

John Fiske - Television Culture
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Chapter 6

Activated texts

The last chapter argued two main propositions: that the television audience is composed of a wide variety of groups and is not a homogeneous mass; and that these groups actively read television in order to produce from it meanings that connect with their social experience. These propositions entail the corollary that 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. In this chapter I shall characterize the television text as a state of tension between forces of *closure*, which attempt to close down its potential of meanings in favor of its preferred ones, and forces of *openness*, which enable its variety of viewers to negotiate an appropriate variety of meanings. The last chapter drew attention to the social forces that worked to open the text up to this process of negotiation: in this one I shall explore the main textual devices that constitute this openness.

This requires a flexible definition of the television text. At one level there is no problem: the primary television text is that pattern of signifiers on the screen and in the airwaves at any one time. But no text is simply a pattern of signifiers: a text is a bearer of meanings, and relating signifiers to meanings is not just a matter of supplying them with appropriate signifieds. Rather, they identify and limit the arena within which the meanings may be found. A fictional image of a white hero shooting a Hispanic villain can never mean anything outside those terms. But within those terms there is considerable space for the negotiation of meaning: the reader can bring left- or right-wing politics to bear, racist or nonracist ideologies, television "knowledges" either of previous episodes of the same series and thus the accumulated "meanings" of the hero, or of other similar series and thus of a generic TV hero and victims or villains. Or readers may, consciously or unconsciously, bring to bear extra-generic television meanings – a news item about US action in Nicaragua, for example, may well form part of the meanings of our hypothetical, but not untypical, incident.

These television knowledges are not confined to television itself. There is a

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whole publicity industry producing secondary texts, writing about television in a wide variety of forms – journalistic criticism, gossip about the stars, specialist magazines for fans (particularly of soap opera), "novelizations" of the television scripts (e.g. ones of *Dr Who*, or *The A-Team*), advertisements, posters, and television promos. These may be secondary texts, but they can be read back into the primary text, the transmitted image.

There is also a third level of text – the readings that people make of television, the talk and gossip they produce: these too are part of this web of intertextual relations that must be taken into account when we wish to study television as a circulator of meanings in the culture.

□ The polysemy of the television text

But we have to start somewhere. I propose to continue the close analysis of the two scenes from *Hart to Hart* that opened chapter 1. Our initial reading showed how the dominant ideology is structured into the text and, by implication, how the text establishes the boundaries of the arena within which the struggle for meaning can occur. We must now extend the analysis to reveal some of the textual devices which open it up to polysemic readings, which therefore work against the attempted ideological closure, and which make it accessible to, and popular with, its variety of audiences.

□ IRONY

One of these devices is irony. The classic and simple definition of irony is a statement that appears to say one thing while actually meaning another.

Thus when the villain says, "Well maybe a few good investments and we can pitch the whole bloody business. But we are going to need a bit more for our retirement fund." his words are treated by the text ironically. The ECU of his face, the heavy irony in his English accent, and the fact that the pretty American villainess has just characterized his attitude as greed combine to lead the viewer not to take his words at face value. We "know" that he is talking about crime and not a pension fund. In other words, we know that this is irony, and that the unstated meanings take precedence over the stated ones. But our spectatorial confidence may not be as secure as this account suggests. For the position of omniscience granted us by the irony in this realist text may be challenged by the social discourses brought to bear on it. A subordinate non-white or non-American, whether in the USA or the rest of the world, could read this to be a subversive use of the discourse and ethics of capitalism which turns the system back on itself.

The irony brings together the discourses of capitalist economics with those of race and of crime, and this collision of discourses cannot be totally controlled by the text or by the dominant ideology. It could be read to mean that the only way in which a male member of a subordinate race or class can participate in the validated activities of patriarchal capitalism (looking after his woman and providing for their old age) is by what the dominant class calls "crime." Such a reading would shift the responsibility for the crime away from the (evil) individual and place it firmly onto the social system, and thus make a sense servicing the interests of an oppositional subculture by contesting the dominant sense proposed by the irony.

Irony, as a rhetorical device, is always polysemic and is always open to apparently "perverse" readings because it necessarily works by simultaneously opposing meanings against each other. Screen theory, like the preferred reading one, would place these meanings in a hierarchical relationship with each other – we "know" that the dominant one (this man is evil) takes precedence over, and is used to explain, the manifest "meaning" of the words (he is behaving responsibly). In this case irony prefers one meaning over the other, and is seen to work in the same way as the perfect camera viewpoint does: it gives the reader/spectator privileged knowledge; we understand the villain's words better than he does, we have a privileged insight into him, and our understanding is complete and adequate. Irony is, in this reading, always part of MacCabe's (1981a) "hierarchy of discourses" that construct for the reader this position of "dominant specularity." But the text cannot enforce its preferred meaning. An oppositional reader may well activate those meanings clustered around "this-man-is-behaving-responsibly." This shift of the moral judgment of the irony away from the individual towards the social system reverses the politics of the meaning. Irony can never be totally controlled by the structure of the text: it always leaves semiotic space for some readers to exploit.

There is irony, too, in the way that the heroine assumes a southern accent to respond to a compliment: "Oh, that's the cutest thing you've ever said to me, sugar." The patriarchal meaning of this is borne by its reference to the traditional myth of the southern belle as the most contentedly and severely subordinate of all female stereotypes; the irony lies in the tension between our liberated, northern heroine adopting this role and the self-aware, parodic way in which she does it. This could be read as foregrounding the gender politics of the myth as she triggers it: in which case the irony would use the discourse of the northern liberated woman to comment critically upon the myth of the southern belle. This appears to be the preferred reading, but a sexual chauvinist could well reverse the preference and read her ironic tone of voice as a form of sexual playfulness that would give the "subordinate" discourse precedence over the preferred, "liberated" one.

□ METAPHOR

The heroine's ironic response is to a compliment couched in metaphorical terms. Like irony, metaphor necessarily involves two discourses, for it always describes one thing in terms of something else. Again, a hierarchical relationship between these two discourses can be preferred, but it can never be enforced. The metaphor that explains a woman's attractiveness to a man in terms of bees, honey, and flowers obviously works to ground a patriarchal view of gender relations in nature and thus, literally, to naturalize it. But the metaphor is spoken in an exaggerated tone of voice that draws attention to its metaphorical nature and thus its artificiality. It could well work to demystify the conventions by which men and women are socialized into relating to each other in our society, and could therefore be read as a critical comment on the ideology inscribed in the practice.

The collision of discourses in irony and metaphor produces an explosion of meaning that can never be totally controlled by the text and forced into a unified sense producing a unified and singular position for the reading subject. The contradictions are always left reverberating enough for subcultures to negotiate their own inflections of meaning.

□ JOKES

Jokes, like irony, like metaphor, work through a collision of discourses. The last chapter has shown how the window/porthole/laundromat joke attempts to give the masculine technical discourse hierarchical precedence over the feminine domestic one: it wants us to laugh at the inadequacy of patriarchy at work, or even as a comment on the inability of patriarchy to cope with the changing definitions of gender. However hard it may try, the text can never finally control the meanings that may be generated when the discourse of patriarchal control collides with that of feminine liberation.

□ CONTRADICTION

Contradiction, literally "speaking against," must be adequately accounted for in any theory of television's popularity in a heterogeneous society, for contradictions are another agent of polysemy. MacCabe (1981a) argues that two of the defining characteristics of bourgeois realism are its inability to treat the real as contradictory, and the work of its metadiscourse in resolving any low-level contradictions in the text. His account does at least show us that contradiction is an issue in both "the real" and the text, or rather, in the understanding of both.

Ideology, as theorized by Althusser, works to iron out contradictions between its subjects' real and imaginary social relations. It constructs a "consensus" around the point of view of the bourgeoisie and excludes the consciousness of class conflict. Conflict of interest can only be expressed through *contradiction*, speaking against, so the repression of contradictions in "the real" is a reactionary ideological practice for it mobilizes a consensus around the status quo and thus militates against social change.

Textual and reading strategies are similarly ideological and work in a similar way. Textual strategies (such as that of MacCabe's "metadiscourse") that propose a unitary, final "truth" of the text work by resolving contradictions and thus deny the force for social change, or at least social interrogation, that is embedded in them. A reading strategy that cooperates with this textual strategy is similarly reactionary: its acceptance of a final "true" meaning of the text can only be achieved by the adoption of the satisfied reactionary reading position of "dominant specularly" (MacCabe 1981a).

Conversely, more radical social and textual theories seek to expose the work of the dominant ideology in naturalizing a bourgeois resolution of contradictions, and work to recover and reactivate them. This need not be a conscious theoretical project. Hodge and Tripp's (1986) school children activated the contradictions in *Prisoner* and used them to "speak against" their subordination by the school system. If texts that bear the dominant ideology are to be popular amongst those who are oppressed or subordinated by that ideology, they must contain contradictions, however repressed, that oppositional readers can activate to serve their cultural interests. Without them, the text could be popular only amongst those who accommodate themselves more or less comfortably with the dominant ideology.

Kellner (1982) also sees contradictions as central to television's ability to appeal to a diversity of social groups. His contradictions work on a larger scale, for they are to be found between different programs: where they occur within a program they are resolved by the narrative working through MacCabe's metadiscourse:

Television mythologies often attempt to resolve social contradictions. For instance, the cop show *Starsky and Hutch* deals with the fundamental American contradiction between the need for conformity and individual initiative, between working in a corporate hierarchy and being an individual. Starsky and Hutch are at once conventional and hip; they do police work and wear flashy clothes *and* have lots of good times. They show that it is possible to fit into society and not lose one's individuality. The series mythically resolves contradictions between the work ethic and the pleasure ethic, between duty and enjoyment. Television mythology speciously resolves conflicts to enable individuals to adjust. (p. 400)

Newcomb (1984) turns to the theories of Bakhtin (1981) to discuss television's multivocality, its collage of discourses which must necessarily include contradictory ones. Bakhtin's distinction between a "heteroglot" text, that is, one composed of many voices, and a "monoglot" one which is singular in its discourse and view of the world, fits well the theory of Barthes (1975a), who suggests that all narratives are composed of an interweaving of voices that cannot finally be structured into any controlling hierarchy (see chapter 8 and 15). As a society contains many voices all striving to be heard over the others, so too must texts that circulate popularly in that society.

Bakhtin (1981) explains heteroglossia in terms that see it as working equally effectively in both society and texts; the heteroglossia of society is structured in the discourse:

Bakhtin's basic scenario for modelling variety is two actual people talking to each other in a specific dialogue at a particular time and in a particular place. But these persons would not confront each other as sovereign egos capable of sending messages to each other through the kind of uncluttered space envisioned by the artists who illustrate most receiver-sender models of communication. Rather, each of the two persons would be a consciousness at a specific point in the history of defining itself through the choice it has made – out of all the possible existing languages available to it at that moment – of a discourse to transcribe its intention *in this specific exchange*.

(p. xx, in Newcomb 1984: 40)

Bakhtin is careful to set this heteroglossia within a context of power relations. Each social group relates differently to the linguistic community, and each is in a constant struggle to draw words and meanings into its own subculture in order to reaccent them for its own purposes. The languages of those with social power attempt to extend their control, and the languages of the subordinate try to resist, negotiate, or evade that power.

A single voice, or monoglossia, is one that attempts to exert control from the center and to minimize the disruptive and vitalizing differences between groups. Heteroglossia not only results from a diversity of voices emanating from a diversity of social positions, it also helps to maintain this diversity and its resistance to the homogenization of social control.

[Heteroglossia is] that which ensures the primacy of context over text . . . all utterances are heteroglot in that they are functions of a matrix of forces practically impossible to recoup, and therefore impossible to resolve. Heteroglossia is as close a conceptualization as is possible of that locus where centripetal and centrifugal forces collide.

(Bakhtin 1981: 276)

Heteroglossia, polysemy, and contradictions are interconnected concepts for they are all ways in which social differences and inequalities are represented textually. As society consists of a structured system of different, unequal, and often conflicting groups, so its popular texts will exhibit a similar structured multiplicity of voices and meanings often in conflict with each other. It is the heteroglossia of television that allows its texts to engage in dialogic relationships with its viewers.

"Dialogic" is another term from Bakhtin that refers to the fact that any use of language necessarily involves a dialogue between historically and socially situated people. Language, and that includes television, cannot be a one-way medium. The last chapter has shown how viewers, differently situated socially, enter into a "dialogue" with the television program, contributing their point of view, their voice, to the exchange of meaning.

Volosinov (1973) (who was part of the same group as Bakhtin, if not actually the same person) uses the term "multiaccentuality" to refer to the dialogic aspect of language. All language can be spoken in different accents, that is, it can be inflected differently according to the social context in which it is used and the social situation of the people using it. *Dallas* need not speak only with the accent of capitalism; in dialogue with a Marxist or a feminist, for example, it can be spoken with a radical accent that criticizes capitalist or patriarchal values (see Ang 1985) and for Moroccan Jews it said clearly that money did not bring happiness (Katz and Liebes 1985). Similarly, the physical/racial characteristics of the villain in the *Hart to Hart* segment may not "speak" only with a WASP accent, but may be inflected to voice the concerns and viewpoint of subordinated ethnic minorities.

The structure of the television text and its ideological role in a capitalist society may well try hard to iron out and resolve the contradictions within it, but, paradoxically, its popularity within that society depends upon its failure to achieve this end successfully.

□ EXCESS

The characteristics of excess have been widely noted in recent criticism, particularly by feminist writers on film and television. Excess can take two forms, both of which are polysemic. The first is *excess as hyperbole*, which is a specific textual device, a form of exaggeration which may approach the self-knowingness of "camp" as in *Dynasty* or self-parody as in Madonna's music videos. The other is a more general *semiotic excess* which is a characteristic of all television, not just of particular programs.

When the heroine of *Hart to Hart* dresses up as bait for the criminals, she deliberately wears excessive jewelry. This is *excess as hyperbole*, and works partly to convey class-based meanings – lower-class tastelessness is excessive,

middle-class taste is restrained, or so the dominant discourse would have us believe. But its function does not stop here. Excessive jewelry draws attention to the role of jewelry in patriarchy and interrogates it.

Similarly, the exaggerated chivalry of the hero as he says "they may not be able to see the honey for the flowers" and the exaggerated southern accent of the heroine as she replies can both be read as excessive. Their excess enables them to carry contradictory meanings: there is a straight meaning which is borne by the face value of the words and fits the dominant ideology, and there is an excess of meaning left over once this dominant meaning has been made that is available for viewers to use to undercut the straight meaning. The compliment and response can be seen as an example of "natural" gender relations in patriarchy, or as a parodic exposure of the artificiality of the conventions that govern those relations and therefore of the ideology inscribed in them.

Excess as hyperbole works through a double articulation which is capable of bearing both the dominant ideology and a simultaneous critique of it, and opens up an equivalent dual subject position for the reader. The reader can both enjoy the compliment and response and at the same time be (slightly) critical of her/himself for doing so. Soap operas are often derided for their excess, yet it is precisely this characteristic that allows the complex reading positions assumed by many fans. These fans treat the operas as if they were real and sometimes relate to their characters as though they were their own family. Yet they know what they are doing, they know that their pleasure in reading soap opera as real life is illusory and that they are, according to their more normal standards, being somewhat silly in doing so. The viewer of soaps can be simultaneously naive and knowing just as can the hero of *Hart to Hart* as he exaggerates the chivalry of his compliment.

Excess allows for a subversive, or at least parodic, subtext to run counter to the main text and both "texts" can be read and enjoyed simultaneously by the viewer, and his/her disunited subjectivity.

Semiotic excess functions similarly, but differs from hyperbolic excess in that it is not a specific textual device, but a characteristic of television in general: there is always too much meaning on television to be controllable by the dominant ideology. There are always traces of competing or resisting discourses available for alternative readings. As Hartley (1983), comparing television with the press, points out:

On television the more complex modes of representation generate an even greater excess of meaningfulness, since TV signifies by colour, motion, sound and time as well as by pictures, words and composition. All these are variously affected by their internal juxtapositions and their external relations with discourses and social relations off-screen. It is hardly

surprising, then, to find television itself characterized by a will to limit its own excess, to settle its significations into established, taken for granted, common senses, which viewers can be disciplined to identify *with*. Disciplining is done partly by television's conventionalised codes of composition, lighting, movement, narrative, genre, etc., and partly by "external" limits such as those professional, legal and other exclusion devices which limit who and what gets on air.

However, I would argue that television can never succeed in its will to limit its own excesses of meaningfulness. (pp. 75-6)

This "excess of meaningfulness" can be clearly traced in the compliment and response in our extract from *Hart to Hart*. Here a number of codes are juxtaposed in a variety of associative relations that can therefore produce a variety of meanings for different audiences. Thus a male chauvinist could associate the make-up, the jewelry (not seen as excessive), and the bees-honey-flowers metaphor in a mutually supportive relationship that would then deny the irony of the compliment and its response, and would read the exaggerated southern accent as sexual playfulness. An anti-patriarch, on the other hand, might activate the contradictions between the codes, such as those between the excess of the jewelry, the normalcy of the make-up, and the way that both of these are in association with an assumed southern accent, to foreground their ideological origin, and the amount of ideological labor that is required to make them fit together well enough to deny their mutual contradictions. Such a reading would also comment critically on the pleasure felt by the sexist with which his/her ideological labor is rewarded. The point to make here is that the conjunction of these multiple codes and textual devices generates far more meaningfulness than the text can control. And this is typical of television. As Hartley (1983) puts it:

Television's signifying practices are *necessarily* contradictory – they must produce more than they can police. Concomitantly, for the viewer, the discipline of the "preferred reading" must be disrupted continuously by the presence of the very ambiguities it is produced out of.

It seems then that the signifying *practice* of mainstream, broadcast network television is not so much to exploit as to control television's semiotic potential. (pp. 76-7)

In the dialogue about the porthole, the heroine says, "I know they are supposed to be charming, but they always remind me of a laundromat." The preferred reading, as we saw earlier, may well be working to defuse any potential threat that a female detective might pose to masculine domination by showing her having to translate the technical discourse of portholes into

the domestic one of windows and laundromats. But in this comment she distances herself from the traditional, sentimental feminine view of portholes as romantic; this distance may well be great enough, for some readers, to resist her textually preferred recuperation into patriarchy. Enough of the modern feminine discourse escapes what Hartley calls the "policing" of meaning by patriarchy to disrupt the smooth surface of the preferred reading. When the heroine's dismissive tone of voice is taken into account as well, the disruptive reading is strengthened so that the joke could mean, to some viewers, that women are not the sentimental fools that they are made out to be, and that there is no need for them to join in men's games of using technical jargon in order to prove it. This sort of disruptive reading is not only made possible by the polysemy of the television text, it is made necessary by the diversity of the audiences amongst whom television must be popular.

The television text is, like all texts, the site of a struggle for meaning. The structure of the text typically tries to limit its meanings to ones that promote the dominant ideology, but the polysemy sets up forces that oppose this control. The hegemony of the text is never total, but always has to struggle to impose itself against that diversity of meanings that the diversity of readers will produce. But this polysemy is not anarchic and unstructured: the meanings within the text are structured by the differential distribution of textual power in the same way that social groups are related according to the differential distribution of social power. All meanings are not equal, nor equally easily activated, but all exist in relations of subordination or opposition to the dominant meanings proposed by the text.

Interestingly, television's economics, which demand that it can be made popular by a wide variety of social groups, work against its apparent ability to exert ideological control over the passive viewer. The fears of the pessimistic Marxism that characterizes in different ways both the Frankfurt School and the screen theorists are contradicted by this culturalist and ethnographic approach to the understanding of television. So, too, are the fears of the moralists, such as Mary Whitehouse or the Rev. Fred Nile: television's excess of meaningfulness may account for their terror of its effects, but their terror is misplaced for it is based upon a fallacious model of the audience as passive and helpless before this semiotic power, rather than one of active viewers exploiting this excess for their own purposes. The power of the people to make *their* culture out of the offerings of the culture industry is greater than either of these schools of thought realized, and so too is their power to reject those offerings of the culture industry which do not offer them that opportunity. It is the audiences who make a program popular, not the producers.

□ Open, writerly texts

Television's need to be popular in a society composed of a variety of groups with different, often conflicting interests, requires its texts to be what Eco (1979) calls "open." By this he means texts that do not attempt to close off alternative meanings and narrow their focus to one, easily attainable meaning, but rather ones that are open to a richness and complexity of readings that can never be singular. The open text resists closure, whether this closure be exerted by the dominant ideology working through its discursive structure or by the author exerting his or her authority over the reader. Eco goes on to argue that open texts are generally associated with literature and highbrow, or minority, tastes, whereas the mass media characteristically produce closed texts. This would seem to contradict his earlier assertion (Eco 1972) that aberrant decodings are the norm in mass communication, and is certainly contradicted by the studies of the culturalists and the ethnographers. Nevertheless the concepts of open and closed texts are useful, particularly when we ally them with the notion of a struggle for meaning. We can then characterize the television text as a site of struggle between the dominant ideology working to produce a closed text by closing off the opportunities it offers for resistive readings, and the diversity of audiences who, if they are to make the text popular, are constantly working to open it up to their readings.

Barthes's (1975a) categorization of texts into the readerly and the writerly has some similarities with Eco's into the closed and open. A readerly text is one that approximates to what MacCabe calls a "classic realist text," that is, one which "reads" easily, does not foreground its own nature as discourse, and appears to promote a singular meaning which is not that of the text, but of the real. As Silverman (1983) says:

The readerly text thus attempts to conceal all traces of itself as a factory within which a particular social reality is produced through standard representations and dominant signifying practices. (p. 244)

The writerly text, on the other hand, is multiple and full of contradictions, it foregrounds its own nature as discourse and resists coherence or unity. None of its codes is granted priority over others, it refuses a hierarchy of discourses. The readerly text is a closed one, the writerly text an open one. Silverman (1983) describes the writerly text as one that replaces the concepts of "product" and "structure" with those of "process" and "segmentation." Segmentation is one of the basic principles of the television text (see below) and works to fragment its unity and destroy its transparency: it works against the classic realist, or readerly, text. In *S/Z* Barthes segments Balzac's novella *Sarrasine* into its smallest units or "lexias," sometimes a single word, sometimes a phrase, rarely more than a sentence. This segmentation forces the

lexias to reveal their cultural construction, their encodedness, and denies them the luxury of appearing "real" or natural. Barthes's reading of *Sarrasine* is an elaboration of the way that television has to be read by many of its viewers. The writerly text, which the television text often is and always can be, requires us, its readers, to participate in the production of meaning and thus of our own subjectivities, it requires us to speak rather than be spoken and to subordinate the moment of production to the moment of reception.

□ Producerly texts

While television exhibits many of the characteristics of open or writerly texts, it also differs from them in one fundamental characteristic: television is popular, whereas open, writerly texts (in the way that Eco and Barthes originally theorized them) are typically avant-garde, highbrow ones with minority appeal. Television, as a popular medium, needs to be thought of as "producerly." A producerly text combines the televisual characteristics of a writerly text with the easy accessibility of the readerly. Unlike the writerly avant-garde text, television does not work with an authorial voice that uses unfamiliar discourse in order to draw attention to its discursivity. The avant-garde author-artist will shock the reader into recognition of the text's discursive structure and will require the reader to learn new discursive competencies in order to participate with it in a writerly way in the production of meaning and pleasure. The producerly text, on the other hand, relies on discursive competencies that the viewer already possesses, but requires that they are used in a self-interested, productive way: the producerly text can, therefore, be popular in a way that the writerly text cannot.

Similarly, the producerly text shows many of the characteristics that Kaplan (1983b) calls for in the radical text (see chapter 3): it draws attention to its own textuality, it does not produce a singular reading subject but one that is involved in the process of representation rather than a victim of it, it plays with the difference between the representation and the real as a producerly equivalent of the writerly mixing of documentary and fictional modes, and it replaces the pleasures of identification and familiarity with more cognitive pleasures of participation and production. But it does not do this in a so-called "radical" way: it does not emphasize differences between itself and more familiar modes of representation, it does not address itself to a minority, alienated group in society. Rather it treats its readers as members of a semiotic democracy, already equipped with the discursive competencies to make meanings and motivated by pleasure to want to participate in the process.

Understanding television as a producerly text logically requires us to

pluralize the term and speak only of its *texts* which are produced by the viewers at the moments of viewing, or of its *textuality*, the more abstract semiotic potential from which these *texts* are produced. This distinction between television's textuality and its texts derives from Barthes's (1977b) between a *work* and a *text*. A work of literature is a lifeless object, a fixed pattern of signifiers on the pages of a book: this only becomes a text when the book is opened up and read. A work is potentially many texts, a text is a specific realization of that potential produced by the reader.

The producerly text, then, needs to be understood as a category that need not be determined only by the structure of the work, but one that can be entered by the strategy of reading. Thus chapter 1 treated the episode of *Hart to Hart* on its own terms as a readerly text, but earlier in this chapter we brought different reading strategies to bear that activated its polysemic potential and treated it more producerly. The "writer" does not put meaning into the text, but rather assembles a multitude of voices within it, what Bakhtin (1981) calls heteroglossia. These voices cannot finally be pinned down in a "hierarchy of discourses," for different readers can "listen" more or less attentively to different voices. The reader makes his or her text out of this "weaving of voices" by a process that is fundamentally similar to that of the writer when s/he created the work out of the multitude of voices available in the culture.

Television's "nowness" invites the viewer to adopt a producerly stance towards the text, sometimes almost literally. Brunson (1984) tells how she, as a soap opera fan, "writes" in advance the script for the soap opera *Brookside*:

At the moment, I don't really think that Sheila Grant is going to have the baby that she is pregnant with. My reasons are partly generic – I know that a very high proportion of soap opera pregnancies come to little more than a few months' story. They are partly what I experience as "intuitive" – she is in her forties, she has already got three children, the house isn't big enough. Partly cynical – she's the only character of child-bearing age on the *Close* who wouldn't have an abortion (Heather, Karen, Michelle (?)) or hasn't already got young children (Marie), so she's the only one that pregnancy will be a big issue for. If I'm right, what I don't know is how she is not going to have it. So my pleasure (rather unpleasantly, in this case) is in how my prediction comes true. (p. 83)

Here the viewer assumes the role of author and sets her "script" against the one to be broadcast in the future. This "script production" is remarkably similar to the actual scriptwriting process in that both are writing processes which draw upon the same knowledge of the conventions of soap opera in general and the structure of character relationships within this one in

particular. They also share a sense of what would be "realistic" in a way that conflates textual knowledge with social knowledge. This sort of "writing" is only made possible because of television's sense of happening in the present in the same time scale as that of its viewers. The future of a television serial appears to be "unwritten," like the real future, but unlike that in a book or film, whose readers know that the end has already been written and will eventually be revealed to them.

The suspense in television, its resolution of uncertainty, engages the viewer more intensely because its enigmas appear to be unresolved and the viewer is invited to experience their resolution, not merely to learn of it. Sometimes this engagement can be so strong as to lead the viewer to attempt to intervene in the actual scriptwriting. Tulloch and Moran (1986) found that fans of *A Country Practice* frequently wrote to the producers attempting to influence future scripts. One fan, for example, having heard gossip that Vicky was going to die on her honeymoon, wrote desperately trying to prevent the script being written. Her arguments share the same sort of knowledge of viewers' pleasures and identifications that the professional scriptwriters need to work with:

I am 14 and a regular viewer of *A Country Practice* and I have heard that Vicky whilst on her honeymoon, is to be killed. If this is true I think you will lose many viewers because the younger members of the cast are the main reason why many of the viewers watch it. Even more, Vicky and Simon have attracted viewers.

If Vicky does die I believe the ratings for *A.C.P.* will drop dramatically and you will lose viewers and there will be no way you will be able to find a replacement for Vicky.

For the sake of *A.C.P.* and Channel 7 I hope that this is not true. If this is true I hope I am not too late in forwarding this important letter.

(p. 232)

The viewer engagement entailed by television's "nowness" is obviously exploited by news, by sport, and by quiz shows. Quiz and game shows go to great lengths to disguise the fact that they are prerecorded, and the winners are known, in order to give the viewers the pleasures of engaging with the uncertainty, of predicting and then experiencing its resolution.

Television producers recognize how important this "writing" by the viewer is. Tulloch and Moran (1986) quote one who has a more respectful and, I would argue, more accurate, view of the audiences than those interviewed by Gitlin (1983) and quoted in chapter 4. "Anticipation is a very important thing for television viewers. Television ... needs to allow people to be smarter than the scriptwriters." (p. 200).

This "writing" by the viewer is frequently part of the gossip discussed in the last chapter, and is encouraged by the fanzines that we will discuss in the next.

Television has in the past been treated by most critics as a readerly or closed text. This approach fails to account not only for many of its textual characteristics, but also for its various modes of reception and its heterogeneous audiences. While we can certainly see in it forces of closure, these are met by the opposing desires of its audiences to exploit its writerly potential by making their "texts" out of its "work."

This same struggle between openness and closure can be seen in the larger structure of the television text, as well as at the micro level of our reading of the *Hart to Hart* extract. Two opposing ways of organizing texts and therefore meanings are relevant here. The first is one based upon logic and cause and effect. This is essentially a strategy of closure because it attempts to specify relations between incidents or elements in a narrative according to universal laws of logic that are the same for everyone and therefore make (literally) *common* sense. Classic realism is a prime example of this principle in practice: in it all actions have both a cause and a consequence, all narratives start with a disruption to the status quo which is then worked through to a resolution that completes (or closes off) the chain of incidents and leaves both the narrative and the viewer in a state of final equilibrium. There are no unexplained irrelevancies in a classic realist text, everything is logically related to everything else, and everything contributes to the sense of the narrative. Realism's construction of a web of rationally explicable connections between all its elements lies behind its self-presentation as the natural, common-sense way of making sense of the world in a scientific, empiricist, rationalist society such as contemporary western society. It shares with science the attempt to close off the meanings of the world to a unified, universal set and to exclude as "unrealistic" or "unscientific" those aspects of experience that disrupt or defy the schema. Realism and empiricism are both agents of ideological closure, but neither is totally effective.

The second organizing principle is one based upon the laws of association rather than those of cause and effect. This is a much more "open" principle for it allows of a far greater variety of associative relations and thus meanings to be made. It is also more typical of the workings of the subconscious than the conscious mind, and thus works differently, not to say disruptively, to the discipline of reason and logic. Earlier in this chapter we noted some of the textual devices (irony, metaphor, jokes, contradictions) which create the possibility for resistive readings: all of these work by the laws of association, and, as we saw, they are unable to specify with any final authority the relations that the reader should make between their different elements or discourses. The reader of an associative text is less "disciplined" than the

reader of a logical text. Of course, no text is either purely associative or purely logical, all texts contain both principles and the tension between them is part of the textual struggle between openness and closure, between domination and resistance. Television exhibits the contradictions between these conflicting principles more starkly than any other medium. As we saw in chapter 2, its typical mode is realism, which is a logical way of organizing our representation of the world; yet, as Ellis (1982) and Williams (1974) have pointed out, its typical way of organizing its texts at the macro level is essentially associative. Williams uses the term "flow" to express this principle, Ellis the term "segmentation," and the difference between the two words indicates the difference between the two approaches to what is essentially the same principle, that of association.

□ Segmentation and flow

When Williams talks about the television experience as being one of "flow" he means that television is a continuous succession of images which follows no laws of logic or cause and effect, but which constitutes the cultural experience of "watching television." He glosses the phrase by contrasting it to the way we normally specify the title of a book or a film; books and films are specific texts, television is a generalized textual experience. Marc (1984) makes a similar point. Summarizing a two-year research program by an audience research firm he writes that "the viewer does not turn on the set so much to view this or that program as to fulfill a desire 'to watch television'." He quotes: "Most of us simply snap on the set rather than select a show. The first five minutes are spent *prospecting* channels, looking for gripping images" (p. 31).

The concept of flow suggests two main characteristics of television, both of which contribute to its textual openness. The first is this associative sequence of images in which any realistic sequence within films or programs is constantly interrupted by commercials, by news breaks, by promos. Williams, used to the more organically organized literary work and to the less interrupted flow of British television, was initially confused by his first experience of American televisual flow:

One night in Miami, still dazed from a week on an Atlantic liner, I began watching a film and at first had some difficulty in adjusting to a much greater frequency of commercial "breaks". Yet this was a minor problem compared to what eventually happened. Two other films, which were due to be shown on the same channel on other nights, began to be inserted as trailers. A crime in San Francisco (the subject of the original film) began to

operate in an extraordinary counterpoint not only with the deodorant and cereal commercials but with a romance in Paris and the eruption of a prehistoric monster who laid waste New York. I can still not be sure what I took from that whole flow. I believe I registered some incidents as happening in the wrong film, and some characters in the commercials as involved in the film episodes, in what came to seem – for all the occasional bizarre disparities – a single irresponsible flow of images and feelings.

(1974: 91–2)

Williams's use of the word "irresponsible" seems to derive from his literary desire for a named author to be responsible for a text, and for this responsibility to be exercised in the production of a coherent, unified text. Of course, no individual is responsible for television's flow in this sense, but that does not mean that the flow is random or unstructured. Indeed, Williams goes on to provide two levels of analysis of this flow in order to uncover its structure. His first level he calls a "long-range analysis of sequence and flow" (pp. 97–8) which consists of a discussion of an evening's typical schedules for six channels. His analysis is relatively superficial. Apart from some generalizations about homogeneity and contrast he has little to say about how the scheduling policy does, in fact, act as an "author" at this level of flow, and, unlike most literary authors, has an explicit and stated intention – to build an identifiable audience which can then be "sold" to advertisers. This institutional, anonymous author, of course, knows all too well the limits of his or her authority – the viewer is free to construct his or her own flow by switching between channels, and though "channel loyalty" exists, it is only a tendency and is never total.

Williams's "medium-range analysis of flow and 'sequence'" (pp. 100–4) is more interesting. He lists forty consecutive segments of a news program including its commercials and promos for programs later in the evening. He notes, for example, the lack of explicit connections between a news report about false claims in drug advertising and two drug commercials later on in the bulletin. He points to a similar lack of connection between promos for a western film and news stories about the Indian protest action at Wounded Knee, and between news stories about a CIA agent being released from China and American soldiers being released from "tiger-cages" in Vietnam. His regret of this lack of explicit or intentional connections in what he calls "undiscriminating sequence" is evidence not only of his literary background, but also of his lack of sympathy with the nature of television and the reading relations it sets up with its audiences. But he does discern under this sequence

a remarkably consistent set of cultural relationships: a flow of consumable reports and products, in which the elements of speed, variety and miscellaneity can be seen as organising: the real bearers of value. (p. 105)

What he does not see is that the lack of connections opens the text up – the relationship between the Wounded Knee item and the promo for the western, for instance, can be read from a progressive or a reactionary position. The textual contradictions reflect contradictory positions in society about the "problem" of the American Indians and their relationship to white power.

Budd, Craig, and Steinman (1985) also find a deep structural coherence underlying apparently disconnected segments of television's flow, and their analysis inevitably "closes" the text down to its ideological, commercial meaning. They analyze the advertisements inserted into an episode of *Fantasy Island* and trace clear links between the first ad of each commercial break and the preceding narrative sequence. For instance, a narrative sequence dealing with a mother's concern for her child's happiness is immediately followed by a commercial for a cereal which makes children happy. Similarly, the sequence in which a mother perceives a problem is followed by a commercial for an ointment which solves an itching problem, and a sequence in which the mother reunites the family across generations is followed by two commercials, one of which shows how Cream of Wheat reunites old friends and generations, and the other in which A.T.&T. does the same. They conclude that

commercials respond fairly directly to the problems, desires and fantasies articulated in the program's narrative by promising gratification through products. (p.297)

The links they describe may well be there, but they are links of association, not of cause and effect, and some of them, for instance the second, are contradictory rather than complementary.

Because sequence and flow are organized according to associative rather than logical relations, the connections are not made explicitly in the text, but are devolved to the viewer where their associative nature will allow them to be made subconsciously. These connections will then not necessarily work to unify the segments of the text (as Williams wishes them to) but may leave the contradictions between segments active and unresolved. Textual unity is an agent of ideological closure, and resisting that unification resists that closure.

The other characteristic suggested by the word "flow" is that television should be continuous and should not end. It is commonplace in the USA for television to be broadcast twenty-four hours a day, but this is still comparatively unusual elsewhere, where there is often pressure from the public (and the broadcasters) to extend the hours of transmission. This does not necessarily mean that people want to watch twenty-four hours a day, but rather that they wish to decide for themselves when to stop watching, and not to have that decision made for them by government regulation or by the economic concerns of the networks.

Altman (1986) relates the extent of the flow of television to its economic context and usefully reminds us that flow promotes and is exploited by the commercial interests of television. By disguising the boundaries between programs, it disguises potential switch-off points:

Provisionally, I would suggest the following hypothesis: flow replaces discrete programming to the extent that 1) competition for spectators is allowed to govern the broadcast situation, and 2) television revenues increase with increased viewing. (p. 40)

In support of this he argues that television programming is most discrete in eastern bloc countries, but that in quasi-state controlled, quasi-independent systems, such as those of France and Britain, a measure of flow appears in the scheduling, whereas network US television is dominated by a heavily promoted flow of images. US public cable channels, on the other hand, approximate more to the British and French situations.

In the USA two sorts of strategy have evolved to promote flow and encourage channel loyalty, one of scheduling, and one of promotion. Scheduling strategy designs the sequence and choice of programs in an attempt to build and hold a large prime-time audience whose demographics are desired by advertisers. It will typically use a strong "lead-in" program to begin prime time and attract the audience that must then be held. Then two alternative, or alternating, strategies are used. "Tent-poling" consists of placing a strong, popular program at the peak of prime time and "hanging" less popular ones on either side of it. "Hammocking" consists of suspending a weaker or newer program between two strong, well-established ones. Both strategies, as their metaphorical names suggest, aim to tie programs together into an unbroken flow and to produce equivalently unbroken viewing in the audience. This scheduling strategy is then supported by the promotional, in which "promos" for programs later in the evening are inserted early into the flow, so that later programs are tied in to earlier ones. Similarly, programs are consistently advertised in journals such as *TV Guide* as linked pairs, threes, or groups. So *O'Hara*, 8.00 p.m., and *Spenser for Hire*, 9.00 p.m., share the same *TV Guide* advertisement under the headline "Top Guns" (April 6-10, 1987), and in the same issue CBS takes a page to advertise its Monday night's flow of women's sitcoms, *Kate and Allie*, 7.00 p.m., *My Sister Sam*, 7.30 p.m., *Newhart*, 8.00 p.m. and *Designing Women*, 8.30 p.m.

Such an account of the economic purpose of televisual flow should not blind us to its textual characteristics. It is effective in the economic sphere only because its textuality appeals to popular tastes and modes of viewing.

Though Williams does not use the word "segment," his analysis reveals how segmented the television flow is. Ellis (1982) argues that it is characteristic of television to broadcast its text in relatively discrete segments, "small,

sequential unities of images and sounds whose maximum duration seems to be about five minutes" (p. 112). These segments are organized into groups like news stories, commercials, or scenes of a narrative, and the flow occurs across these segments. These segments typically follow each other with no necessary connections, and indeed, Ellis argues, news and current affairs programs have made a virtue of this necessity by deliberately mixing items. Title sequences frequently exploit this segmentation by editing together shots from the forthcoming or past programs in a rapid, highly enigmatic way. Music video is another example of exaggerated segmentation. Even drama series and serials, where the narrative requires the principles of logic and cause and effect, may be segmented into short scenes with logical links omitted. The switching between one narrative strand and another in multi-narrative programs such as soap operas is frequently rapid and unmotivated.

Segmentation is more characteristic of open or writerly texts than of closed or readerly ones. Allen (1985) finds soap opera's abrupt changes from plotline to plotline a device that opens the text up and requires an active reader:

The mere syntagmatic juxtaposition of two apparently unrelated scenes represents a paradigmatic indeterminacy for the reader: could the relationship between them be more than sequential? (p. 80)

This "indeterminacy" is, of course, a general effect of segmentation and is not unique to soap operas, though it is emphasized in them. Indeed, Allen's final question could equally well be asked of the "syntagmatic juxtaposition" in the news of the "apparently unrelated" stories of a "strike" and of rising unemployment (see chapter 15). Ellis (1982) agrees that the disruptive breaks between segments outweigh any attempts of continuity or consequence to unify the text. Syntagmatic links are agents of closure (which is why realistic narrative insists on proper consequence rather than mere sequence), and their absence opens up "syntagmatic gaps" through which the "reader inserts himself or herself into the text" (Allen 1985: 78).

Larger versions of these gaps occur between episodes, and in these the viewer "enters the text" in the imaginative and creative way that we traced earlier in this chapter and in chapter 5. These gaps quite literally make the soap opera a producerly text, for they invite the reader to "write in" their absences, and the invitation is readily accepted by many viewers, of whom Palmer's (1986) subjects are typical:

[About *Fame*] We usually get together and start talking about it, 'cause it's really good and you remember what happened, and you wonder what's going to happen next in it. (*Clara*, 11) (p. 101)

We could both tell each other about it if we missed any of the TV and we could both think of what is going to happen if it is continued. (*Philippa*, 8) (p. 101)

Advertisers, with their powerful economic motive, have been concerned to exploit this productively activity of television audiences. Martin Buckland, an executive with USP Needham, Melbourne, says:

In techniques and style, there is a trend towards advertisements in which the viewer is asked to complete the circle: the message is implied rather than stated, and it is up to the public to take the final step in understanding. This has come about because of increasing audience sophistication – largely as a result of growing up with television.

(quoted in Hewitt 1986: 14)

An ad for men's toiletries by Manege exemplifies this:

Visual

ECU of bottle – woman's hand – rubbing it on man's jaw, hand slipping down man's chest, playing with the button on his denim jacket.

Voice-over

When a woman puts Manege on a man he knows that the more she puts on . . . (long pause) . . . the more life will take off.

The long pause invites the viewer to "complete the circle," to write "she" instead of "life." The "newly written" viewer-script, which says what the official one dare not, exploits the polysemy of language in its pun, for it means simultaneously "the more of his clothes she takes off" (supporting the visual message), "the more of her clothes she takes off" (the scandalous, unspeakable message), and "the more she 'flies high'" (as in the verbal message). The writing by the viewer exceeds that of the official script, for it contains three, as opposed to two, patterns of meaning and it implicates the viewer into the process of making meanings for the product. Obviously the advertiser hopes that this implication will engage the desires of the viewer and transfer them to the product. But, as I shall argue in chapters 13 and 16, the viewers' pleasures of making meanings, of "writing," are not necessarily transferred to the interests of the advertiser: many more viewers gain pleasure from advertisements than buy the products being promoted.

Segmentation allows another form of "writing" by the active viewer – zapping. Zapping consists of flicking through the channels watching snatches of each, and moving on as soon as attention or pleasure is lost. Commercial breaks often trigger the finger on the channel switcher and the US networks plan their schedules so that their ad breaks occur at the same time in an attempt to ensure both that their audience watches the ads which provide the networks' income and that they "hold" their audience through the ads. The advent of cable has nullified any effectiveness this strategy may have had. The television viewer can watch a program under roughly similar conditions

to the watching of a film, or a televisually literate viewer (and many younger viewers are particularly literate) can watch two programs simultaneously by zapping back and forth between them, using his or her televisual literacy to fill in the enlarged syntagmatic gaps produced by the practice which Palmer (1986: 79) calls "systematic switching" in order to distinguish it from the more random channel searches of zapping.

Zapping allows the viewer to construct a viewing experience of fragments, a postmodern collage of images whose pleasures lie in their discontinuity, their juxtapositions, and their contradictions. This is segmentation taken to the extreme of fragmentation and makes of television the most open productively text for it evades all attempts at closure. It is a form of scratch video that produces an individualized television text out of its mass-produced works.

The television text, then, is composed of a rapid succession of compressed, vivid segments where the principle of logic and cause and effect is subordinated to that of association and consequence to sequence. Flow, with its connotations of a languid river, is perhaps an unfortunate metaphor: the movement of the television text is discontinuous, interrupted, and segmented. Its attempts at closure, at a unitary meaning, or a unified viewing subject, are constantly subjected to fracturing forces.

Television and oral culture

Television's distinctive textual characteristics, quite different from those of literature or film, have derived from and are inserted into a popular culture in which orality plays a central role. Television is so often treated as an inferior cultural medium with inferior textual characteristics because our culture is one that validates the literary, or rather the literate, and consequently de-values the oral. Fiske and Hartley (1978) list some of the main differences between oral and literate modes of communication:

Oral modes

dramatic
episodic
mosaic
dynamic
active
concrete
ephemeral
social

Literate modes

narrative
sequential
linear
static
artifact
abstract
permanent
individual

metaphorical	metonymic
rhetorical	logical
dialectical	univocal/"consistent"

The list of oral characteristics needs to be extended to include "nowness," a sense of the future that goes with an "unwritten" text, and a direct, personalized address and its production of a textual or cultural *experience*, rather than of separate, labeled works of art.

The formal characteristics of television are essentially those of oral rather than literate modes of communication. This does not mean that television is an oral culture, but that its popularity is due, in part, to the ease with which its programs can be inserted into those forms of oral culture which have survived in a mass, industrialized society.

Ong (1982) suggests that an "electronic" society produces a form of secondary orality which is based upon and derived from literacy, rather than vice versa:

with telephone, radio, television and various kinds of sound tape, electronic technology has brought us into the age of "secondary orality". This new orality has striking resemblances to the old in its participatory mystique, its fostering of a communal sense, its concentration on the present moment, and even its use of formulas (Ong 1971, 284-303; 1977, 16-49, 305-41). But it is essentially a more deliberate and self-conscious orality, based permanently on the use of writing and print, which are essential for the manufacture and operation of the equipment and for its use as well.
(p. 136)

Ong rightly emphasizes the participatory nature of this "secondary orality" but overemphasizes its dependence upon the written word. The orality of television is not just a spoken version of a literate culture: its textual forms, not just its "spokenness," are oral, and, more significantly, it is *treated* as oral culture by many of its viewers. They enter into a "dialogue" with it, they gossip about it, they shift and shape its meanings and pleasures.

Oral culture is embedded in everyday life unlike writing which produces an abstract knowledge that is disengaged from immediate social experience:

for an oral culture learning or knowing means achieving close, empathetic, communal identification with the known (Havelock 1963, 145-6), "getting on with it". Writing separates the knower from the known and thus sets up conditions for "objectivity", in the sense of personal disengagement or distancing.

(Ong 1982: 45-6)

The "knowing" or "learning" offered by *Dallas* or *Prisoner* is deeply embedded in the social context of their reception and use. The "knowledge" is

essentially oral. Its meanings are determined more by the contexts of its readings than by the central system of television and can thus take an oppositional stance with little sense of strain. As Bakhtin (1981) argues, oral culture, especially in literate societies, is typically associated with subversive or scandalous movements and stances. It is the essentially oral forms of television that allow it to be embedded so firmly in the social-cultural life of its viewers and that enable such an active, participatory, selective set of reading relations.

This means that television is able to play in industrial societies a similar role to that played by folk culture in more homogeneous ones. This is not to romanticize television, nor to homogenize it, for television is clearly not "of the folk." Yet the meanings made from it are readily incorporated into the cultural lives of various social formations in such a way that they work as folk culture. Seal (1986) lists four criteria for defining a folk culture and it is remarkable how closely watching and talking about television can meet them. They are:

1. Folklore defines and identifies the membership of a group for its members, often in opposition to other groups.
2. Folklore is transmitted informally, either orally or by example, and consequently does not distinguish clearly between transmitters and receivers.
3. Folklore operates outside established social institutions such as the church, the educational system or the media, although it can interact with them and traverse them.
4. There is no standard version of a folk text – it exists only as part of a process.

There may be a broadcast version of a television program, but the text that a particular subculture may make of it exists only as part of the cultural process of that audience: the school students' *Prisoner* is part of their process of making sense of their experience of subordination and of their resistive stance to it.

Television's openness, its textual contradictions and instability, enable it to be readily incorporated into the oral culture of many and diverse groups in many and diverse ways so that, while it may not in its broadcast mode be a form of folklore, it is at least able to serve folkloric functions for some of its audiences. 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.