is its negation of every civilized pleasantry, with Anthrax pushing this notion to the limit by putting 'NO' labels on their guitars, to signal a relatively strict moral stance on subjects of importance from pollution of the environment to legal issues and drugs. Recording a B side of a Public Enemy song also suggests a fascinating and important crossover between the most aggressive musical genres of the 1990s (*Hot Metal,* September 1990:43).

It is no surprise that slam dancing took hold among the death and thrash-speed metal fraternity because slam dancing is the closest thing to complete physical freedom and risk taking there is. Slam dancing emphasizes the slam! with the anger, the pushing-shoving-mindlessness paramount. The intention of the pogo-jumping mayhem of slam dancing is moshing, where people intentionally collide with each other at high speed. Like being caught in the middle of a riot or a stampede, it is terrifying in its power. I imagine it is somewhat like being towed behind a jet fighter as it releases nuclear warheads. No wonder one of the bands with a place in the thrash-death camp is named Megadeth.

This sub-genre of heavy metal is perhaps better known generically as hard core and is the closest direct descendant of punk still living. There is nothing pretty here. No pretty Jon Bon Jovi to dream about. No worryingly blonde Aryan look-alikes. Just black. Hard core and its half-brother speed metal tolerate few niceties. Why should they? The 1988 Metallica concert in Melbourne, Australia was overpowering, with the audiences's most passionate roars coming in one sing-along which consisted of the deafening: 'Die! Die! Die! Die! …' Vocal audience power is part of the indulgent empathy of a live rock-music performance. With metal, it is more concentrated than other rock performances, although it should be said that non-metal bands at the height of popularity can also generate phenomenal audience noise. U2's sound engineer Joe O'Herlihy reported that audience volume during the Joshua Tree tour had registered 120 decibels, which is louder than the band's PA system (Melbourne U2 forum, 1989). At a more recent (1990) Anthrax concert in Melbourne, the most overpowering chant was for the chorus to *Antisocial:* the song repeats that word over and over in what becomes a celebration of black T-shirted youth in a frenzy. The mostly male audiences at both these concerts had a proletarian camaraderie that older hippies may have hoped for 20 years ago.

It is here that significant bonds are created for restless youth, especially among the head-banging brigade. Occasionally, whole rows of young men and sometimes a few girls as well, nod their heads up and down in the classic head-bangers salute to the beat, their arms carelessly thrown around each other's shoulders.

But evidence of more significant bonding occurs when slam dancers stage or pit dive on to the hands and heads of the audience beneath them. Despite the risks they are always caught—except for one notable occasion when a happily drunken middle-aged male tried the stunt at a Melbourne hotel and the crowd of usually supportive youth parted like the Red Sea at the appearance of Moses's staff, leaving the diver to land flat on his face. Age prejudices within youth culture are defined like this, so that the solidarity of youth and its particular anxieties are identified within the hard-core heavy-metal community. It is a fraternity of anxiety although, importantly, slam dancing has now moved through the ranks of live music supporters to such an extent that it appears at virtually any live performance—the most startling was at a Violent Femmes concert in Melbourne, late in 1990. Metal's manic magic marches into the ranks of a mid-western, three piece band whose heritage is folk!

The devil did not make them do it

Critics claim that it is in the metal sub-culture that devil worship, Satanism, black magic and violence are preached and practised. There is little evidence for this, except for occasional reports which are blasted into relief by sensational (read 'tabloid') press. But if heavy metal has a tough time of it, there is no doubt that the objections to its public profile from the fundamentalists and fulminators of

hellfire did not expect to fail in the much publicised case against Judas Priest (*Australian Left Review,* September 1990). Certainly the Judas Priest case is the most notorious. In this instance the parents of two teenage American youths who killed themselves just before Christmas 1985, claimed the boys had done so because of secret lyrics or 'masking' on the 1978 album *Stained Glass.* The allegations suggested that there was more to heavy metal than big chords and black lights. That case penetrated the American psyche (do we read at this point 'the popular imagination'?) to such an extent that is was possible for Jay Leno, one of the hosts of the 1990 Emmy Awards to make a passing comment about it during the program.

His ironically comical suggestion that Judas Priest had masked their albums was emphasized when he pointed out that the band's recordings already advocated sexual perversions, beastiality, drug abuse and violence, so why would anybody bother about masking? Criticism of the music and lyrics of heavy metal is institutionalized to such an extent that a person can appear on national and world television (Leno was seen making these comments during Australian prime-time television, when the awards were replayed in full) as Leno did, and sendup the music. Criticism of the court case against the band was his primary point.

In reality, the case was nothing exceptional. It is just that the lives of millions of people in this world are not the predictable, comfortable ones that everybody is supposed to enjoy in liberal democracies. Some lives are bigger and bolder, sadder and more relentless than others. This is the world of heavy metal. In this sense it is gothic and gargantuan, sick and seductive, therapeutic and thematic. Everything is overstated and oversimplified in a moment that approximates modernist anguish. The badness in society becomes evil, which becomes Satan which is further reduced to simplistic word-picture narratives of events. Take Metallica's *Shortest Straw:* 'Shortest straw/challenge liberty/downed by law/live in infamy/rub you raw/ witchhunt riding through/shortest straw/this shortest straw has been pulled for you.' (Hetfield, 1988). This is death: the ultimate transgression against the celebratory indulgence of rock music's mythological life-force. It is the negation that recognizes everyday life for the bitter pill it is.

Communication is bold and unequivocating, not reflective and cerebral. The sleaze and mainstream end of heavy metal makes this point even more forcefully with its decorations—vast light shows changing color in spell-binding irrational sequence, with clothes that don't seem appropriate for anything much, especially wearing. It is also here, in these genres on the Hollywood side of town that sexism and misogyny is most evident. It can be seen in the decorative use of women in Poison's video clip *Unskinny Bop,* where the all-male band performs, while beautiful women appear at the start of the clip as girlfriends and at the end of the clip as lovers. It is an opinion reinforced by a rock-music roadie who told me that, in his experience, heavy metal musicians treated women worse than any other rock musicians. Speed- and death-metal musicians entertain a different dress code—black jeans and T-shirts, in a representation of mundane everyday

work wear, although the black signifier maintains the alienation theme. Part of the secret to explaining the differences in the bands and genres could be that Metallica and Anthrax are based in and around New York, which says something for their engaging sense of alienation and death, while Megadeth, Poison *et al.* are Los Angeles or in other cases English.

But it is the music that really talks—the sheer persuasive presence of power chords. These are the sounds that only an electric guitar can proclaim. The sound is as bold as politicians in an election campaign and as uncompromising as Pol Pot, Power chords are the meat in the otherwise wimpy sandwich of music being offered to contemporary pop-music consumers. That at least is what the suggestion seems to be. These chords are also a manifestation of the rapidly changing nature of pop music, where pop is becoming anything and everything, swimming in a sea of fads that are increasingly incomprehensible. The power of the chords are like a magnet to realness.

Ironically, a lot of heavy metal offers a simplicity of realness in this sea of incomprehensibility. Power, unequivocating in its boldness, is writ large as power chords give way to guitar solos—along with screaming vocals, the standard fare of metal mania. The individual in the audience can and does seem to momentarily join in this statement and rise above everything on a magical bed of numbness, but just as the moment of incredible pleasure seems about to be cast in stone, we slide back into a seething cauldron of oblivion. That could be death, but then again, for many people it is a lot more like life in the 1990s: salvation in hell.

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LISTENING TO A LONG CONVERSATION: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC APPROACH TO THE STUDY OF INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES IN THE HOME[1]

ROGER SILVERSTONE ERIC HIRSCH AND DAVID MORLEY

A long conversation

In introducing a paper on the problems posed for social anthropology in the study of social change, Maurice Bloch recalls Malinowski's view of what anthropology was all about. It was about, they both suggest, the study of a

> long conversation taking place among the people with whom [the anthropologist] lives during field work and in which [he/she] inevitably joins. A long conversation where not only words are exchanged but from time to time also things, animals, people, gestures and blows…The long conversation which the anthropologist observes has begun long before [he / she] came and indeed it has begun long before any of the people the anthropologist meets have been born. (Bloch, 1977:278)

For Malinowski, everything was to be found in this long conversation. It was the locus for an understanding of the way the past affects the present and is expressed through it.

In the study on whose methodology we report in this paper, we too have entered into a long conversation, or more precisely into a series of long conversations. These conversations are those that each family in its household constructs for itself as part of its continuing engagement with the world: with its past, its present and its future.[2] Increasingly, information and communication technologies are becoming part of this world, as both subjects and objects, topics and resources. The study consists in a number of differently focused attempts to engage with, and listen to, the long conversations which families are having and to understand the role of information and communication technologies in articulating them.

Ethnography at home

Sandra Wallman, in introducing her study of eight London families, separates the activities of doing ethnography from doing participant observation. Working at

home and working with households in urban rather than rural areas, she argues, requires a specific vision of ethnography other than in broad terms in contemporary society, the issue of its

> The crucial problem has to be to devise research strategies that are feasible in a dense urban setting (as participant observation is not) and yet do not distort the realities of ordinary life by dealing with people as 'units of population', classified only by characteristics that can readily be seen and counted by outsiders in the way that conventional social survey tends to do. (Wallman, 1984:43)[3]

Elizabeth Bott, in introducing her anthropological and psychoanalytic study of twenty London families, makes a similar, but differently framed point. She points out that family research is intrinsically difficult both methodologically and conceptually; inter-family comparisons are difficult; there is very little in the literature which can provide guidance:

> We started with no well-defined hypotheses or interpretations and no ready-made methodology and field techniques. We could not apply—at any rate in pure form—the methods and techniques of social anthropology, of surveys, of psychological case studies, or of psychoanalysis. Special techniques had to be developed. (Bott, 1957:8)

In introducing our sociological, anthropological and social psychological study of social and technological relations within twenty households in London and the south-east of England, we need to make a number of points. There is, still, very little, methodologically, to draw on. The problems faced are both technical and conceptual. Working with households, working within the private worlds of those within one's own culture, and working with families in order to understand the nature of their relationship to communication and information technologies, is an intensely problematic activity. We, too, have had to devise our own methodological procedures, and we have done so both reflexively and recursively as the research has developed.

Those procedures have emerged as a result of a critical engagement with the literature principally on the study of the television audience (Morley and Silverstone, 1990) and with that on the family, technology and consumption (Silverstone, Morley *et al,* 1989). The study of the television audience had broken down precisely at the point at which it was to be confronted in its social and cultural complexity. Family studies had generally taken very little account of technological and media relations. Studies of technology had opened the question of its status as culture, but had not yet approached, other than in broad terms in contemporary society, the issue of its construction in consumption. Studies of consumption had barely begun to examine the social and social-psychological

dynamics of the appropriation and use of objects in general and information and communication technologies in particular.

Behind the closed doors of households, within the twisted veins of family relations, and around the multiplicity of activities associated with media and technology use, were a set of research questions which had barely been articulated, and which for us, too, would continue to emerge as the study progressed. The research was motivated, therefore, by a desire to understand something of this relatively uncharted territory. The geographical metaphor is deliberate. Much of what we felt we had to do was to understand relationships in space and time: relationships with the physical geography of the home (to which we would not necessarily have access) and to the displacement of technologies, and media- and technology-related activities, in different parts of the house; relationships to the networks of friends and kin (which extend and transform the boundaries of the household beyond the physical); relationships with the past and with the future, in the appropriation of images and identities and in the expression of hopes and fears. We had to try to uncover something of the experience of technology and media (and something of the experience of modernity which that would illuminate) which lay beneath the surface of everyday talk and interaction. We wanted, finally, to understand how, and how significantly, a family's material position determined its opportunities for consumption, and how consumption activities (very broadly conceived, see Silverstone, Hirsch, Morley, 1990) expressed and created both their own distinctiveness in style and practice and also how they expressed and created gender, age and class differences. We wanted, in short, to get to grips with the fine grain of the relations between domestic culture and information and communication use. Hence ethnography. But hence a set of research strategies that attempted to overcome some of the intrinsic problems of ethnographic research both at home and in the home, and that attempted to come to terms with the specificity of the relationships surrounding media and information technology use.

In this paper we intend to provide a descriptive account of the methodological basis of the research as it has evolved—because it *has* evolved—during the study. We intend also to develop an argument based on our experience of undertaking the research which seeks to establish both the viability and validity of a methodology for ethnographic research, but for ethnographic research not bound to, nor necessarily overly dependent on, participant observation as a research tool. We hope to demonstrate the value of the approaches that we have chosen to adopt in this study. We are not yet in a position to discuss all of it, since much of the writing is still to be done.

The story of the research

All ethnographies require, in large measure, the reinventing of the methodological wheel. This is because, of their very nature, ethnographies

are grounded in the realities of other people's lives—in what Clifford Geertz describes as the 'informal logic of actual life' (Geertz, 1973:17). Every ethnography is unique. Yet the problems raised by doing ethnography are not just ethnography's problems: they are those of social research as a whole. The problem, as writers as different in their various ways as Geertz and W.G.Runciman have argued, is a problem (among other things) of description and of understanding.[4]

Compare, for example, Geertz:

> Doing ethnography is like trying to read (in the sense of 'construct a reading of') a manuscript—foreign, faded, full of ellipses, incoherencies, suspicious emendations, and tendentious commentaries, but written not in conventionalised graphs of sound but in transient examples of shaped behaviour… Understanding a people's culture exposes their normalness without reducing their particularity. (Geertz, 1973:14)

and Runciman:

> The historian of the distant past, no less than the anthropologist who returns from an exotic and alien culture, is concerned to convey to his readers not simply the course of a sequence of reported events, or even a set of more or less well-tested concatenations of cause and effect. He is also concerned to convey the nature of the institutions and practices by which the lives of the people whom he has been studying are governed in the way in which those institutions and practices were perceived and experienced by them. (Runciman, 1983:18)

Neither of these positions is without its difficulties. Yet each defines the research task, the challenge, both in its generality and in its specificity. That our research was 'at home' does not alter the methodological position one jot (though it does require a particular response). For us that task was, on the face of it, both deceptively simple and terribly ambitious (on the 'simplicity' and difficulty of doing ethnography at home see Strathern, 1986). It was to 'understand' the ways in which families in households 'lived with' their information and communication technologies (their televisions, their videos, their telephones and their computers). The phrase 'lived with' constitutes something of a hornet's nest. What we wanted was an understanding of the relationship between families and their technologies such that we could address the issues of the incorporation of those technologies into their everyday lives and to gain a measure of insight into what is often called 'the impact' of technology in the domestic sphere.

We, and others, had argued that the household was the crucial site for the investigation of the reception of television, and there had been some studies which had begun to address this question (*Journal of Family Issues,* 1983; Lull, 1988; Morley, 1986; Morley and Silverstone, 1990). Yet both conceptually and

empirically we wanted more than simply to focus on television. The isolation of television from other materially and symbolically related communication and information technologies (and other technologies) as well as from the social and cultural context of the household was increasingly going to be unsustainable in research terms, above all as technologies and services diversified and multiplied and as domestic relations shifted around them. We wanted, therefore, to understand the processes and dynamics of the relationship of families, media and technologies as systems, both intrinsically—that is with regard to the internal structure of family life—and extrinsically—that is with regard to the relations between families and the wider society expressed through neighbourhood, work, networks of kin and friendship and, of course, media and information use. We were interested in information and communication technologies' role in integrating or isolating families and households into or from the world beyond their front door. We were interested in the role of communication and information technologies in mediating the public and the private spheres. We were interested in the role these technologies had in sustaining—what we have come to see as crucial—the family's integrity: its own security in time and space. (Silverstone, Hirsch and Morley, 1990)

The research questions were initially not formulated much more precisely than this. They were driven, however, by a compulsive fascination with the 'actual practices' of media and information technology use, by a conceptual imperative to provide a framework for understanding reception (in relation to media use) and consumption (in relation to the appropriation of objects and meanings more generally). They were also driven by an awareness that we did not know what people actually did with the information and communication technologies they bought but also by an awareness that what was becoming available in terms of new technologies, new services and new systems was likely, suddenly, to expand quite dramatically.

These questions were unashamedly empirical. They required some kinds of answers. And those answers would have to be provided by an engagement with the realities—with the long conversations—of other people's lives. Those realities would have to be, in Runciman's terms, reported on, described and to an extent also explained and evaluated. We were aware of some of the methodological pitfalls (we became aware of others). Yet for us the bottom line was, in good measure, both authenticity and accuracy in our description of our families and their technologies, and in equally good measure, plausibility and persuasiveness in our analysis (causal or otherwise) of the relationships we came to understand as significant.

In practice this came to mean the following.

We chose to study families and in choosing to do so, and indeed to study nuclear families, we took account of the fact that not only were such families still the largest single household unit in British society, but that they still occupied a fundamental ideological position in British culture.[5] The 'importance' of the family, the 'future' of the family, the 'threats' to the family: these

preoccupations are still very much part of the currency of public debate. Once focused however, the research would, we hoped, both allow us to grapple with the specific problems of technology in family life, and it would also allow us to engage, in research terms, with a core institution of contemporary society at an important time in its development. We hoped to have something to say at the end of the study not just on the future of domestic information and communication technology but on the future of the family in its relation to technology.

Families, therefore, would mean nuclear families with school-age children. And since we wanted a clear basis for comparison within the study as well as a basis for examining families with a relatively high level of technology ('technology-rich families'), all our families would possess at least three of four core information and communication technologies: the television, the telephone, the computer and the VCR. As it turned out, most had all of them, and many, of course, had more than one example of each (especially the TV set and the telephone). For practical communication reasons, they would be English speakers, and as far as possible ethnically homogeneous.[6] The point of this rather abrasive attempt at control was to reduce, as far as possible, the number of factors which we would have to take into account at one time in our analysis.

The first four families were recruited through the offices of a marketresearch recruitment agency and received a fee. For a number of reasons (above all control of the recruiting process and cost) this proved unsatisfactory and the remaining families were recruited through schools. Each family—usually, but by no means only, the parents—was met with for a preliminary discussion at which the aims and the procedures of the research were outlined. Families were asked whether they wished to take part. They were told that they could withdraw at any time during the study and that their participation and the data derived from that participation would be entirely confidential.

Recruitment was not an easy process, although the difficulties experienced did not match those of Bott. Families did come forward, though not in large numbers, and we were able to reject those who did not meet our minimum criteria, as indeed we were rejected by those who felt, once the study had been explained, that they did not want to take part. Having established our criteria for their selection, we then became dependent on the judgements of others (headteachers in the main) for the identification of those families who might be suitable and who were, in principle, willing to take part. In practice we had, at this stage, some, but not a great deal of choice, although we were able to maintain our commitment to family structure, to hold a rough balance across the social structure (we have both working- and middle-class families) and to divide the study between metropolitan London (twelve families) and a provincial town some thirty miles to the west of London — Slough (eight families). Most (sixteen) families were recruited in districts in which cable television was available, though only one family with cable found itself within our group. During the course of the study one of our London families subscribed to satellite television.

There were no expectations nor claims that the families within our study would constitute a representative sample. The London group was biased to some extent since two out of the three schools that offered help in recruitment were religious foundations.

No family, once it had agreed to collaborate in the study, subsequently withdrew, despite the fact that the research, for many, extended over a period of up to ten months. Relationships have remained good, and the request by the researchers to undertake follow-up interviews in years to come has been granted by all. In the final interview session a discussion took place in each case on their attitudes and feelings towards the study. The substance of these discussions provides an important reflexive component to the study as a whole, and we discuss some aspects of this below.

The study can be divided into two entirely unequal halves. Initially, and with the first four families, our intended methodology was clear. We wanted both a record of a typical week's activities and as many opportunities as we could create to spend unstructured time with each family, observing as much, and disturbing as little, of their daily life as possible. So each of the families would complete a week's 'time-use diary', modelled closely on a research instrument currently being used on a national survey of time use. The purpose of the time-use diary was to provide, for each member of the family old enough to fill one in, a record of activities and technology use throughout a week.[7] They would also be involved in a period of participant observation during a further week. At the end of both these consecutive weeks each family would be interviewed.

Four families were studied in this way and the data analyzed. Observations took place over five periods during the week when children were at home both on weekdays and at the weekend. The researcher, a woman, participated in the domestic life of the household, but taking notes and taping conversations where it seemed appropriate to do so. We have reported two case studies based on this period of fieldwork (Silverstone, Morley *et al.,* 1989). Models for this kind of research, albeit few and far between, had been provided both within the psychoanalytic literature (Henry, 1972) and in one or two studies of television use (Hobson, 1982; Silverstone, 1985). But our study differed from both these base models in a number of respects. It differed from the psychoanalytic in that there was no therapeutic intervention expected, and that the nature of the research contract was one in which, at least on the face of it, our participants would not expect a return. Yet an understanding of family dynamics, of the structures of daily life and of the family system (Gorell-Barnes, 1985), was a necessary precondition, in our view, for an understanding of the place of technology within the household. It differed from previous research on television use principally because it had a much broader concern not just with family dynamics but with the systematic (or unsystematic) use of a whole range of technologies by all members of the family. In pursuing not just patterns of use, but also justifications and explanations for (and indeed fantasies around) those patterns of use, we quickly discovered what seemed, given our aims in this

study, irresolvable limitations of a participant observational ethnographic approach and of the juxtaposition and timing of the various research interventions that we had chosen to adopt.

Put simply, the difficulties were these. There was a sense (perhaps no more than that) that the research was unable to provide much more than a relatively superficial gloss on the culture of the families we were studying. It quickly became clear that 'hanging in' would certainly provide a more or less coherent account of family life (though powerfully mediated through the person of the ethnographer) but it would not provide, within the relatively short period we had to undertake it, either a systematic analysis of technology and family interaction, or a strong basis for any point-by-point comparison between families; and it would not enable us satisfactorily to contextualize families historically and geographically, that is in relation to their pasts, their futures, and their neighbourhoods: in other words within time and space relations. What it did, of course, provide was a real-time involvement with a family in its daily life and an opportunity to escape the limitations of self-reporting, which has been a fundamental problem of all academic and non-academic research on, above all, the television audience.

At this point in the research the researcher left the study. Her replacement was a man (Eric Hirsch). We redesigned the study in an attempt to deal both with our dissatisfaction with the earlier design and also with our perception that intensive participant observation might become increasingly problematic with a differently gendered researcher.

The issues raised by this bald observation are many and various. It is quite impossible to do them justice here. The decision to alter the research methodology was taken fundamentally because we were dissatisfied with what had been produced by the earlier combination of diary, observation and interview. We do not know whether a decision to persist with the original methodology but with a male researcher would have made a significant difference to our ability to work with families, to build a meaningful relationship with them and to generate a good understanding of the qualities of their lives.

The problems posed here are epistemological, methodological and political. We can ask, but not conclusively answer, a number of questions. Is participant observation necessarily gendered? Is it essential that a woman be the observer in a domestic setting? Will a woman produce different and, crucially, incommensurably different, understandings of a family than a man could produce with the 'same' methods? Is a man denied (by his gendered status) a kind of knowledge which is vouchsafed to a woman (and indeed is the reverse also the case) ? Our answer to all these questions is, of course, that it depends. It depends, in each case, on the questions being asked. It depends, in each case, on judgements of whether the consequences of gender difference in research in this kind are likely to be significant or not. It depends, too, of course, on the particular qualities—the personalities, the experience—of the researchers involved. And it depends on the methodological structuring of the research as a whole.[8] We would

want to argue therefore that the gendering of the research needs to be set against other constraining factors that must be taken into account in evaluating and reflecting upon the process and the results of the research as a whole.

In practice, the restructuring of the research involved developing or adapting a number of discrete methodological inputs to supplement both the time-use diary (which we maintained) and, within a different time and space framework, a reduced commitment to participant observation. In briefly presenting each of these methodological inputs we will try and indicate what specific questions they were designed to answer, and to provide an indication of their relationship to each other. In subsequent sections we will comment on the methodological strategies adopted for the study as a whole and its relation to the conceptual framework that is emerging to support it.

A VERY PARTICULAR ETHNOGRAPHY

The first change was in the overall design of the ethnography and for the timing of our work with each family. Instead of an intense two-week involvement we decided to spread our work out with each family over as many months as it took to complete our various assignments but in a more harmonious relationship to the natural temporalities of each household's life. Our various interventions would be spread over a period of many months and we would not necessarily stick to the same chronology in the implementation of each research input.[9] This would allow a more relaxed and less intrusive research input and would enable us to get to know families in a more comfortable way. It would also allow us to undertake research with a number of families simultaneously. This in turn had a number of benefits. The first was to get a sense of neighbourhood and families' differential involvement in it, since families were recruited within a relatively short distance from each other both in London and in Slough. And the second was to get recursiveness and reflexivity built into the study even at this level of basic organization. Work with one family would feed into that with another. Things learnt from one would be incorporated into the methodology in time to include it in the study as a whole.

Fieldwork, therefore, for this second tranche of sixteen families took place during a full year. During this time we were working with each family for a minimum of six months during which nine visits lasting from two to five or six hours would have been made. We therefore had the opportunity to observe the effect of seasonal changes, and in relation to life-events or changes within each household (the arrival of new technology, an increase in the wife's working hours, the experience of being made homeless, etc.) to get some sense of social and technological change in real time, and, equally, some sense of a family's response to stress and to enforced and voluntary changes in the organization of their daily lives.

Each of the following research inputs had a specific function in the research. Each also has a secondary, reflexive or triangulatory significance. Together they

provided what we will describe below as a 'methodological raft' particularly in relation to the model of the household which we are using as a framework (which we also describe briefly below) for analyzing the data and for constructing an account of the significance of information and communication technologies for the household.

Preliminary interview

Each family had a preliminary interview which included the completion of a semi-structured questionnaire, at which demographic and other infor mation about the family and the household was collected. This provided an opportunity not just to get a sense of how family members displayed or made visible their knowledge of the various forms of ICT-related and non-ICTrelated activities in the home, but it provided the first opportunity for them to display in their talk the balance of powers within the family, as between husband and wife, as between parents and children (who may or may not have been present at this and subsequent sessions) —who is talking about what?—and a first opportunity for the researchers to gain some sense of family ideology and values and of the social organization of the household. It also, of course, provided the first opportunity for talk: to get family members used to talking about themselves. This interview would rarely take less than three to four hours and would often spread to five or six hours scheduled over two meetings.

Participant observation

Much has already been made of the difficulties of doing participant observation within urban families (see Wallman, 1984 and above). Our sense of it is that it is not impossible, though it is difficult. But more significantly we wish to argue that participant observation, while it may be necessary, is not sufficient for the kind of study we are undertaking. No specific periods were assigned to participant observation during the main study. Yet a great deal of participant observation took place. This would take the form of observing interactions during our own interviews and especially during those periods at either end of designated research time, when the researcher would be involved, (often no more than in the Visitor' role, (cf. Bott, 1957) in entertaining the children, sharing television watching or other unstructured activities, chatting about recent events or being himself entertained to meals. The researcher's presence would, however, often be a focus of the household's activities; and at the same time the underlying pattern of those activities would occasionally (and dramatically) come to the surface as a result of that presence. Observation would also be directed towards noting the objectifications of the households' aesthetic and domestic culture in the arrangement and display of pictures, photographs, objects and furniture in the rooms to which we had access (see p. 215).

Participant observation for us involved moving with the flow of events, both in terms of the shared time of the visit but also in the absent time between visits and after the full work of the study had been completed. In these shared times the researcher would be in position to gain all sorts of inconsequential information about family relations or significant events (or purchases) just by being there, literally, or by being at the end of a telephone.

Participant observation provided for us, therefore, a constant check on (and another account of) families' own accounting of their technology use and of their domestic relations. It provided one of the many levels of multiple triangulation which we incorporated into the study in order to sustain the web of understanding which it is our aim to produce. Participant observation is not, however, the only basis for the study's claim for authenticity. That claim, once again, must at least in significant degree depend on our ability to integrate the results of the various methods that we have adopted in the study as a whole.

Time-use diary

Time-use diaries are complicated and difficult research instruments to administer and analyze. A week's diary asking for accounts of activities (where, with whom and with what technologies) on a half-hour basis for every member of the household old enough to fill one in is a tall order. Individuals complete them with varying degrees of detail and commitment: wives will sometimes complete them for their husbands. Some are meticulously completed, some are sloppy. None are without ambiguity. Coding them is a problem.

Yet they were essential to the study and functioned in a number of different ways within it. First of all, they provided an objectification of a week's activities, and one that can be cross-examined—as indeed they were in detailed interviews—for their typicality and their significance for those who filled them out and for those (husband and wife together usually) who were asked to talk about them subsequently. The differential styles and intensity of their completion speaks of the gendering of their domestic culture as well as providing a display of the multiple temporalities of domestic life. They dramatically reveal, for example (even taking into account their unevenly detailed completion), the consistently longer and more complex days that wives had, at home, compared to their husbands. They provided (since location of activities was a crucial part of the information sought) the first indication in this study of the space-time geography of the home. They provided the first opportunity for the individuals in the household to begin to be reflexive about their daily activities and to register surprise, as many did, that they spent so much time in one activity or another.

The diaries were analyzable in a number of ways: both as a key to an understanding of the movement of the individuals of the household through the days and the week, their coming together and their separating, and of course also their activities with technologies (their watching television, and the programmes they watch, the time spent on the computer and the phone (though the phone was

something of an invisible technology even within this research tool) and so on). But it was in the talk about the diary (taped talk that was important as an aid in coding the data afterwards as well as in its own right) which provided not just a check but an identification of a family-defined agenda for the study. In this talk the boundary of the household began to emerge in their talk of the comings and goings of its individual members, and of their patterns and networks of communication. The public and the private face of family life began to become visible. The first indications of family priorities and identities also became visible in the discussions around the diary. The home as the site of work and for leisure, and the specific, shifting and sometimes problematic quality of that began to become evident. Above all, the diary and the talk around it provided both the first level of respondent-led reflexivity within the study (the family commenting on the data they themselves had produced) but also the first stage of the attempt within the study to ground our understanding of family life and technology use within the moral economy of the household (Silverstone, Hirsch and Morley, 1990; and see p. 223—or at least that part of it which is grounded in the project to create and maintain a sense of family and individual security in time and space.

Household maps

This aspect of the study—the internal space-time relations of the household — was pursued in a second research intervention, though it was originally conceived with a slightly more mundane purpose in mind. Each member of the family was asked to draw a map of the internal space of the household.[10] Originally this was designed merely to compensate for the likelihood that the researcher would not gain access to all parts of the house, and to provide for the study a record of the disposition of all the technologies and significant objects in the house as a whole. Of course it provided, albeit in a complex and contradictory way, another set of multiple accounts, affected by drawing capabilities as well as by motivation, of the internal structure of the household.

Each individual undertook this task separately. Their talk with the researcher while they were doing it was recorded, and once again provided a commentary on their activity. Of course, results are variable and need to be interpreted carefully (and in conjunction with other sources of similarly focused information). Yet they provided a fascinating, often highly gendered and aged, account of phenomenological space: mental maps of the home. Both women and men forgot to include technologies. The telephone in particular tended to disappear, to become 'invisible', so taken for granted does it appear to have become in many households. Women's drawings (like their diaries) were often much more detailed than their men's—expressing, one might suggest, an obviously much closer familiarity and affective engagement with the domestic environment in which they work.

Interpretation of this data would be impossible without triangulation, for the absence of technologies and objects could be the result of their perceived unimportance, their unperceived enormous (taken for granted) importance, or just carelessness. Yet, once again, as objectifications of household space they provided a significant component in our understanding of the internal boundaries of the household and a visible expression of 'home'.

Network diagrams

The time-use diary and the household maps provided a route into an understanding of the predominantly internal structures of time and space for individual families and provided an indication of the significance of technologies (particularly ICTs) in articulating those structures. Two further space-time oriented methodologies extended the space-time geography beyond the boundaries of the physical unit of the household, into a network of kin and friendship relations on the one hand, and into the construction of the family past on the other. Together these four research interventions provided what we have already identified as a 'methodological raft' for the study as a whole. By this we mean a multiply triangulated set of research inputs which provides a basis for reporting and describing the particular character of each family's achievement in creating for itself which provides its own ontological security in space-time relations and a first-base account in the research of the role of technology in that ongoing project. We intend it to provide a secure yet flexible 'floating' support for the research as a whole.

The network maps were a means to assess a household's resource base in neighbourhood, among friends and among kin and also to provide an indication of the ways in which (and the relationships through which) the household extends beyond the physical boundaries of the house and home. Following Wallman (1984) we wanted to know the degree and quality of a household's involvement in both local and global worlds, how families assessed that involvement and what communication technologies were used to service it. Families were asked to complete two diagrams. The first was a map designed to record geographic distance of people in the household network. The second was designed to record 'affective' distance.[11] Members of families took part in this exercise jointly. Children were involved as before, though often children's networks were under-represented in the final product. In most cases, it was the women who took the lead in identifying both kin and non-kin relationships on behalf of the family as whole.

The two maps together provided an objectification of a family's own characterization of the significance attached to the multiplicity of formal and informal, close and distant, supportive and unsupportive, relationships that extend the boundaries of the household into place and space, into neighbourhood and beyond. They provided, too, an indication of the structuring of identity (self-hood) and identification (other-hood) that takes place as a constant project in a

family's management of relationships in time and space. They provided, finally, an indication of the role of technology (as opposed to face-to-face communication) in sustaining these relationships in terms of their reciprocity and their intensity, and also a reverse indication of how the network of significant attachments defines a pattern of media and technology use.

Family albums

If the network maps provided an opportunity to explore with each f amily the extension of their household in space, then the discussion of the family photograph album (or the family home videos) provided an opportunity to explore that extension in time—at least for the past.[12] How the family's self-chosen visible record of its own past is organized and displayed: for whom it is displayed and on what occasions; the stories, the family myths (Byng-Hall, 1973) it supports in the telling; the particular character of the appropriation of private images for private or public display; the absences as well as the presences, are all material for analysis. The family album (or the collection of photos in boxes) is yet another objectification of family identity. It is a transitional object (Winnicott, 1971) between present and past, between the public and the private, between modesty and display.

The family photograph album is a multiply layered and complex text. It is often a significantly gendered product (who takes the photographs, who selects them for inclusion, who constructs the images of family history?). The taking of photographs (the camera is an important and much forgotten communication technology), the posing of the shots, the selection of events to which to take the camera, the relative stress on the formal or the ritual as opposed to the informal occasion, the logic of their arrangement in the album itself, all together provide not only a rich source of data but a route into family identity and integrity.

These last four research inputs: the diary, the maps of domestic space, the network maps and the photograph album, together provide the main elements of the methodological raft for the study as a whole. Together they provide material which allows us reflexively and recursively to interpret the particular structures and strategies that comprise the ongoing project of each household to sustain itself in time and space. None of them on their own is sufficient for the task. Each research input is accompanied by a recorded commentary from the family either in response to what has been created or during the course of creating it. Each objectification (each set of data) generated within the research reflects on the others; each objectification, either indigenously produced or prompted by the research, is reflected upon by those who produce it. Together they provide the foundation for the remaining research inputs which focus more specifically on particular aspects of family life as they relate to the consumption and use of information and communication technologies. And they also provide the foundation for our understanding of the processes of family life as a whole— above all for our understanding of each family's project for creating and

maintaining its sense of ontological security—and of the role of technology in that project.

Technology list

We have created a list of domestic technologies. It runs to forty-nine items, as well as providing space for families to identify those technologies that they may have in addition. Towards the end of the study we ask family members to identify the presence or absence of each of these technologies in the home: their make, their age, how many of them, their location, and most crucially, who bought and uses them. In this data we have a measure of the technological richness or poverty of each household. We have a measure of the gendering of those technologies in use. And we begin, through discussion, to gain an impression of the patterns of their use, the claims (disputed or otherwise) for their ownership, the problems of regulating their use, and the decision-making processes that went into their purchase. We gain a sense of what Kopytoff (1986) calls the biography of an object, in this case a technology, as it becomes incorporated (and domesticated) into the household. The list becomes an objectification of the technological culture of the household, of its density and its values.

The implementation of this research instrument provides, in conjunction with the output from the diary and the other research inputs, a basis for understanding both the qualitative and quantitative significance of technology in each household, and it raises questions both specifically about the way in which the technologies are perceived by different individuals in the family and about the differences between families in their differential appropriation of 'identical technologies.

Personal-construct interview

The question of the affective significance of technologies in the household, and above all the gendering of that affectivity, is now raised. Personalconstruct psychology finds its place within the study in the use we make of it to attempt to understand the ways in which family members construct their technological universes. Personal-construct theory draws on the human capacity, through experience, to organize a world view and seeks to understand the basic discriminations and classifications which order and distinguish one world view from another. We are interested in comparing masculine and feminine constructs, not of other people but of domestic technologies (both information and communication, and other, technologies; see Silverstone, Morley, *et al.,* 1989) and we are interested in understanding the emergent constructs as expressions of an individual's identity, and as indicators of the ways in which that identity is expressed in attitudes to the technologies which are part of an individual's daily life.

There are two aspects of this theory and methodology which made it relevant to us in our efforts to understand the relationship between family processes and technological change. The first is that construct theory presumes a close relationship between the content of a person's classificatory universe as expressed through his or her constructs and the immediate context of their experience of the world. Personal-construct theory assumes a model of the mind already embedded in a complex environment (Bannister and Fransella, 1986: 171), although it does not take this notion anything like far enough.[13] The second is that it assumes that the personal constructs are systematic: 'Each person characteristically evolves, for their convenience in anticipating events, a construction system embracing ordinal relationships between constructs.' (Bannister and Fransella, 1986:11)

Our request that the adults in the families engage in an exercise designed to draw them into a consideration of their feelings (or absence of feelings) for the various technologies that they have within their home, was important both in its own terms and as part of a triangulation of the study as whole. It released a perhaps more fundamental aspect of the relationship between an individual and technology than can be achieved through other methodological procedures. Constructs can be compared to uses. Individual universes of meaning in relation to technologies can be compared to each other and to what may emerge as the family 'culture of technology', illustrating sources of conflict or incompatibilities within the household. An understanding of psychological processes can be embedded within an anthropological and sociological framework. The gendering of technologies in the home emerges as a much more complex phenomenon as a result (Livingstone, 1990).

Media use

The study of our families' media use brings this research very much into the heartland of a world of concerns and issues principally devoted to the study of television and the television audience. We have argued in previous papers that that study requires a realignment both to take into account changes in media availability and use as well as to take into account the social environment in which such use takes place (Morley and Silverstone, 1990; Silverstone, 1990). Nevertheless, the issues that the media create for our study, issues that we have approached through our understanding of the double articulation (Silverstone, Morley, *et* al., 1989) of information and communication technologies in public and domestic culture are those that media scholars will recognize. They concern the ideological significance of mass communications, the power of texts, and their articulation and negotiation of the boundaries between public and private worlds: through individual programmes, genres and the schedules of broadcasting. They concern the relation between the global and the local, as well as the domestic and the national which new systems of broadcasting, as well as new patterns of ownership and control, increasingly dramatize. They concern

questions of family power (Morley, 1986) and control over the use of media technologies, and they concern questions of the audience as such and the nature of the activities that hitherto have unproblematically been described as viewing.

We were not able in our study, systematically, to observe patterns of media use, though we had significant access to those patterns of use insofar as they manifested themselves both in the time-use diary and in *ad hoc* observation of use during times when the researcher was present in the household. In discussing patterns of use with each adult separately, through a consideration of a typical week's viewing, the attempt was made (though once again it depended on triangulation within the research) to establish the differential availabilities to view, and the key points of the week or the key programmes that provide the occasion for committed viewing. For what kinds of programming is time created to watch, by whom, when?

We are well aware of the problems associated with building any account of viewing behaviour simply on self-reporting. Indeed we have already noted them. But once again we are in a position to check information generated within this input against that provided elsewhere in the study: in the diary and in the final interview in particular. The technique adopted here (that of taking each respondent through a week's television listings) will only indicate a sense of the likelihood of watching particular programmes, and this needs to be set against the actual practice of watching (and listening). Once again it is in the discussion which takes place, and is recorded, within the period devoted to this aspect of the research which emerges as important. It becomes an indicator both of attitudes to, and the dynamics of, media use within the household as expressed differently by the adults within it.

Analysis of household income and expenditure

The final focused research meeting (though not necessarily chronologically final in each case) was devoted to a consideration of the household budget, and to the economic position of the household at a structural and at a daily level. Information was sought on annual income and expenditure, on the management and control of the household budget (see Pahl, 1989), on the decision-making process in relation to major purchases, on the division of responsibility in relation to daily expenditure and household budgeting, as well as on degrees and sources of debt.

We were interested in establishing the levels of economic power within the household as an expression (or not) of the levels of income of individual members. We were interested in the material base for consumption decisions and practices, particularly as they bear on the consumption of information and communication technologies and services. We were interested in the status of technology as gift in the family, and we were of course interested in the material basis for the gendering of technology (both amongst adults and particularly among adolescent children, who in many cases have part-time jobs which enable a certain degree of economic independence).

We were interested, finally, in the economic expectations of each family, in their own perceptions of their economic status relative to other families within their reference group and in their perceptions of how that has changed during their lives as well as how likely and in what directions they think it will change in the future.

The intention was to provide with this (and of course associated data from the study) an account of the economic position of the household both in order to provide a material basis for analyzing the moral economy of the household, and to provide a basis for understanding the significance of economic position as a determinant of culture (see Bourdieu, 1984).

The final interview

The final interview had, principally, a summary and an 'exit-from-the-field' function. But it was also an occasion for covering issues that may not have been fully explored during the body of the study. Generally, discussion focused on questions of f amily identity and future expectations, patterns and practices of consumption, the domestic aesthetic and media use. An attempt was made to characterize in discussion the central articulating features of each family's life, as the family itself defined them and as they have emerged during the course of the study. The final interview was also an occasion for the families to reflect on their involvement in the study, the reasons behind their decision to become involved, and the quality of their experience.

It is on this latter aspect of this interview that we would now like to focus. By the time this interview took place, both researcher and family had got to know each other fairly well. The pattern of their working relationship had been set and, we have to hope, enough trust had been developed within it for us to be confident as researchers that what we had heard, seen and learnt, would provide the basis for an accurate and honest account; and that the members pf the family, for their part, were confident that we would work with the material they had provided for us with equal honesty. But we wanted to understand how family members themselves felt about the development of the study and their own involvement in it. Of course, there had been many opportunities during the previous months for families to air their anxieties and to discuss them with the researcher but, since the final interview was undertaken by the principal researcher who had not previously met the families, this was seen as a special opportunity to raise these questions most clearly, albeit through (as well as prompted by) a new relationship.

Why had they agreed to take part in the study in the first place? Had the study developed according to expectations? Had they felt compromised in any ways by any tasks or any of the questions? How had they experienced the researchers? Had they learnt or experienced anything of value themselves as a result of their participation? Were there any anxieties or concerns still unresolved: about publication, for example?

There was no expectation of conclusive answers to these questions, but it was perhaps surprising how much emerged as a result of them, both of a positive and more critical kind. The study had, for many, developed in ways that they had not anticipated, and clearly there had been anxieties about the length of time it was taking and about its focus. Families had agreed to be part of a study on technology in the home but some of them had been unclear as to why so much attention was being paid to aspects of their f amily life that seemed to have no direct bearing on their use of technology. On the other hand, many families had found their involvement in the research stimulating; they had found themselves discussing aspects of their lives (both with and without the researcher) that they would not normally have done, and this had been interesting and in many cases, even in their own terms, therapeutic.

Our own anxieties in designing the study in the way in which we had, had in part focused on the structural inequalities of the contract that would implicitly be drawn between us and our subject families: that we would be doing all the taking (and apart from a small gift[14]) providing very little in return. This was not generally how it was experienced, as our family therapy colleagues had, in fact, early on in the study, advised us.[15] We were offering a degree of focused attention and interest to families in their everyday lives which was exceptional, and at a certain, but crucial level, undemanding of them. Most, though not all, (we believe genuinely) reported unexpected gains from their involvement with us.

Reflection and reflexivity

Anthropological self-knowledge is not simply a function of personal characteristics such as how much is shared with the people being studied (closeness and distance) or degree of sensitivity to one's own scholarly constitution (self-consciousness). Such self-knowledge is also to be located in the social techniques of ethnographic/anthropological production. (Strathern, 1986:19)

We began this paper with reference to anthropology's engagement with the long conversations that inscribe the reality of its subjects. But there is more than one long conversation within any ethnographic practice. There are, at least two: that of the subjects and that of the researchers. Self-knowledge, as Strathern argues, requires an awareness of the processes by which, actually, three sets of parallel objectifications[16] come to be realized: the objectifications produced by the subjects of the ethnography as a result of their social practices: the objectifications produced by the researchers as a result of theirs; and the objectifications mutually produced during, and as a result of, the research by subjects and researchers. These objectifications emerge through practice, self-consciously (sometimes) as far as the researchers are concerned, unconsciously (often) as far as the subjects are concerned. But in each case these

objectifications are the products of the various long conversations: the partial and provisional textual manifestations of different and infinite histories.

Ethnographic self-knowledge therefore requires awareness of the specificity of the techniques that are involved in the generation of social understandings. Clearly these include questions of writing which we have not dealt with in this paper. But they also include questions of the production of understandings in the practices of fieldwork, and these we have attempted to elucidate.

There are specific practical constraints on the practice of fieldwork in the setting in which we have been working. Those practices have emerged and evolved as a result of dialogue with the subjects and subject of the research— the methods themselves have been grounded (Glaser and Strauss, 1968) in the activity of the research itself. Likewise, we have attempted not just a multiple triangulation within the research but also a kind of reflexiveness in which methods 'talk to each other' and subjects comment on the research process and their own involvement in it as it progresses. There has been an attempt (perhaps not always a very successful one) to shift the status of the researched from subjects to partners. We will also consult them on the things we write.

None of this, of course, guarantees the research in its claims for accuracy and authenticity. But as Runciman argues, there is no such guarantee (1983:236–49). Nor is there one position from which one can claim an uninterrupted and perfect view (Clifford, 1986:22). Yet we are committed to offering a description and an analysis of a social reality which is both accurate and plausible, but about which we can be wrong, a reality that we can mis-describe and mis-analyze, that we can mistake, as well as be right about. We are also providing a description of that reality, those multiple domestic realities, that depends on an agenda which we have set, and on a theoretical position which serves our purposes and not those of our subjects. Our accounts must be plausible to those in our community who may take a different view of things—Runciman's 'rival observers'; but they must also be plausible to our subjects, in the sense that they can be persuaded that what we are accounting, and accounting for, in their lives and worlds is recognizable even if they may not in some cases be able to accept our explanation for it.[17]

We began with a set of questions and a set of expectations that a methodological immersion into the depths of household domesticity and everyday life would go some way towards providing some answers. The various conversations that we have been conducting within the research have led to a developing set of research tools and a methodological approach that we have characterized in terms of a 'raft'. The raft has provided the basis for the construction of a model of the household, its place in urban society and the significance of information and communication technologies within it. This we have characterized as the moral economy of the household (for an extensive discussion see Silverstone, Hirsch and Morley, 1990).

Baldly stated, we have come to see each household as both an economic and a cultural unit in which the respective material position of each sets profound

limits on the opportunities available for consumption and self-expression, but within those limits and in important ways perhaps transcending them, households are able to define for themselves a private/ public moral, emotional, cognitive, evaluative and aesthetic environment—a pattern of life—on which they depend for their survival as much as on any economic security.

Objects and meanings, technologies and media cross the diffuse and shifting boundary between the public sphere where they produced and distributed, and the private sphere where they are appropriated into a personal economy of meaning. Their passage and their incorporation into the household marks the site of the crucial work of social reproduction which takes place within the household's moral economy. We see information and communication technologies as fundamentally implicated in this work of social reproduction, not just as commodities and appropriated objects, but as mediators of the social knowledge and cultural pleasures which both facilitate the activities of consumption as well as being consumables in their own right.

This model is beginning to provide the framework for the analysis of our data. Through it we are attempting to address the ways in which families and households create and sustain their security, integrity and identity with the resources that are available to them and to address the role of consumption and of technology in that process. The model is part of a grounded theory, grounded in our experience of the families with whom we are working, grounded in the question we began by asking and grounded in the methods that have emerged as attempts to answer those questions.

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Notes

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  The research consisted of a qualitative study of twenty family households in the south-east of England. The aim of the research was to enquire into the relationship between family life and the consumption and use of communication and information technologies (principally the television, the VCR, the computer and the telephone).

The empirical research to which the paper refers is still underway. Early reports have appeared (or will shortly appear) as follows: Silverstone, Roger (1991) 'From audiences to consumers: the household and the consumption of communication and information technologies', *European Journal of Communi-cation* vol. 6. 135–54; Silverstone, Roger, Hirsch, Eric and Morley, David (1990) 'Communication and information technology and the moral economy of the household', CRICT *Discussion Paper,* Brunel University (to appear in Silverstone, Roger and Hirsch, Eric (forthcoming, 1992) *Consuming Technologies* London: Routledge; and *Mitteilungen* (in press, 1991) Berlin: Verbund sozialwissenschaftliche technikforschung; Silverstone, Roger and Morley, David (1990) 'Families and their technologies: two ethnographic portraits', in Putnam, Tim and Newton, Charles (1990) editors, *Household Choices,* London, Futures Publications.

2 There is an important technical issue which the choice of families to study within this research to some extent glosses over. It relates to the different and complex meanings attachable to the terms 'household' and 'family'. There are two points to be made. All the households in this study are family households. But both households and families are problematized in so far as we recognize, indeed we focus upon, the nature of the boundary around both that is constructed by individuals in their practical accomplishment of everyday life.

3 One comment is perhaps in order. As we go on to argue, participant observation, the object of often nostalgic reflection by anthropologists working in urban environments (e.g., Bott, 1957:43), is not necessarily impossible in those environments. Its usefulness is of course constrained by the limitations of space, time and access. But its usefulness crucially depends on the questions one is asking in the research and on the kinds of answers one is seeking.

4 Runciman's characterization of the specificity of the methodology of the social and human sciences is in terms of the four dimensions of reportage, description, explanation and evaluation. (Runciman, 1983:1–56 and *passim*).

5 See note 2 above.

6 In fact our families, although predominantly white, were distinguished by religious affiliation (Catholic, Jewish and Hindu as well as Anglican and non-affiliated).

7 Although, as we have already said, we can make no claims for the representativeness of the families in our sample, the time-use diary would have a secondary purpose of enabling us to use the data to check each family's representativeness against a national sample (by, for example, class position and use of time).

8 In fact, of course, although the fieldwork researcher changed after one year of the project, the remainder of those involved stayed with it. These included two other male sociologists and a female social psychologist. In addition, this group had access to others for consultation and advice, including a group of mixed-gender family therapists.

9 In presenting the various inputs in the pages which follow we may give the impression that a rigid chronology was maintained. This was not the case, nor did we think it necessary to do so, though a rough chronology was preserved for obvious practical reasons.

10 The common instruction was as follows: 'Please draw each room in your house and in each of those rooms I would like you to put what you think are the most

important objects in those rooms and include with those objects the technologies in the room.'

11   For the geographical distance map families were asked to identify family and non-family members according to physical distance from the household (and to distinguish between, broadly speaking, positive and negative relationships). For the affective distance map (a more complex and ambiguous undertaking) families were asked to identify family and non-family members according to their emotional significance and intensity of communication. We also asked families to indicate through what media the relationships with these individuals were sustained.

12   Futures are much more problematic. We discuss in the final interview (see p. 220) family expectations and ambitions, and even, on occasion, raise the question of the future more generally. Not surprisingly, individuals have difficulty in articulating a clear sense of future for themselves and their families. Even a focus on ambitions for children does not always provide a focus for more than a gloss. Futures are very private and inchoate things.

13   'Context' in this context is still a subjective category: 'The context of a construct comprises those elements among which the user ordinarily discriminates by means of the construct.' (Bannister and Fransella, 1986:171). In the present study it is precisely our intention to contextualize personal-construct analysis within data generated by other subjectivist and objectivist methods. Context, for us, is a sociological as well as a psychological category.

14   As we have already noted the first four families in the study were recruited through a market research recruitment agency and paid. The remaining sixteen were recruited through schools on a different basis. We offered them (and their children individually) a small gift token from a store of their choice. This was made clear at the beginning of the study, during the recruitment interview. It was paid normally after the final interview.

15   We have during the study been able to consult a group of family therapists at the Tavistock Clinic, London. These entirely supportive meetings provided an important input to the research. We found ourselves talking to a group of experienced and sensitive colleagues who understood families and family dynamics. Their advice has been invaluable.

16   We use the term objectification in a methodological sense. We wish the term to refer to the various readable/analyzable products of the research practice which have emerged either as a result of our attention to the indigenous productions of our subjects or as a result of our own methodological interventions. Clearly the final products of the research—our own texts—will also have the status of objectification, though in this case of our own practices as social researchers. For a discussion of 'objectification' as substantive, see Silverstone, Hirsch and Morley (1990).

17   W.G.Runciman (1983:290–1) puts it slightly differently: 'lt is still the standard practical test for authenticity (could 'they' have been brought in principle to accept it [the description] ?) and behind that the standard practical test for accuracy of reportage (are there any good grounds on which the rival observer might seek to designate their observed actions differently?' The 'in principle' clause begs, of course, a great many questions, not least the question that 'they' can be wrong about what they do, or that 'they' can refuse to accept a 'correct' interpretation.

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WHAT ARE WORDS WORTH?
INTERPRETING CHILDREN'S TALK
ABOUT TELEVISION
DAVID BUCKINGHAM

Qualitative research on television audiences has often been motivated by a desire to take the viewer's side—in effect, to speak on behalf of those who are seen to lack a voice. In the case of research on children and television, this has arisen at least partly as a response to public debates, which have characteristically regarded children as merely passive victims of the medium. The notion of the 'television zombie' has increasingly been challenged by a view of children as active, sophisticated, discriminating viewers.

While this attempt to defend the viewer is certainly worthwhile, it also has its limitations. There is a real danger that the desire to validate viewers' perspectives can lead to a superficial populism and even to a kind of political apathy. In rejecting the dominant view of children as victims of television, there is a risk of merely adopting an opposite view. In place of the traditional image of the innocent, vulnerable child, we end up with an equally romantic image of the wise, liberated child. This view of children is as homogeneous and undifferentiated as the one it seeks to replace. We continue to talk about 'the child' as a universal category, rather than specific children living in specific social and historical contexts.

Furthermore, attempting to speak on behalf of the viewer—or enabling the viewers to 'speak for themselves'—can lead to a rather superficial and, indeed, partial account of what is taking place. I would argue that a good deal of qualitative research in this field—including my own previous work (e.g. Buckingham, 1987)—has adopted a fundamentally empiricist approach. Researchers have tended to take data at face value: what people say is generally seen as sufficient evidence of what they think. The influence of the researcher, and of the act of 'doing research', have largely been neglected. Where researchers have used group discussions or interviews, the role of interpersonal or group dynamics has been played down. Furthermore, there has been a tendency to attribute a causal role to social factors such as class, race and gender, in ways which are unduly reductive and deterministic.

This paper draws upon qualitative data gathered as part of a pilot study for a more extensive and systematic research project on the development of children's 'television literacy', which is currently under way.[1] The research took place in a small primary school in Hackney, East London, in the spring and summer of

1989. A total of forty-seven children aged between eight and eleven years of age were interviewed in groups of four or five, some on a number of occasions, and in a variety of combinations. The topics for discussion and the programmes we viewed together were largely determined by the children themselves.

The aim here is not primarily to present the 'findings' of the research these have been briefly reported elsewhere (Buckingham, 1990a)—but to discuss some of the methodological issues which have arisen from it. In particular, the paper will address the question of how we *interpret* qualitative data about television audiences—and more specifically, how we interpret talk. I will argue for a more cautious and self-reflexive approach to interpreting audience data, which gives due weight to the relationship between children's talk and the social contexts in which it is produced.

Speaking for themselves?

Clearly, talk is only one among many possible sources of data about television audiences, although there is good reason to argue that it should be privileged. Much of the meaning of television is established in and through verbal language, both in the encounter between the reader and the text— which in the case of broadcast television almost invariably takes place in the company of others—and in subsequent discussion. As John Fiske (1987) has argued, the production of meaning from television is typically a participatory, social activity, which can be regarded as part of a broader 'oral culture': the meanings which circulate within everyday discussion of television are 'read back' into individual responses to the medium, thereby generating a dynamic interplay between 'social' and 'individual' readings

Nevertheless, there is a significant danger here of adopting a 'realist' view of language, as if viewers' statements about television provided a kind of privileged access into what goes on in their minds. As discourse analysts have argued, language cannot be seen as 'a relatively unambiguous pathway to actions, beliefs or actual events' (Potter and Wetherell, 1987:34). They point out that the same phenomenon can be described in a number of different ways, and that it is ultimately impossible to distinguish between accounts which are 'accurate' and those which are 'inaccurate'. In practice, there are considerable inconsistencies and contradictions in subjects' accounts of the social world; and as a result, we cannot use language simply as evidence of what people think or understand.

Clearly, individual users of language have no option but to select from among the available linguistic resources, which are already structured in particular ways. Language therefore cannot be seen as merely a neutral vehicle for 'attitudes' or 'beliefs', or a product of mental entities or processes. At the same time, subjects use language to construct versions of social reality: to a large extent, what people talk about is constructed in the process of talk itself. These versions of reality are consequential, in the sense that they perform specific social

functions or purposes. In these respects, then, language is both constructed and constructive.

Considering children's understanding of television in the light of this approach has a number of implications. On a basic level, it means that we need to pay much closer attention to the specific social and interpersonal contexts in which discourse is produced. 'Doing research' constitutes one such context, itself no more or less 'biased' than any other, but nevertheless one which is clearly likely to favour certain kinds of discourse more than others.

In the case of the data presented here, we are dealing with children's responses to an unfamiliar researcher's questions, which have been recorded outside the classroom, but nevertheless within a school context. The children knew that I was a friend of their regular class teacher and also that I worked at the university. Beyond this, my motivations were deliberately left vague: the brief explanation that I wanted to 'find out what they thought about television' appeared to suffice. They seemed to accept my right to ask questions of them, without expecting to do so in return. While many of them asked to hear the tapes played back, they rarely enquired about what they would be used for—although on one or two occasions I had to reassure them that their teacher was not going to listen to them!

While I was inevitably to some degree perceived as a 'teacher', few of the children seemed to regard the interviews as a primarily 'educational' activity. Most probably saw them simply as an opportunity to get out of lessons. Nevertheless, any adult asking children questions about television within a school context is likely to invite what children themselves would perceive as 'adult' responses. Children know that most teachers disapprove of them watching television, and they are familiar with at least some of the arguments about the harmful effects the medium is supposed to exert upon them.

There is some explicit evidence of this in the transcripts of these discussions. For example, in discussing relatively 'violent' action-adventure cartoons, one group of ten- and eleven-year-old boys did consider their potential effects:

Colin: It's because…little children. Like my mate, his little brother, he's two and he watches it *[Thundercats]*. And that's why they don't put nobody getting killed at the end… Because they'll be going about, and if somebody hits them or something they'll be going 'I'm gonna kill you' and everything. It will put hate in their hearts. [If] They put something on, two year olds can't watch it, because they do it, things like that.

Although Colin does appear to agree that harmful effects can occur, it is significant that he attempts to displace these onto children much younger than himself—a finding which has been noted in previous research (Cullingford, 1984; Buckingham, 1987). In addition, he argues that the producers are responsible enough not to put younger children at risk: while he himself clearly finds the 'pro-social' morality of the cartoons tiresome— elsewhere in the

discussion, he likens the 'happy ever after' endings to those of children's fairy tales—he implies that this is necessary in order to 'teach children a lesson'.

In other instances, the children were more directly concerned to refute the idea that television exerted any influence upon them. One group of ten-year-olds engaged in an almost competitive display of cynicism about the false claims made by television advertisements:

Robin: Really, I like adverts, 'cause they don't make sense. 'Cause you know [Brand] ones. They say they test an ordinary powder. They go off and probably choose the worst powder in history. And then they choose the best powder in history and they put a [Brand] sign on it…whenever I get [Brand] liquid, I washed my coat, and there was this tiny little soup stain on it, and then when I got it out of the wash, the soup stain was still there.

DB: So you're saying you don't believe what they're saying, then?

All: No!

Robin: That's why I like them, 'cause they lie. [Laughter]

This was merely the first of a series of examples where the children accused the advertisers of using misleading techniques, or where their own experience of products had led them to doubt the claims being made. They were certainly under no illusions about the persuasive intention of advertising, or about the economic factors involved. In viewing a brief selection of advertisements, they constantly drew attention to continuity mistakes, and mocked them for being 'unrealistic' and for 'showing off'.

While the responses of another group of eight-year-olds were much more enthusiastic—including singing along and dancing to the videotape! —they too were keen to show that they could 'see through' advertising. In their view, the enjoyment of advertisements had little to do with the products themselves:

Garry: Some people think that adverts are to make them…buy it. But the advert is just, like, for watching. Some people love the advert but they never buy it.

Garry's view was perhaps supported by the fact that the children's favourite advertisements were for products they themselves would never have bought, such as pensions or petrol.

As these examples indicate, the children are to some extent already familiar with 'adult' discourses about the harmful effects of television. More crucially, it is clear that they perceive the context as one in which a relatively 'critical' response is at least appropriate, and possibly even required. The 'critical' discourse serves a dual purpose: it enables the children to present themselves as 'adult', for the benefit of each other and myself; and it provides a means of refuting what they might suspect adults (including me) to believe about the influence of television upon them.

To this extent, it would seem reasonable to suspect that the children were more 'critical' here than they might have been in another context, for example where

they were not so obviously positioned as 'children' in relation to an 'adult', or in a non-educational setting. But this is not to imply that the children were merely dissembling, or seeking to please, and that 'what they really think' can be found elsewhere. From the perspective of discourse analysis, we would argue that children have at their disposal a range of discursive possibilities, or 'repertoires': even within these interviews, for example, these ranged from singing along to advertisements to accusing them of lies and deception. Yet given the context, there was clearly something to be gained from being seen to employ a 'critical' 'adult' discourse.

This possibility is one which has largely been ignored by previous audience research. It seems to be assumed that the role of the interviewer remains constant, and can therefore simply be effaced. For example, in *The 'Nationwide' Audience* (Morley, 1980a), Morley classifies the responses of different groups according to their social position. Yet it is clear that, for example, black female working-class FE students and white male middleclass bank managers are likely to respond very differently to a white male middle-class academic, irrespective of what they are discussing. Some groups may perceive the interview situation as requiring a 'critical' response, while others may not: some may choose to play what they perceive to be the game, while others may actively refuse to do so.

Similarly, in *Family Television* (Morley, 1986), the different- and indeed, as Morley admits, unusually highly stereotyped—responses of males and females need to be related to the context of the interview itself. Women, for example, will be likely to say quite different things in the presence of their husbands (as was the case in this research) and to a male interviewer, from the kinds of things they would say if interviewed alone by a female interviewer. Again, this is not to suggest that any one context is inherently more valid than any other, or that we will ever arrive at some uncontaminated 'truth' about what viewers really think. It is simply to argue that we need to see discourse in context, and take account of how subjects themselves perceive that context.

Group talk

Yet, as I have implied, how subjects perceive the context is not constant or easily predictable. 'Context' cannot be seen, as it often is in traditional social research, as a variable which is of equal weight or significance for all subjects, and which can therefore be 'subtracted' from the findings, or simply ignored.

In the case of this research, for example, the children did not consistently adopt the 'adult' or 'critical' discourse I have identified. While at least some of what they said might be seen to be for my benefit—whatever they may have perceived that to be—much of it was not. In certain contexts, children may indeed seek to please, by telling us what they think we want to hear: but equally, for a whole variety of reasons, they may not.

The crucial additional factor here is obviously that these discussions were held in groups, generally of four or five. The children were thus interacting with their

peers as well as with an adult, and would be likely to perceive these two audiences (or in fact multiple audiences) in very different ways. In this context, as Hodge and Tripp (1986) have argued, 'non-television meanings' may be powerful enough to swamp 'television meanings': the existing social relationships between members of the group, and the ways in which these relationships are negotiated and redefined in the process of verbal interaction will obviously be a major determinant on the meanings which are produced. Here again, trying to 'filter out' these social relationships in order to arrive at an accurate account of 'what children really think' may be a futile and, indeed, misguided activity.

Again, this is a point which has been neglected by previous research in this field. All too often, potential debates and differences within groups are suppressed, and groups are taken to be 'representative' of unified social or ideological positions. In their critique of Morley's *Nationwide* research, Jordin and Brunt (1988:239) argue that this approach 'comprises the ethnographic, qualitative and contextually specific aspects of the research by radically abstracting from the real material complexity of the groups'. The focus, they suggest, should be on what groups *do,* rather than what they represent. While broad structural factors such as class clearly do influence the ways in which individuals make sense of television, it is important to regard these not as *external* constraints, but as social relationships which are actualized or brought into play in the specific context of the discourse itself. 'Decoding' television is itself a social process, not merely an effect of other social processes.

I would like to develop these points by examining some extracts from a discussion with a group of ten-year-olds about the US sitcom *The Cosby Show.*[2] The role of the only black (Afro-Caribbean) child in the group, Serena, is crucial here, although significantly it was not her, but a white boy, Newton, who introduced the issue of race:

Newton: You know the programme I was talking about, called *The River?* All the people on that were white people. But on *The Cosby Show* they used mixed people, like they use…

Others [joining in]: Chinese people, black people, all sorts of people.

Serena: But that's nice, I think that's all right.

Others: That's good…all different cultures…

Newton: But in *The River,* it's sort of stupid really, they only have white characters.

Serena: I don't watch a lot of television really, only *Cosby Show* and the news […]! think, because they say that there's more white people than black people and Chinese people and everything, and Indians. And I don't like that. I *love* white people, because I've got a lotta, lotta white people in my family. [Three-second pause]

Kate:	There's not a lot of comedies which deal with black people. I've noticed that. Some of them just do not have any. No starring or anything […]
Kerry:	I don't think they actually *look* for black people to be in their programmes. I don't think they even try and get them. I don't think they want them either.
Kate:	I think if you've got a good comedy, making you think, making you laugh, with black, white, Chinese, together…
Serena:	Make it mixed.

While the children do not use the term 'racism' here, it was used in other discussions, and it would be reasonable to assume that they were at least to some extent familiar with an anti-racist discourse: the criticisms offered by Kate and Kerry here clearly depend upon notions of 'fair' representation, for example. At this stage in the discussion, the consensus is one which might be termed 'multiculturalist'—and here the use of the word 'cultures' is itself significant. Thus, while the underlying issue (not least in terms of the composition of the group itself) is the difference between 'black' and 'white', it is notable that they repeatedly broaden this to include 'Chinese' and 'Indian': throughout the discussion, there is relatively safe common ground in the argument that the races should be 'mixed'.

Nevertheless, Serena's position here is problematic. Her contribution is the longest, and the most personal. She relates the issue of racial representation to her own viewing behaviour, implying that the relative absence of black people is the major reason for her lack of interest in most television. At the same time, she is quick to disavow the impression that she is anti-white, both by exaggerated emphasis ('I *love* white people') and by her assertion that there are 'a lot' of white people in her family. Since Serena herself is not of mixed race, it is difficult to know whether this latter assertion is true—it is not beyond the bounds of credibility—although it is interesting that it is followed by one of the few pauses in what is a fairly animated discussion. It may be that the others doubt what she is saying, but are reluctant to question it, or that the personal force of her contribution leads to a momentary silent recognition of the racial differences in the group. It is notable that the discussion shifts immediately afterwards to less personal ground, and to the reassertion of the 'multiculturalist' position.

Serena went on to compare *The Cosby Show* with the black British sitcom *Desmonds:*

Serena: I watch it *[Desmonds],* but I don't like it. There was too much black people in it. I like having something where there's a nice lot of black people in it, 'cause I'm black. It don't seem like that. But I like white people, as much as I like black people.

DB: But there's not a lot of white people in *The Cosby Show,* are there? Others: No.

Serena: There's not a lot, but there's a few.

Kerry: Like next door neighbours and…
Serena: Yeah.

The grounds for Serena's criticism of *Desmonds* here are difficult to evaluate. Although white characters do occasionally appear in *The Cosby Show,* they only ever occupy minor roles. If anything, the white characters in *Desmonds* are more central. On the other hand, *Desmonds* is British rather than American, and if only for this reason, the ethnic identities of its characters—as revealed, for example, in their use of Afro-Caribbean dialect —will be much more clearly marked for a British audience. In terms of a head count, *The Cosby Show* is more of a 'black' programme, although its 'blackness' is geographically and culturally much more distant, and thus perhaps less immediately salient for these children.

Whether or not Serena's criticism of *Desmonds* is fair or accurate is beside the point, however: what is important is the rhetorical function it has in the context of this discussion. Serena is still concerned here to reassure the other children that she is not anti-white ('I like white people, as much as I like black people') and her criticism of *Desmonds* provides some kind of proof of her sincerity.

At the same time, it is notable that Serena explicitly defines herself here as black, and attempts to explain her judgments in these terms. By contrast, none of the white children appear to regard it as necessary to define themselves as white. Serena is implicitly defined, and defines herself, as different from the rest of the group, and from the norm.

This issue becomes more problematic as the discussion proceeds:

Serena: I think it's right to have a lot of white people *and* black people *and* Chinese people *and* Indian. This is what my grandad said, now, 'cause he's on his own, he says that there should be *more* black people, more… all different colours in films, and whatever. 'Cause that's not right, just putting white people, white people, white people. They think about more white people than black people. But I don't think that.
Newton: But that *[The Cosby Showt?],* it's all black people.
Serena: But you think about just white neighbours, and like — Others [interrupting]: No. I don't, Serena. I don't.
Serena: —everything white this, white that. But I don't. [Confusion of voices]
Kerry: Not all persons…
Newton: Most of my friends are black.
DB: So what you'd like, Serena, is not to have a white programme and a black programme, but to have programmes that have a mixture of people in it?
Others: Yeah.
Serena: But we've only got three black girls and two black boys. I don't think that's fair…
Kerry: That's bad, if you have a programme for black people and [one for] white people. Because the black people would feel a bit ashamed if they got white friends. They should just mix it.

Kate: But in most programmes they just base it on one colour. Like in *Cosby Show* they just base it on black people and…[…]
Serena: But it makes a change, makes a change.
Kerry: I know, but they never usually put them together. It'd be nice if they did.
Serena: But I'm happy about *The Cosby Show,* because they put… There's always white people and never black people, or many black people.

The most notable aspect here is the way in which Serena's position shifts from an attack on racist bias in television to an attack on the rest of the group. In her first contribution here, the criticism is still directed against a generalized 'they' (i.e., the programme-makers), as in Kerry's comments in the first extract above. It is significant that she draws on an outside authority here, in the form of her grandfather—indeed, in the discussion as a whole, she refers to her own home and family circumstances much more frequently than the other children, possibly suggesting a much more directly personal engagement with the issues at stake. Note also that by the end of this contribution the question of race is being posed much more starkly in terms of 'black' and 'white'.

In Serena's second contribution, however, the pronoun shifts decisively from 'they' to '*you*' and is accompanied by a repeated emphasis on the word 'white', which recurs seven times in rapid succession. Serena is clearly spreading the blame, and defining the other children in racial terms, as she has chosen (or been led) to do herself. The others clearly perceive themselves to be accused of racism, and respond by attempting to exempt themselves from individual blame—a classically liberal discursive strategy (see van Dijk, 1987).

To avoid further conflict, my own contribution here attempts to pull Serena back to her earlier 'multiculturalist' position, although it is notable that she initially refuses this. Here again, the issue is defined by her in much broader terms: her response to my question draws attention to the relative isolation of black pupils in the class—and perhaps implicitly, to their under-representation when compared with the local community at large. Kerry and Kate attempt to move the discussion back to television, and return to more impersonal language ('the black people', conveniently ignoring the black person present, and the indefinite 'they'). Interestingly, *The Cosby Show* is now defined as being much more exclusively 'black' than it was earlier in the discussion. Serena's incomplete comment on the programme in her final contribution suggests that her earlier line of defence—that the programme 'mixes' the races—cannot now be sustained: she has to acknowledge that the reason she enjoys the programme is because it is a black show, and that this 'makes a change'. While Serena is thus not wholly placated, there is no way in which she can refuse the 'multiculturalist' consensus which the others attempt to re-establish, unless she is willing to be perceived as anti-white—which in the context of the school as a whole might not be a particularly comfortable option.

This latter hypothesis found some confirmation in another discussion of *The Cosby Show,* also with ten- and eleven-year-olds. Here, the issue of race was not raised at all until I deliberately introduced it: the response of Derek, the only black child in the group, was particularly significant.

DB: One other thing you haven't talked about yet is that it's a black family.

Derek: That's what I was gonna say, but then I thought it might be…

Amy: I was gonna say that.

Derek: Because most—I'm not trying to be bad or anything—most, um… There's not a lot of black comedies, there's only white ones. […]

DB: Why did you say, Derek, you didn't want to talk about that, or something?

Derek: If I said it, it might be racist, kind of.

DB: Why would it be racist?

Derek: Because when I said that to one of my friends, he said 'that's racist'. And I said 'no'.

As the discussion which followed clearly demonstrated, this group was aware, and indeed highly critical, of racism in the media and in their daily lives. What was notable was their initial hesitancy in discussing it. In the extract quoted, Derek is clearly concerned that simply introducing the topic will lead to him being seen as anti-white: like Serena, he needs to reassure his listeners that he is not 'trying to be bad'. Both Derek and Serena find support from their white friends, who are often extremely fluent in articulating their opposition to racism, but they remain concerned that the issue will become divisive.

Determinations

While it would certainly be possible to reduce this kind of discussion to a statement of consensus, this would be to ignore the complexity of what is taking place. We obviously need to account for the differences between individuals in the group. Yet we also need to acknowledge the inconsistencies and contradictions in what particular individuals say. From the perspective of discourse analysis, this kind of variability is crucial to an understanding of how discourse operates. What people say can no longer be seen simply as evidence of what they think—of their 'attitudes' or 'beliefs'. On the contrary, people use language to perform a variety of functions in the context of specific social interactions.

In the case of the above discussion, we might apply this approach in a number of ways. In particular, we might investigate the different ways in which the object of discussion—that is, 'race'—is constructed in the process of the discussion itself. We might trace the shifting permutations of the key terms 'black' and 'white' and the less frequent use of the subsidiary terms 'Chinese', 'lndian', 'colour' and 'culture'. Clearly, there is a process of categorization taking place here, but there is some variation and negotiation in the way in which this is

achieved. The longer list of categories—'black, white, Chinese, Indian'—or the generalized reference to the existence of categories—'all different colours'— generally serves to maintain a consensual, 'multiculturalist' position, while the emphasis on 'black' and, particularly, 'white' tends to disrupt it. Serena's insistence on difference and on inequality ('fairness') within the group challenges the artificial harmony of the multiculturalist discourse, with its attempts to efface racial difference and inequality (see Carby, (1980). This involves Serena in a process of self-definition ('I'm black') and, most crucially, a process of defining others (through her repeated use of the word 'white').

As Potter and Wetherell (1987) argue, categorization is not something fixed but, on the contrary, a highly flexible process: categories do not live in individuals' heads, but are actively constructed and reconstructed in discourse, in order to achieve particular goals. Likewise, definitions of self and other are vital discursive moves, particularly in situations of potential conflict (see Shotter and Gergen, 1988). These systems of categorization and self-representation need to be judged, not in terms of their degree of 'accuracy', but rather in terms of what they enable speakers to achieve.

This perspective provides a much more complex understanding of the question of 'determination', considered briefly above. As I have indicated, one of the major criticisms of Morley's *Nationwide* research was of its tendency to aggregate individuals into groups, and to treat these groups as homogeneous 'representatives' of broader social categories, most notably social class. Towards the end of *The 'Nationwide' Audience'* and in the other work of this period (Morley 1980b, 1981), Morley begins to develop a less mechanistic model of this process, which traces the role of social class in determining 'the structure of access to different discourses'. Yet while this model is certainly preferable to the economic determinism of Morley's earlier approach, it is arguable whether it fully escapes it. As Jordin and Brunt suggest, 'to simply insert the mediating term of subcultural discourse between class and decoding no more changes the mechanistic nature of their relationship than does extending a line of touching snooker balls' (1988:24). 'Class' continues to be seen as an *external* determining constraint on the ways in which television is 'decoded': determination 'appears as a process acting *on* human beings rather than a human process' (see Hogg and Abrams, 1988).

To regard determination as a 'human process' in this way implies a view of individuals as active social agents: children, in particular, would need to be seen as active participants in their own socialization, rather than merely passively moulded by broader social forces (see Steedman, 1982). Definitions of self and other, of the kind described above, will clearly play a vital part in this process. Furthermore, socialization would need to be seen as a process of contestation and struggle, without guarantees of success.

I would like to develop this argument by looking at some further extracts from the data, in this case taken from discussions focusing primarily on cartoon series. In this instance, the children were grouped according to gender and age (eight-

year-olds and ten/eleven-year-olds). In the first interview, they were invited to discuss their viewing preferences in general, and then to consider cartoons in more detail. In the second, we viewed an episode of the US series *Thundercats,* with pauses for discussion.

Of all the programmes we discussed, cartoons were perceived as the most clearly 'gendered' by the children themselves. Choosing to discuss them in single-sex groups accentuated this: particularly for the girls, gender was the central issue from the very beginning. In all of the groups, there were very clear statements about which cartoons were 'for boys' and which 'for girls'. Nevertheless, the groups negotiated these definitions is rather different ways, with age and to a lesser extent class emerging as additional factors. The group of older girls was perhaps the most explicitly critical. The discussion began with them asking me why I wasn't interviewing any boys:

Serena: You should talk to the boys. Because cartons are for boys. Because they've got most boys in it, and men.

She-Ra, a cartoon featuring a female superhero, He-Man's twin sister, was seen as a possible exception to this tendency, however:

DB: So what is it you like about *She-Ra?*
Sharon: I just like the way she acts, for a girl. Like *He-Man,* they wouldn't let a girl be it, I thought. They wouldn't let a girl be so strong, and she's strong.
DB: So she does all the things *He-Man* can do?
Girls: Yeah.
Serena: Makes a change. 'Cause most of the boys thinks that girls are a wimp and everything. But I don't think that's right, so let them shut their mouth. The girls should take over the boys so they know that they're a wimp.
Sharon: Like they feel like we're feeling now. [General agreement]
Serena: Because they always say that because they play football every single day that girls can't play with a ball. Because the boys just takes over the ball and keep it.

The girls' discussion then turned to the question of boys' and girls' behaviour in the playground, suggesting that their criticism of the cartoons was merely part of a much broader concern. Later in the discussion it emerged that few of the girls (including Sharon) actually watched *She-Ra,* yet in the context of this exchange it seemed to be important for them to take a principled, almost militant, stand. Each individual contribution builds on the preceding one, and there is a good deal of mutual support, both spoken and unspoken: the girls are actively constructing a group solidarity on gender lines, in a way that would obviously be much more risky in a mixed group.

The younger girls were rather more ambivalent, however. They had some difficulty in classifying *She-Ra,* claiming at one point that it is a 'girls'

programme', but then going on to argue that boys tend to watch it more than girls. They pointed out that *She-Ra* is not in fact equivalent to *He-Man,* in that it rarely features 'real' fighting, and that the character She-Ra is always seen with He-Man, while the reverse is not the case. The presence of a central female character was thus not sufficient to qualify it unambiguously as a 'girls' programme'.

While gender was certainly a major factor here, age was also important. Even the younger girls described the cartoons as 'babyish' and 'boring', although they were rather negative about their own preference for 'soppy things' like the Australian soap opera *Neighbours.* One of the older girls explicitly rejected the cartoons' apparent (and 'masculine') preoccupation with power and conflict, irrespective of the gender of the characters themselves:

Gaynor: I don't like the things that show men being strong or women being strong. I think they're a bit boring.

DB: So you don't like either *He-Man* or *She-Ra?* What don't you like about it?

Gaynor: I don't know. They're all about power, and getting revenge on one evil man and that. It's all the same…It's always the goodie getting revenge on a baddie.

Sharon: And the baddies never get the goodies.

Gaynor: You know the story, that the baddies aren't going to win, and the goodies are always going to win.

The function of these judgements, therefore, is not merely to assess the programmes. The girls are also actively defining their own position, largely but not exclusively *against* the programmes. They are defining themselves as female, in the sense that they have shared preferences and are able to recognize what is 'for them': if the younger girls do this in a rather self-deprecating way (they like 'soppy' things), the older ones are much more assertive. They are also simultaneously defining themselves in terms of age: in rejecting what they describe as 'babyish' (and, coincidentally, 'for boys'), they are implicitly defining themselves as more mature and sophisticated.

While this self-definition is generally a collective process—there is a good deal of 'we' in these discussions, and comparatively little 'I'—there was at least one instance of open conflict. Here, the younger girls were discussing *Ghostbusters,* a cartoon which appears to be less clearly 'gendered' in its appeal. To begin with, there was general agreement that *Ghostbusters* was 'brilliant', although it was felt that the toys associated with the programme were more 'for boys'. At this stage, I attempted to draw in one of the girls, who had been relatively silent up to this point:

DB: What do you think, Nicola? Do you think they're for boys?

Nicola: Yeah. But I remember I've got a book of *Ghostbusters.* [General mocking laughter] I don't know why I've got it, though.

Kerry: You bought it!

Natalie: You like *Ghostbustersl*
DB: Did someone give it to you, or something?
Kerry: She bought it herself, because she likes *Ghostbusters.* She's always got it at school.
Nicola: It's boring.
Natalie: This is true. She always brings her *Ghostbusters* bag to school —
Nicola: —I don't—
Natalie: —her *Ghostbusters* toys and she takes them over the playcentre.
Nicola: I don't. I don't even go to playcentre.

Possibly because she is more middle class, Nicola is not too popular with the other girls in this group, and they use her unwary admission about the *Ghostbusters* book as a means to marginalize her still further. Significantly, *Ghostbusters* is associated with the playcentre, and is thus defined as being for younger children. What remains striking, however, is the fact that a preference for *Ghostbusters* is used here almost as an accusation, when not two minutes previously the same girls had been expressing their own preference for the programme. In this instance, it is very clear that the existing interpersonal relationships among the group supersede the judgements they appear to make about television.

Gender and to a lesser extent age differences were also addressed explicitly in the boys' discussions of cartoons. The younger boys, for example, simultaneously acknowledged and attempted to disclaim the importance of gender:

Rodney: Have they [the girls] got *My Little Pony* cartoons to watch, same as us, we've got…
DB: No, they're going to watch *Thundercats* as well.
Boys: Oh…[…]
Richard: They ain't for girls.
Anthony: Anyone can…they can watch it!
Robert: Yeah. It can be for girls and boys.
Rodney: Yeah, girls can watch it.
Gareth: It's sexist. It can be for girls and boys. Like, a girl…Like, girls are in it. Like Cheetara's in it. Cheetara's in *Thundercats.* Cheetara's a girl.
Rodney: She's a woman, you idiot.

Interestingly, the boys use an anti-sexist discourse here to question the validity of these distinctions: Gareth's 'It's sexist' refers not to *Thundercats* or the cartoons themselves, but to the assumption, voiced here by Richard, that the cartoons are 'gendered'. Any sense in which the boys themselves might see their own enjoyment of the cartoons as problematic, or even experience guilt, is very neatly circumvented.

The older boys were also aware of potential criticisms of the cartoons, although their grasp of the discourse was perhaps less secure:

Vinh: I think that Three Musketeers *[Dogtanian]* is quite racist.
Darren: Racist, why?
Vinh: Because it's always boys going on heroes and all that stuff. Why couldn't it be a girl?
Darren: There is a girl. Milady. And Juliet.
Vinh: But why isn't Juliet doing all the adventures?
DB: So what do the girls or women do in *Dogtanian?*
Vinh: All they do is walk away, like…wiggling their bums. […]
Vinh: See, I told you it was quite racist. Why can't it be a man going down the street wiggling his bum instead of a woman? [Laughter]
Daniel: Men do wiggle…
Colin: Let's see you do it, then, Daniel, go on! [Laughter]
Vinh: See, why couldn't a man just be captured and a woman capture him?
DB: Have you ever seen that in a cartoon on TV?
Boys: Yeah. *She-Ra.* Yeah. Always does. And *Thundercats.*
Colin: But it's only because *He-Man* was made and people were saying it was sexist. They made *He-Man* first but I reckon that people were saying than it was sexist and everything so they made *She-Ra.*
Vinh: *She-Ra* is the opposite of *He-Man.*
DB: So do you watch *She-Ra?* Do you like that?
Vinh: Yeah! *He-Man, She-Ra,* my best programme! Others: No.
Colin: I watch it, but only because there's nothing on the other side.
Vinh: I don't! *She-Ra's* my best programme!
DB: OK, tell me what you like about *She-Ra.*
Vinh: Me? Because she always goes 'I am *She-Ra!'* and she hold up her magic power.
Darren: And then her legs look really sexy! [Whistles] [Laughter]

While Vinh's confusion at the start of the extract suggests he has only partly learnt his right-on lines, the group as a whole is clearly familiar with the broad outlines of the anti-sexist discourse. While the younger boys in the previous extract define representation primarily in terms of head-counting (and refute the potential objections by pointing to the token female characters), the older boys here are also concerned with comparing male and female roles, and with the emphasis on female sexuality.

Nevertheless, there is a tension within this group, with the older boys (Colin and Darren, who are both eleven) effectively policing the younger ones. Thus, Darren questions Vinh's criticism of the cartoons in his first two contributions, and rather deflates his enthusiasm by his final comment, which of course reinforces the view of women as 'objects' of the male gaze. Colin's role here, and throughout these discussions, is rather more complex. He is concerned to make distinctions between himself and the ten-year-olds (at one point saying quite explicitly 'I'm eleven, 'I'm big') and to appear adult and worldly-wise. Throughout the screening of *Thundercats,* he kept up a constant stream of

modality judgements, pointing out continuity mistakes, and questioning the authenticity and probability of the action. Here too, his perspective is relatively distanced, attributing a kind of opportunism to the programme's producers. At the same time, he also undermines Daniel's support for Vinh's argument, reinforcing traditional notions of masculine behaviour. While the anti-sexist discourse is not explicitly rejected, there is an emphasis on maintaining a group solidarity which is essentially masculine, and ensuring that potential deviants are kept in line.

The children's judgements of the cartoons in these discussions are thus heavily overdetermined by questions of gender. The children's perceptions of the texts as strongly gendered brings into play a set of already well-established gender positions. Yet even in this relatively extreme situation—extreme in the sense that none of the other texts or genres we discussed were perceived as gendered to such a degree—there is some uncertainty and flexibility. As I have shown, the children's gender identities are not unitary or fixed, but are on the contrary established and negotiated in the course of the discussion. The children define themselves, and are defined by others in the group, in different ways for different purposes. Gender identity, we might say, is achieved rather than given.

At the same time, the children do acknowledge ambiguities in the texts themselves. Their uncertainties about how to place *She-Ra,* in particular, point to the fact that the 'gender' of a text is not a straightforward attribute of the text itself. There is a debate here about the criteria which one might use to establish this. Is it simply a matter of head-counting, or should one make a more qualitative analysis of male and female roles? Does role-reversal turn a 'boys' programme' into a 'girls' programme'? Or is a 'girls' programme' simply a programme that girls watch?

The picture is complicated further by the use of what I have termed an anti-sexist discourse, which probably derives largely from the school. Interestingly, it is *only* the boys who use the word 'sexist'—although, as I have indicated, it tends to serve some rather ambiguous functions. While it is the older girls who adopt the most 'militant' anti-sexist stand, the consequences of this position in relation to texts are unclear: while some of them claim to want fantasies of female power, others profess themselves bored with the whole idea.

While it would certainly be reductive to claim that these programmes are a major *cause* of 'sexist attitudes' (as is often argued), it would be equally simplistic to suggest that the children's readings of them are merely a function of their pre-existing social positions. Neither the meaning of the text nor of the children's social positions are wholly given: while there are clearly limitations on both, they are established and negotiated *simultaneously* though discourse. Neither determination by the text, nor determination by social position, would appear to explain the complexity of this process.

Conclusion: some notes of caution

In this paper, I have argued for the importance of social relations in interpreting children's discourse about television. In conclusion, I would like to point to some potential dangers in this approach—not so much to qualify it, as to re-state some fundamental emphases. My concern is that in attempting to do justice to the complexity of the process, we may reach a point at which any meaningful generalizations are simply untenable.

In particular, it is crucial to emphasize the *material,* as well as the discursive, nature of social relations. As qualitative research pays greater and greater attention to the detail and variability of social life, there is a risk that it will become merely descriptive, rather than explanatory. While it is important to avoid more mechanistic notions of social determination, and to acknowledge the complex ways in which subjects define and negotiate their *own* social positions, it is also vital to avoid an approach which is merely individualistic. We need to acknowledge the complexity of the 'micro', but seek to explain it in terms of its articulation within a network of relations, the 'macro' (see Silverman, 1985).

In the case of research on children, the question of cognitive development cannot simply be ignored, as I have tended to do here. While I would agree that traditional developmental psychology of the Piagetian variety is both asocial and often mechanistic, there are certain generalizations about children's development which remain valid. Age, like other variables, cannot simply be reduced to a matter of 'access to discourses'. In their attempt to arrive at a 'systematically non-cognitive psychology' (Potter and Wetherell, 1987:157), discourse analysts risk throwing out the baby with the proverbial bathwater. Clearly, language cannot be seen as merely a neutral pathway to cognitive processes: but this does not necessarily mean that it is futile to talk about cognitive processes at all. In this respect, the work of Vygotsky (1962, 1978) may offer a productive way forward, not least because it offers a materialist theory of cognitive development, in which language plays a central role.[3]

My second note of caution here concerns the role of texts. In this paper, I have discussed children's readings of a range of texts, from cartoons to advertisements to situation comedies. Clearly, each of these genres invites a very different kind of engagement on the part of audiences. While there are undoubtedly major limitations in the kind of 'textual determinism' which was adopted by '*Screen* theory' in the 1970s, there is equally an opposite danger of exaggerating the degree of power or freedom audiences possess. As audience research and textual analysis increasingly develop as separate aspects of media research, it is important that they do not lose sight of each other. While we do need to acknowledge what readers bring to texts, we also need to account for what they find there.

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Notes

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2 For a parallel account of older children's readings of *The Cosby Show,* see Sefton-Green(1990).
3 For an application of Vygotsky's theory to media education, see Buckingham (1990b).

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REVIEW

LIBERATING THE AUDIENCE
SHAUN RICHARDS

Susan Bennett, *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception* (London, Routledge, 1 990), 21 9 pp., £30.00 and £8.99.

Despite the several decades during which Continental—particularly French—literary theory has gone through the process of first translation and then incorporation into British critical practice, theatre theory has remained largely untranslated and its influence felt but fleetingly. While work by Goldmann, Macherey, Foucault, Derrida *et al.* are all to be found in English-language translations—and the time lag between first publication and translation is increasingly foreshortened as publishers come to realize the marketability of these foreign imports—two of the major works in theatre theory to have appeared in the same period, Anne Ubersfeld's *Lire le théâtre* and *L'école du spectateur,* remain untranslated, and although a collection of the essays of Patrice Pavis is available, his magisterial *Dictionnaire du théâtre* is still only available in the French original.[1] It is, moreover, a clear decade since Keir Elam's *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* sought to introduce the British reader to the (then) heavily structuralist inflection of theatre theory.[2] The intervening years have seen little publishing activity in this area; Julian Hilton's *Performance* and the series which it was intended to introduce—New Directions in Theatre— being one mainstream exception.[3] Those monoglot English-language readers who are interested in a more theoretically informed approach to

the analysis of theatre as both production and dramatic text have had to subsist on the articles occasionally carried by *Modern Drama* and *New Theatre Quarterly* or the less readily available journals such as *Degrés* or *Poetics Today.* Given the importance of the project and the paucity of English-language participation, there is clearly a space for a book with the stated intention of Susan Bennett's which is, as she notes in her introduction 'to be …a study of theatre audiences as a cultural phenomenon' (p. 1).

The critic whose work informs the book's overall project is Roland Barthes and it is his work on Racine which provides Bennett with the achieved expression of her own approach. Ranging beyond the purely textual dimension, Barthes, in *On Racine,* asked questions, which Bennett reiterates, as to the social configuration of Racine's public and, crucially, the function of the theatre for this public; was it 'diversion? dream? identification? distance? snobbery?' (p. 71). Bennett extends these questions into the world of the contemporary theatre and centralizes the experience of the audience and their role in the interpretive act; indeed she asserts that the book as a whole is intended to be: 'a testimony to the contemporary emancipation of the spectator' (p. 186). By this Bennett refers to not only her critical liberation of the audience in acknowledging its participatory role in the realization of a production, but also testimony to those theatre groups which have consciously sought an 'active' as opposed to 'passive' stage/ auditorium relationship. The title itself alerts us to Bennett's main concern, but the reader expecting what the subtitle promises, namely a *theory* of production and reception is likely to be disappointed. What emerges is not a theory as such but a series of insights and observations which follow on from accounts of Brecht, reader-response theory and feminist inflections of the latter. In that the book may be intended to serve as an introductory text for the student coming to theatre theory for the first time, there is something to be said for the approach, but given the attention which Bennett gives to reader-response theory, for example, which is the subject of two of Methuen's New Accents series,[4] the informed reader looking for a development of 'a theory of production and reception' is likely to see this material, which is clearly—and more fully—elucidated in other texts, as a somewhat superfluous introduction to a work which, while promising a 'dialectic' between recent critical theory and modern theatrical practice, fails to realize its own ambitions.

What Bennett wants to do as part of her contribution to the 'liberation of the spectator' is simultaneously reorientate the analysis of theatre *and* direct attention away from the established and establishment concept of the theatre audience, a project which involves an analysis of the area of theoretical activity described as that 'operating in opposition to dominant cultural and political practice' (p. 7). What is then focused on are those theatre groups which, in the very structuring of their theatre space, 'liberate' the audience into a freer relationship with the production and/or focus their productions on subject matter which exists beyond the margins of the socially and politically acceptable material which is handled by what Bennett sees as the more conservative

mainstream theatres and their audiences. In rejecting the dominant critical tendency to focus on productions for 'middle-aged, high-income, high-education, professional, managerial and white-collar groups' (p. 94) Bennett gives a higher, though not exclusive priority—the Royal Shakespeare Company is referenced on five occasions—to those groups which could still be loosely categorized as 'fringe'. The most successful attempt in this respect is the eight pages given to an examination of El Theatro Campesino's *Zoot Suit* (1978) and Holly Hughes's *Dress Suits for Hire* (1987). The productions, the audiences and the issues had a United States, or more specifically Los Angeles and New York inflection, but while Bennett references the Chicano and lesbian dimensions of the respective plays, the socio-political-cultural nuances of the United States context is not familiar enough to British readers—and Bennett provides no sustained analysis of either cultural or theatrical codes—for any more than a general impression of the significance of these productions to emerge.

There does, indeed, appear to be a lack of clarity as to the intended readership of the book for while one of the more sustained sections of analysis relates to highly specific United States conditions these are not 'theorized' to a level which would make them generally interesting or applicable, nor is the analysis sufficiently grounded in either production detail or cultural/social location for the method to become an example of what could be implemented in other national contexts. While Britain's The People Show are referenced, there is no mention of Welfare State, certainly one of the most innovative companies involved in liberating the audience, who extended the bounds of theatre into a communal, participatory performance.[5] A section which is of more general use to a British readership and, indeed, any reader looking for a practical example of the way in which an audience-directed analysis might go, is the consideration of the audience's role in interpreting the opening scenes of Ibsen's *A Doll's House* and Caryl Churchill's *Cloud Nine*. In both cases the textual signs which an audience must decode are considered along with information as to, in the case of *A Doll's House,* the original reactions to the play and, in the case of *Cloud Nine,* speculation as to audience reaction to the first productions. In the case of the Dartington College of Arts, where the Churchill play was premiered in 1979 by the Joint Stock Company, Bennett considers that it 'would *likely* guarantee an audience familiar with the work of Joint Stock' (p. 159, my emphasis) and a similar lack of critical rigour is manifest when she considers the Royal Court Theatre where the play received its London production. Here audiences 'were *likely* of similar socio-cultural formation to those which attended at Dartington' (p. 159, my emphasis). Although they would not, Bennett considers, have had a close relationship with Joint Stock, the Court audience 'would *likely generally* share the political sympathies and the awareness of theatrical strategies in oppositional theatres' (p. 159, my emphasis).[6] The material on the textually encoded signs whose polyvalent quality can both engage and disturb an audience is a useful practical demonstration of an informed reading of a dramatic text but it constitutes only a small proportion of the book and it is, moreover, outside of

the general brief. Where, in this section, a consideration of audience enters, it is a constituency of possible rather than actual responses, and references to the *likely* qualities which an audience would bring to a production exposes both the limitations and practical difficulties in erecting a theory of audience on anything less than fully researched empirical evidence.

Whereas a study of audience response as a constitutive part of the theatrical production is best based on the detailed examination of individual texts/productions within an historically and culturally informed context, Bennett opts for a series of observations and insights which, while drawing attention to the general importance in the interpretive context of inputs as various as the location of the theatre, the contents of the foyer, and the information contained in the programme, are all too frequently based on brief references to, rather then detailed examinations of, individual productions. The problem is that the references are simply too brief, and even in the case of the best-known and most frequently cited British example, John McGrath's now defunct 7:84 Company, the reader's ability to engage fully with the argument is determined by a prior knowledge of McGrath's work.[7] In the case of the companies whose productions are referenced as exemplifying the approach preferred by Bennett they are, with some exceptions, most frequently North American. If a substantial analysis of the production(s) was provided as a means of both elucidating the company's approach and advancing the book's thesis then there would be no difficulty with this, but neither the Tammanhous Company of Vancouver's production of *Haunted House Hamlet* nor the work of the Mulgrave Road Co-Op of Nova Scotia are well enough known (or at least not to this reviewer) for a thesis to be based on a one or two line reference to the company, and the same would have to be said for the Dakota Theatre Caravan, the Appalachian-based Roadside Theater, Terra Mia in Australia and Le Théâtre Parminou in Canada. These are, for Bennett, 'only a few of the "marginalized" who have established new audiences and who have achieved …"the liberated performance"' (p. 186), but the precise terms in which this has been achieved are left too vague to be taken as anything more than a basis on which to scour the pages of *Drama Review*.

Bennett's project is, admittedly, a complex one and both the ambition and the need for it to succeed are readily acknowledged. But for a *theory* to emerge the cultural code(s) of the society and those codes inscribed in the text/production would both have to be analyzed, and in far more detail than is attempted here where a pick-and-mix theatrical internationalism occupies the space which would have been better given to the focused and grounded analysis which Bennett demonstrates fitfully on *Zoot Suit* and *Ghosts*. While *Theatre Audiences* provides a number of informative insights, what it does most successfully is convince the reader of the importance of the project; what it lacks is the sustained and substantial analysis to achieve it.

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Notes

1 Anne Ubersfeld, *Lire le theatre,* Paris: Editions Sociales, 1977; *L'école du spectateur,* Paris: Editions Sociales, 1981. Patrice Pavis, *Languages of the Stage: Essays in the Semiotics of Theatre,* New York: The Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982; *Dictionnaire du théâtre,* Paris: Editions Sociales, 1980.
2 Keir Elam, *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama,* London: Methuen, 1980.
3 Julian Hilton, *Performance,* London: Macmillan, 1987.
4 Robert C.Holub, *Reception Theory: A Critical Introduction,* London: Methuen, 1984. Elizabeth Freund, *The Return of The Reader,* London: Methuen, 1987.
5 For a detailed account of the work of Welfare State see Tony Coult and Baz Kershaw (eds) *Engineers of the Imagination, The Welfare State Handbook,* London: Methuen, 1983. For a more general study of Welfare State and The People Show within the context of British fringe theatre see Sandy Craig (ed.) *Dreams and Deconstructions, Alternative Theatre in Britain,* Ambergate, Derbyshire; Amber Lane Press, 1980.
6 The work of Joint Stock is detailed in Rob Ritchie (ed.) *The joint Stock Book, The Making of a Theatre Collective,* London: Methuen, 1987. Given the extent to which the company's work forms the basis of one of Bennett's most sustained examinations of the production/audience relationship, the absence of this title from the bibliography is to be regretted.
7 A full account of the ideas informing the work of 7:84, and of the role of popular theatre in general, are to be found in John McGrath's two books of essays: *A Good Night Out, Popular Theatre: Audience, Class and Form,* London: Methuen, 1981, and *The Bone Won't Break, On Theatre and Hope in Hard Times,* London: Methuen, 1990.

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