

## Chapter 3: Understanding Audiences

Within everyday discourse the word ‘audience’ is commonly used unproblematically; however, this term is actually rather complex, and establishing its exact definition poses a number of conceptual difficulties for social research as ‘audience’ is fundamentally an abstract concept. Therefore, this chapter provides an overview of developments within audience research in order to understand how differing theoretical paradigms have conceptualised audiences. The discussion firstly addresses approaches that propose the media is a powerful force which has ‘effects’ on people’s behaviour, and moves on to consider perspectives which suggest individuals use media to satisfy psychological and social needs, thereby attributing audiences a more active role. Following this, the chapter details the seminal ‘Encoding/Decoding’ model which highlights that although media messages are embedded with a ‘preferred reading’, audience’s interpretations of these texts is dependent upon the individual’s assumptions and social context. As such, this model prompted shifts towards qualitative studies of audiences which the chapter explores through a discussion of more recent studies informed by feminist agendas and a focus on social uses of the media. The primary concern raised in these studies is the need for people’s media consumption to be considered within the context of their lived experience and for research to foster new methodological approaches in audience analysis. Thus, the chapter concludes by outlining in brief the potential benefits of creative audience research.

### 3.1 The Problem of Audience

In his book *Audience Analysis* (1997), Denis McQuail states ‘The word “audience” has long been familiar as the collective term for the “receivers” in the simple sequential model of the mass communication process (source, channel, message, receiver, effect) that was deployed by pioneers in the field of media research’ (p. 1). He suggests that this definition has been utilised in everyday discourse to refer to that which is, in reality, a diverse and complex principal subject, associated with numerous and often conflicting theoretical approaches. McQuail claims that as most audiences

of the mass media are not observable – apart from in fragmentary or indirect ways – conceptualising the audience remains problematic due to its abstract character. Furthermore, he notes ‘Audiences are both a product of social context ... and a response to a particular media provision’ (p. 2) and that these often overlapping spheres which influence media use are further compounded by an individual’s ‘time use, availability, lifestyle and everyday routines’ (*ibid.*). Thus, McQuail argues that although the term ‘audience’ is ostensibly clear in its definition, it is in fact, an ambiguous concept defined by variable and intersecting factors such as:

[B]y *place* (as in the case of local media); by *people* (as when a medium is characterized by an appeal to a certain age group, gender, political belief, or income category); by the particular type of *medium* or *channel* involved (technology and organization combined); by the *content* of its messages (genres, subject matter, styles); by *time* (as when one speaks of the ‘daytime’ or the ‘primetime’ audience, or an audience that is fleeting and short term compared to one that endures) (*ibid.*, original emphasis).

In agreement with these ideas, Shaun Moores (1993) asserts that the audience is not a homogeneous group that is easily identifiable for observation and analysis. Rather, Moores proposes a plurality of *audiences* – consisting of disparate groups categorised according to their reception of various media and/or by their social and cultural positioning (p. 2). Although this definition poses further conceptual difficulties, Moores highlights this by drawing upon Janice Radway’s (1988) work on the origin of the word ‘audience’ itself. In her analysis, Radway states that the term’s original definition referred to the act of hearing in face-to-face communication, in which individuals shared a direct physical space. In contrast to this, Radway says that in its contemporary usage the term is used to include consumers of electronic mediated messages. In this formulation, she notes that the audience is both distanced and dispersed, and consequently it becomes increasingly difficult to determine who or what constitutes the audience (p. 359). This point is consolidated by Moores’ statement that ‘The conditions and boundaries of audiencehood are inherently unstable’ (1993, p. 2; see also Dahlgren, 1998). However, if the notion of audience is ‘inherently unstable’ then, as Moores asserts, ‘how is it that we have come to accept the category of “the audience” as a self-evident fact?’ (1993, p. 2). Specifically, John

Hartley (1987) claims that the fabrication of the 'audience' is perpetuated by media industries and media academics for their own purposes: 'in all cases the product is a fiction which serves the needs of the imagining institution. In no case is the audience "real", or external to its discursive construction' (p. 125). In opposition to this, Moores maintains that the audience has a 'reality', albeit emeshed in lived experience and elusive, and in accordance with Ien Ang's (1991) argument, a differentiation must be made 'between "television audience" as discursive construct and the social world of actual audiences' (p. 13). In other words, Ang's argument maintains that the economically motivated audience of the media industry is a discursive fiction, whereas the audience of social reality remains a legitimate object of study.

Developing this theme, Karen Ross and Virginia Nightingale (2003) identify five elements of media events that are sources of audience research interest, 'the audience participants as individuals; the audience activities of the participants in the media event; the media time/space of the event; the media power relations that structure the event; and the mediatized information with which people engage' (p. 7). They further suggest that 'In all audience research, certain assumptions are made about what aspects of the media event are acting on audiences and about whether or not such "influence" is likely to benefit them [the researchers]' (*ibid.*). Consequently, Ross and Nightingale claim that any consideration of the media and audiences will be partial rather than comprehensive. Thus, in order to understand how audiences have been conceptualised, it is necessary to consider the various theoretical paradigms employed in audience analysis.

### **3.2 Effects**

Research by Herbert Blumer (1946) claimed that modernity had produced a new social form, the *mass*, which differed from the 'group' and the 'crowd' in that it was disparate, alienated, dispersed and lacked collective will or identity. Furthermore, he suggested that the mass were distanced from the sources of cultural production and subject to influence or control by external forces or interests, for example the media. Indeed, such concerns of effects on the mass were articulated as early as the aftermath of World War One. As Will Brooker and Deborah Jermyn (2003, p. 5) note, the

effectivity of propaganda as a weapon initiated studies that proposed a 'direct effects' model of understanding audience's responses to media messages. In this approach, human behaviour is seen to be conditioned by a stimulus-response model in which the media transmit messages that are unquestionably received by a passive audience. James Lull (2000) summarises this point stating, 'The first stage of media audience research reflects ... strong impressions of the ... media as powerful, persuasive forces in society' (p. 98).

Expanding on this issue, the role of the media as a tool of manipulation is an area explored by the Frankfurt School, principally, Theodor Adorno (1991; with Horkheimer, 1979). Adorno proposed that the mass media, or what he termed 'the culture industry', acts ideologically to control and contain the masses by 'craftily sanctioning the demand for rubbish it [the culture industry] inaugurates total harmony' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1979, p. 121). According to Adorno, the culture industries produce 'standardised' products which, he maintained, nulls the audience into a docile state that precludes any critical or political engagement with culture and society. Thus, Adorno relegates the role of the audience to a passive mass unable to create 'authentic' meaning in the texts they consume. Although Adorno's ideas continue to have theoretical currency, a number of criticisms have been levelled against his work. For example, Ang (1985) claims that the 'ideology of mass culture' is highly reductive as it equates the popular with 'bad taste' and inferiority. Furthermore, Adorno failed to engage with any ethnographic study of *actual* audiences, or textual analyses of the cultural products he discussed (Brooker and Jermyn, 2003, p. 52). In addition, Ross and Nightingale (2003, p. 4) suggest that it is inappropriate to conceptualise the audience as *mass*. Instead they propose *formations* is more representative, as this indicates the social/cultural complexity of audience membership and that audiences do not exist solely in relation to the media.

### **3.3 Indirect Effects**

Returning to the issue of effects, Robert Merton's ([1949] 1968) analysis of propaganda and persuasion conducted in 1949 revealed that media effects were not as predictable as supposed. His study identified that individuals could read texts at total

variance from the intended message of the producers. This ‘boomerang effect’, he claimed, could be produced when audiences compared a text’s content with their own experience, and concluded that ‘misreadings’ were a result of an individual’s social/cultural perspective rather than an inherent flaw in the message. The significance of Merton’s work was that it established a relationship between social and lived experience and reading media texts. This principal was developed further by Elihu Katz and Paul Lazarsfeld (1955) who acknowledged the role of the social environment in the interpretation of media. Katz and Lazarsfeld proposed a ‘two-step flow’ theory, in which media messages were not transmitted directly to individuals, but mediated through ‘influentials’ or respected ‘opinion leaders’. Furthermore, they ‘found that opinion leadership does not operate only vertically from top to bottom, but also horizontally: there are opinion leaders in every walk of life’ (Lazarsfeld, 1968, quoted in Brooker and Jermyn, 2003, p. 7). Consequently, Katz and Lazarsfeld questioned the status of the audience as a ‘mass’ of alienated individuals, rather they proposed the audience consisted of individuals involved in complex social networks. Thus, these studies indicated how the media functioned as a facilitator for social interaction and opened up the possibility of a more ‘active’ audience that the simple stimulus-response model denied. However, these works produced only observable and short-term results in terms of attitude changes in the audience. In addition, they failed to produce a theoretical response to media industry systems or to engage with macro-level culture and economic formulations (Hall, 1982).

Despite the problems highlighted regarding the ‘effects’ model, effects of media violence and the influence of the media on children remains a pertinent issue. Further difficulties arise in that there are disparities between the findings of the US and UK research. As Olga Linné and Ellen Wartella (1998) observe, US research indicates a causal link between media violence and violent behaviour in the audience, whereas UK research reaches contradictory conclusions – arguing that US research ignores social and economic factors. On this issue, David Gauntlett (1998, 2002) raises a number of criticisms with effects studies. Specifically he argues that they do not account for the audiences’ complex engagement and interpretation of texts, and fail to acknowledge that other social and cultural influences on behaviour cannot be successfully isolated from media influences:

[I]solating one particular thing, such as TV viewing or magazine reading, as the cause of a person's behaviour is basically impossible. The idea that a bit of media content 'made' somebody do something will always seem silly, for the perfectly good reason that, as we all know, the influences upon any decision to do something are a complex combination of many elements, including previous experiences, opinions, values and suggestions from various sources (2002, p. 29).

### **3.4 Uses and Gratifications**

Weaknesses in the effects model prompted the development of the uses and gratifications approach that was informed by Katz's (1959) statement that 'less attention [should be paid] to what media do to people and more to what people do with the media' (p. 2). This thinking enabled studies to investigate long-term attitude changes and the role of the active audience. Elihu Katz, Jay Blumler and Michael Gurevitch (1974) identified the focus of this approach as:

(1) the social and psychological origins of (2) needs, which generate (3) expectations of (4) the mass media or other sources, which lead to (5) differential patterns of media exposure (or engagement in other activities), resulting in (6) need gratification and (7) other consequences, perhaps mostly unintended ones (p. 20).

In this formulation, the audience use the media to satisfy psychological and social needs. Denis McQuail, Jay Blumler and J. R. Brown (1972) illustrated audiences could utilise the media to gratify a number of needs: diversion (escape and entertainment); personal relationship needs (social interaction); personal identity needs (character identification and value reinforcement); and surveillance needs (information accumulation). Thus, the uses and gratifications approach accommodated an understanding of audience members as active agents within a social network rather than fragmented individuals within a monolithic mass. Furthermore, the model acknowledges media content and how attitude change extends to include the audience's knowledge, behaviour, beliefs and value systems (Abercrombie, 1996, p. 141).

Although the uses and gratification approach opened up new and more ‘positive’ possibilities for audience research, a number of criticisms have been levelled against it as a tool of analysis. Nicholas Abercrombie (1996, p. 142) asserts that it is ‘too positive’ – crediting the audience with far more autonomy and control than they have in actuality. In addition, he states that the approach does not interrogate how audiences ‘create’ meanings in their interpretation of media texts. Virginia Nightingale and Karen Ross (2003, p. 6) identify that although the model foregrounds the active audience and its needs, it fails to engage with the concept of identity and identities being produced by culture. They question the approach further by noting that, although it prioritised the role of the ‘active audience’, it neglects the influence of social and cultural experience on the audiences’ readings of the media. Martin Barker and Kate Brooks (1998a, pp. 87-88) criticise the approach as it does not consider: needs generated *by* the media; the consequences of needs *not* being gratified; in some cases media contact may constitute a need in itself; it does not consider changes that may result from a need being satisfied nor does it acknowledge that some audience members use the media more than others. They further highlight the problem of gratification acting as a vicarious compensation for audience members’ ‘problems’, the method misunderstanding the media as a wilful aid to peoples’ ‘struggling’. As they explain:

‘[G]ratification’ means one and only one thing: it is a solution to a deficit in an individual which has been caused by problematic social experience. They talk of the media ‘compensating’ for problems, of audiences ‘feeling insecure’ and using the media as a result ... audience responses are constructed by much more than putative ‘needs’ seeking gratification (pp. 90-91).

### **3.5 Political Economy**

In response to the uses and gratification model, studies emerging in the 1970s recognised that audiences should be considered as communities or cultures, rather than individuals. The political economy approach situated audiences within a theoretical framework that allowed for critical analysis of the media *and* media content. For example, James Halloran, Phillip Elliott and Graham Murdock (1970) aimed to develop ‘a comprehensive strategy which would include the study of the

mass media as social institutions and of mass communication as a social process, both within the wider social system' (p. 18). Halloran, Elliot and Murdock's study on news coverage engaged in analysis of both the production of, and responses to, media texts. They identified that reception and interpretation of media was influenced by the audiences' position in society (in this specific case – occupation), and that media texts were constructed and framed in accordance to media industry protocols. As Maxwell McCombs (1994) states, the media's structuring of news leads to what is termed 'agenda setting' in which the media 'may not be very successful in telling us what to think, but is stunningly successful in telling us what to think about!' (p. 27; see Cohen, 1963). The strengths of this approach to audience research was that it was grounded in social theory – focusing specifically on class and media representations – and recognised the role of the audience's social/cultural position in their interpretations (Ross and Nightingale, 2003, p. 34). However, a large number of the studies relied on quantitative methodologies, and a more nuanced theory which accounted for the subtleties in readings of media texts was developed by the encoding/decoding model.

### **3.6 Encoding/Decoding**

In his seminal paper *Encoding/Decoding* (1980) Stuart Hall proposed that media producers 'encoded' meanings into media texts, which carry a 'preferred' reading intended for the audience. Incorporating a semiotic framework into his analysis, Hall claims that the active audience do not simply digest messages encoded by the producers, but 'decode' meanings from the media in accordance with *their own* social and cultural context. Thus, according to Hall, media texts are polysemic and can be read in a number of ways. However, Hall stresses that the encoding/decoding model does not claim that texts are open to an infinite number of interpretations as they remain 'structured in dominance'. Rather, the audience can adopt one of a number of stances when decoding a message: accepting the dominant reading; adopting an oppositional position – decoding a totally contrary message to that intended by the producer; or a negotiated position in which the preferred reading is accommodated without accepting its ideology. Although Hall does not deny that media messages



have effects, he reminds us that these effects are dependent upon the audience's *interpretation* of the text:

Before this message can have an 'effect' (however defined), or satisfy a 'need' or be put to a 'use', it must first be perceived as a meaningful discourse and meaningfully de-coded. It is this set of de-coded meanings which 'have an effect', influence, entertain, instruct or persuade, with very complex perceptual, cognitive, emotional, ideological or behavioural consequences (p. 509).

Therefore, Hall's encoding/decoding approach demonstrated a number of advantages as a theoretical model: it enabled the media to be studied as a facet of, and a transmitter of, dominant ideology; it revealed how media messages were reworked by different social groups within society; it identified that although dominant readings were 'privileged', they were not dictated by media texts; it studied the audience in terms of their readings rather than their psychological needs; and emphasised the political rather than the personal. In addition, by focusing on 'discourses' it lessened the importance of any single text or media (Ross and Nightingale, 2003, pp. 37-38).

David Morley's (1980) study of *Nationwide* was an early example of the encoding/decoding approach being utilised to investigate audience reception of media texts. Through engaging with both reception of the programme's ideology and mode of address, Morley analysed the responses of a number of occupational groups according to class (including shop stewards, black students in further education, bank managers and apprentices) in order to monitor their acceptance or rejection of preferred meanings. His study attempted to illustrate how the participant's social positioning would influence whether they read *Nationwide* from a dominant, negotiated or oppositional position. Mapping each group's responses, Morley demonstrated that the audience's reactions were 'politically patterned'. Although the encoding/decoding approach enabled Morley to consider the study of 'audience talk' more thoroughly and investigate situations where 'talk is both produced and "normalised"' (Ross and Nightingale, 2003, p. 38), a number of problems are inherent in his findings. As Abercrombie (1996, pp. 143-144) notes, the study revealed it was too simplistic to describe the audience's reception of media within the prescribed categories of dominant, negotiated and oppositional readings. For example, the bank

managers accepted the ideological position of the programme but rejected its mode of address, whereas shop stewards were attracted by the popular format but rejected the ideological content. Even within the reading categories, complications were observed – the shop stewards and the black students both took oppositional stances; however, the shop stewards’ opposition manifested itself as active dissent, whereas the black students totally disengaged from the programme. Furthermore, decoding cannot be evaluated solely in terms of the social, economic or class location of the audience; analyses of selected audiences’ responses need to be questioned if members of the specific group would not usually engage with the selected media text; and, are there truly ‘preferred’ readings of texts, or are these projected onto the text by the researchers themselves (see Barker and Brooks, 1998a, pp. 93-97)?

Despite the above criticisms it should be stressed that Hall (1994) himself states his initial paper was intended as a proposal for new approaches and development – not a *fait accompli* solution:

I had in my sights the Centre for Mass Communications Research – that was who I was trying to blow out of the water ... [and if the model has] *any* purchase, now and later, it’s a model because of what it suggests. It suggests an approach; it opens up new questions. It maps a terrain. But it’s a model which has to be worked with and developed and changed (p. 255, original emphasis).

Likewise, Morley (1981), in his postscript to the *Nationwide* study, evaluates his own ideas and proposes further developments stemming from the belief that media readings cannot be reduced to social determinism. Furthermore, he suggests future studies should focus on genre and contextual based investigations grounded in audience’s media consumption. Research, he claims, needs to consider media products that engage various cultures and subcultures, and establish patterns across genres:

[B]y translating our concerns from the framework of the decoding model into that of genre theory, we may be able to develop a model of text-audience relations which is more flexible, and of wider application ... it would involve us in dealing more with the relevance/irrelevance and comprehension/incomprehension dimensions of decoding

rather than being directly concerned with the acceptance or rejection of substantive ideological themes (p. 10).

### 3.7 Feminism

Changes in approaches to audience research prompted by the possibilities opened up by the work of Hall (1980) and Morley (1980) initiated a move towards qualitative studies of audiences. Specifically, this shift towards ‘audience ethnography’ can be observed in feminist research. Many of these studies took women’s readings of popular texts as their object of study; media texts considered were often those that had previously been attributed little critical worth – for example romance novels (Radway, 1987), teen magazines (McRobbie, 1982) and soap operas (Modleski, 1984; Geraghty, 1991). This approach not only enabled analysis of the pleasures and meanings gained by the readers, but was also instrumental in the popular being taken ‘seriously’ within academic study. The focus of these studies was not *what* was being read, but *how* and *why* the audience read it (Brooker and Jermyn, 2003, p. 213).

These ideas are evident in Radway’s (1987) analysis of women’s romance reading, in which she aimed to establish readers’ interpretations of these texts. However, Radway acknowledged during her research that she would have to investigate ‘the meaning of romance reading as a social event in a familial context’ (p. 7), i.e. the significance of reading *as an act* needed to be considered as well as the narrative content of the novels themselves. In her study, Radway demonstrated that the novels allowed readers to find pleasure in escape into the romantic fantasy, but of equal – if not more – significance was *the act* of reading constituted a ‘declaration of independence’. Thus, Radway stated that reading allowed the women to isolate themselves from their domestic situation, and argued that reading functioned as a form of resistance in that:

It is combative in the sense that it enables [the reader] to refuse the other-directed social role prescribed for them by their position within the institution of marriage. In picking up a book, as they have so eloquently told us, they refuse temporarily their family’s otherwise constant demand that they attend to the wants of others even as they act deliberately to do something for their own private pleasure. Their activity is

compensatory, then, in that it permits them to focus on themselves and to carve out a solitary space within an arena where their self-interest is usually identified with the interests of others and where they are defined as a public resource to be mined at will by the family. For them, romance reading addresses needs created in them but not met by patriarchal institutions and engendering practices (p. 211).

Therefore, Radway's work highlights that the examination of media texts must consider the environmental and social context in which pleasures and meanings are constructed. Her study also foregrounds a paradox in reception of popular texts; despite their often 'conservative content', their consumption can be simultaneously resistant to, and complicit with, dominant ideology.

Despite her acknowledgment of the many benefits of Radway's study, Ang (1988) raised a number of criticisms of the analysis. She opposed the assumption that reading romance fiction precludes a feminist standpoint, and suggested that Radway constructs an artificial division between herself as feminist/researcher and her study participants as interviewees/romance fans, claiming that the work is undermined by a 'form of political motivation, propelled by a desire to make "them" more like "us"' (p. 518). Furthermore, Ang criticised Radway's focus on 'the ideological function of pleasure' (p. 519) and proposed that *pleasure itself*, and its potential for empowerment, should be investigated. However Brooker and Jermyn (2003, p. 214) note that in the preface to the 1991 edition of *Reading the Romance*, Radway acknowledges the need for a more 'multi-focused approach' incorporating both ethnographic and textual analyses of popular texts, and the importance of eliminating the 'superior' position of the researcher in relation to study participants.

In her analysis of *Dallas*, Ang (1985) engaged as both fan and 'intellectual' with the intention of studying the pleasures evoked in viewing the programme from a non-judgemental perspective. Ang asserted that despite the programme's seemingly unrealistic nature, its appeal for many viewers lay in its *emotional realism* which articulated concerns and emotional states experienced by them, albeit in a melodramatic form. Other respondents reported that they gained pleasure from ironic viewing of the programme, distancing themselves from the text and any supposed ideological content. The significance of Ang's study therefore, was that it revealed

that each viewer had a 'more or less unique relationship to the programme' (p. 26) which could not necessarily be rationalised in ideological terms. Furthermore, the findings were based on statements produced by the audience *themselves*, in which the participants interpreted their own motivations and pleasures, rather than Ang solely projecting her interpretations upon them. For Ang, pleasure was a key area of contestation in feminist cultural politics, and argued that feminism must move beyond its view of women as 'passive victims' of mass culture, stating that pleasure and meaning are created by women in popular texts. However, Joke Hermes (1995) reminds us that researchers must be wary of 'the fallacy of meaningfulness' (p. 148) – the imposition of significance on a text that the readership does not share. As her study demonstrated, pleasure can be derived from a text precisely because of its undemanding and disposable nature.

### 3.8 Social Uses

Although the preceding theories differ in their findings, the underlying similarity between them is that they propose that researchers must engage with the audience and their use of media within the context of their everyday lives. This is demonstrated by feminist researchers who prompted a development towards a new formulation in which texts are not considered purely in terms of their interpretation, but also the domestic situation in which they are consumed (Modleski, 1984; Gray, 1992). For example, Dorothy Hobson (1982) in her ethnographic study of the soap opera *Crossroads*, demonstrated that women only *intermittently* engaged with the programme as they were simultaneously occupied by domestic tasks.

In his influential study *Family Television* (1986), Morley developed these ideas to approach the audience, not as individuals, but as a family or household, with the aim of exploring television watching as an activity. His interview sample consisted of eighteen white South London families, consisting of two adults with children drawn from working-class and lower middle-class backgrounds. Morley's principal findings were concerned with the manner in which family dynamics influenced how and what was watched – or 'the politics of the living room' (Cubitt, 1984) – and focused on issues such as who had control over programme choices. Men, he observed, watched

television in a more attentive manner than women and proposed that this is a result of men's lives generally being divided into 'industrial'/work time and home/leisure time, whereas the division for women is traditionally less clear. Morley attributes this to the fact that for women, the home constitutes a place of work irrespective of whether they are in employment or not and, consequently, women could only view television 'guiltily' or 'distractedly' (1986, p. 166). His study also found that men take greater control over what is watched, plan and select what they watch more than women, and while men watch more television than women, they talk about it less. Morley stresses that these gendered differences are not biologically determined, or in anyway intrinsic in male and female behaviour; rather they are grounded in the social construction of men and women and the division of responsibilities within the home and family:

Essentially the men state a clear preference for viewing attentively, in silence, without interruption 'in order not to miss anything'. Moreover, they display puzzlement at the way their wives and daughters watch television. This the women themselves describe as a fundamentally social activity, involving ongoing conversation, and usually the performance of at least one other domestic activity (ironing etc.) at the same time. Indeed, many of the women feel that to just watch television without doing anything else at the same time would be an indefensible waste of time, given their sense of domestic obligations. To watch in this way is something they rarely do, except occasionally, when alone or with other women friends, when they have managed to construct an 'occasion' on which to watch their favourite programme, video, or film. The women note that their husbands are always 'on at them' to shut up. The men can't really understand how their wives can follow the programmes if they are doing something else at the same time (p. 50).

Thus Morley states that researchers must consider the *context of viewing* as much as the *object of viewing*: the reception of media texts cannot be considered outside the context in which they are received.

On a similar theme, Lull (1980) researched the viewing habits of two hundred families in the context of their day-to-day routine; with researchers fully integrating themselves into the families' lives for periods up to seven days. His study identified two 'uses' of television within the home: *structural* and *relational*. Lull considered structural uses to be the manner in which television functions as an 'environmental

resource’ – ‘a companion for accomplishing household chores and routines ... a flow of constant background noise which moves to the foreground when individuals or groups desire’ – and as a ‘behavioural regulator’, providing punctuation for domestic time and daily activities (pp. 201-202); whereas relational uses are the ‘ways in which audience members use television to create practical social arrangements’ (p. 202). Within relational uses, Lull identified four specific categories: ‘communication facilitation’, encouraging conversation and the articulation of themes discussed in programmes within the family; ‘affiliation/avoidance’, to promote family cohesion or conflict; ‘social learning’, such as transmission of information; and ‘competence/dominance’, the role of the television in facilitating arguments and expressing authority. Although Lull’s study may be perceived as working within a uses and gratifications framework in order to investigate how ‘audience members create ... practical actions involving the mass media in order to gratify particular needs’ (p. 197), his work is significant as it focuses on viewing context and interpersonal dynamics within the family, rather than the individual viewers. Thus, both Lull and Morley’s studies established the significance of television as a social resource (see Dickinson, 1998) and how viewing is dictated by, and reflects, power relationships within the family.

Although these approaches opened up contexts of media consumption for further consideration, a number of criticisms have been raised which must be considered. Ang (1989) criticises Morley’s work stating that he distances himself in his role as researcher from the participant group:

Due to his academic posture Morley has not deemed it necessary to reflect upon his own position of a researcher. We do not get to know how he found and got on with his interviewees, nor are we informed about the way in which the interviews themselves took place ... how did the specific power relationship pervading the interviewer situation affect the families, but also the researcher himself (p. 110)?

Furthermore, David Gauntlett and Annette Hill (1999) highlight that Morley’s study is problematic as its discussions of gender roles can be interpreted as ‘reinforcing rather than breaking down the gender distinctions which Morley himself is critical of’ (p. 5). This point is acknowledged by Morley himself who notes his own limitations in the

afterword of *Family Television*: ‘there is a tendency in the interviews to slide back towards a parallel analysis of “gendered individuals” rather than a fully fledged analysis of the dynamics of the family unit’ (1986, p. 174). In addition, Morley’s sample neglected to include representations from different social backgrounds, therefore failing to consider effects of class, gender and region on his findings. For example, he does not investigate whether gendered responses to media may vary depending on educational and class background (see Harindranath, 1998).

Returning to the issue of the role of television in social life, Roger Silverstone (1990) has argued that studies must investigate how television has become integrated into our everyday lives and central to our understanding of ourselves and the world. He therefore proposes that studies must undertake ‘a methodological approach, or set of approaches, which sets the audience for television in a context of the world of everyday life: the daily experience of home, technologies and neighbourhood, and of the public and private mythologies and rituals which define the basic patterns of our cultural experience’ (p. 245). However, Gauntlett and Hill (1999) observe that Silverstone is overhasty in his suggestion and, ‘before we can begin to understand the symbolic, material and political structures in everyday life, it is important to consider what people have to say about their own experience of television and everyday life, and the practicalities of television in the domestic space’ (p. 9), as demonstrated in their study *TV Living*. This work is notable due to the scale of the study; 500 participants each completing a diary three times a year over a five year period. Their approach incorporated a ‘life analysis’ of the participants as it ‘assumes that through close study of people’s everyday lives over time, we will acquire a picture of broader changes in society which are having an impact at the individual level’ (p. 18). Thus, Gauntlett and Hill were able to identify, not only participants’ changes in attitudes towards media, but also how personal life changes affected their interpretations of the media. Importantly, Gauntlett and Hill stress that they did not work from a recognised theoretical model, in order to allow their findings to be led by participants’ responses, rather than imposing an agenda upon them.



### 3.9 Ethnicity

Expanding on the theme of factors that contribute to interpretations of the media, it is important to note that these will also be dependent on an individual's cultural positionings. As Jacqueline Bobo (1988; see also Jhally and Lewis, 1992) has highlighted, an individual can occupy a number of standpoints – such as black, working-class and female – all of which intersect and overlap in responses to media texts. For example, Tamar Liebes and Elihu Katz (1993) aimed to investigate how the programme *Dallas* was received within different cultures. Conducting focus groups divided by ethnicity into American, Kibbutznik, Arab, Moroccan, Russian and Japanese participants, they analysed how each group discussed *Dallas* and their retelling of the narratives. Liebes and Katz identified how the various groups placed significance on different elements and themes within the story, reporting that Arabs and Moroccans displayed a tendency to retell the stories in 'linear' terms; focusing on a particular storyline told sequentially, whereas Americans and Kibbutzniks retold the stories in 'segmented' terms; detailing characters or relationships. In addition, the Russian participants displayed a tendency to engage in 'thematic' readings; focusing on abstracts such as ideology or politics. Liebes (1988) states that the linear retellings of the Arabs and the Moroccans, and the thematic retellings of the Russians are 'closed' as they presume a manipulative agenda inhabits the original narrative:

[T]he linear retelling ... correlates with a 'hegemonic' reading in which the reality of the story is unquestioned and its message is presumably unchallenged. The paradigmatic [thematic] retelling, on the other hand, is more likely to accompany an 'oppositional' reading (Hall, 1980; Morley, 1980), whereby critical awareness of an overall message surely sounds an alarm that the message may be manipulative (1988, p. 278).

On the other hand, she claims the segmented retellings of the Americans and Kibbutzniks are more 'ludic' (playful) and engage in speculations on future narrative possibilities. Thus, Liebes concludes, the segmented retellings are more 'open' and less confined by ideology or tradition.

However, Barker and Brooks (1998a) identify a number of methodological and ethical problems with Liebes and Katz's study. They note that although the researchers acknowledge *Dallas* as a polysemic text, they (Liebes and Katz) imply that there is a 'preferred' meaning. In addition, the study indicates that some groups are more susceptible to this 'preferred' meaning; Arabs were most at risk as they were 'less modernised'. Barker and Brooks highlight this as being not only inaccurate but deeply offensive, adding 'that because their groups were assembled on the basis of "ethnicity", what their transcripts reveal is going to be primarily an expression of that ... It also leads easily to political judgements which we do, indeed, find offensive – especially in the context of Israeli politics' (p. 99). Furthermore, Barker and Brooks illustrate how the study's own methodology can be used to undermine its own findings. In their analysis, Liebes and Katz conclude that the Arab participants are the most vulnerable to ideological deception and the Americans/Kibbutzniks are the most perceptive. However, as Barker and Brooks argue, the Arabs can be seen as the least vulnerable as this group are most aware of the programme's construction of Americanness and contest it on these grounds. It is the Americans (and Liebes and Katz), they claim, that are most deceived as they are unaware that their own 'ludic' approach renders them vulnerable to Americanist ideology (pp. 97-101).

In light of Barker and Brooks' criticisms, Liebes and Katz's analysis is seriously undermined by its use of ethnicity in its methodology. However, a more successful investigation that engages with ethnicity as its primary focus is Marie Gillespie's (1995, see also 1993) two year ethnographic study which explored how Punjabi youths in Southall used a variety of popular cultural forms in the construction of their social identity. Within this work Gillespie considered the Australian television soap opera *Neighbours*, and the pleasures and uses the youths gained from it – a media product from a culture seemingly very different from their own. She observed that *Neighbours* constituted a metaphorical, rather than literal, reflection of their own tight-knit communities and that the narratives facilitated social learning:

While young people regularly emphasize the *differences* between the soap world and their own cultural experience, in another sense they stress strong *parallels* between the soap world and the social world of Southall ... In certain respects, the soap opera embodies many of the characteristics of local life: the central importance of the family;

a density of kin in a small, geographically bounded area; a high degree of face-to-face contact; a knowable community; and a distinctive sense of local identity ... While young people's own families and those in their social networks provide their frame of reference about family life, soap families not only extend but offer alternative sets of families as reference groups by which young people can compare and contrast, judge and evaluate, and, in certain cases, attempt to critique and transform aspects of their own family (1993, p. 32, original emphasis).

In addition, Gillespie states that *Neighbours* enabled the youths to discuss sensitive areas by proxy with friends and family. The programme also, she maintains, gave the Punjabi audience insight into the 'other' culture of white teenagers and the effects of freedoms prohibited to the Punjabi's by the code of *izzat* (family honour).

Despite Gillespie's analysis identifying how the Punjabi youths appropriate television as a 'cultural resource', she fails to acknowledge that ideological conceptions of gender may be learnt from the programme (Gauntlett and Hill 1999, p. 217). Furthermore, although Gillespie makes a number of valid observations, her analysis focuses solely on Punjabi youths and does not explore the possibility that other ethnic groups may interact and negotiate with popular culture in similar ways. A danger inherent in her study then, is the implication that her findings are *representative* of Punjabi (and more generally Asian) youths as a whole.

### **3.10 Audience Power**

Discussions of the preceding theories demonstrate how the audience have been attributed with a more active role in the decoding of texts. The notion of the 'active audience' is vigorously advocated by John Fiske (1987; 1989a; 1989b), who rejects any claim that audiences are 'cultural dupes' and that cultural product necessarily promotes capitalist ideology. Indeed, he abandons the term 'audience' as it implies a 'mass', in favour of 'reader' which acknowledges the individual's social positioning and shifting agendas and priorities. In addition, Fiske does not deny the pervasive force of ideology in society, but maintains that the individual's agency should not be underestimated. Fiske's argument is grounded in his belief that popular texts are polysemic in nature, open to multiple interpretations in order to gain a substantial and

varied audience. Although he does not dispute that media producers embed a preferred meaning in a text, he states that the ‘overspill’ of possible readings undermines the dominance of that message.

Drawing upon the ideas of Michel de Certeau (1984), who argued that people ‘snatch and grab’ media materials, reinterpreting them for their own uses, Fiske claims that consumers are engaged in ‘semiotic guerrilla warfare’ – ‘ripping’ or appropriating existing texts and inscribing them with their own meanings. For example, he illustrates how Judy Garland has been ‘ripped’ from her intended context of wholesome American woman, and given new meanings within gay culture (1989a). Thus, irrespective of the aims of the producer, Fiske argues that the meaning of a text is dependent on its interpretation by the consumer in relation to their lived experience:

[Cultural commodities], which we call ‘texts’, are not containers or conveyors of meaning and pleasures, but rather *provokers* of meaning and pleasure. The production of meaning/pleasures is finally the responsibility of the consumer and is undertaken only in his/her interests: this is not to say that the material producers/distribution do not attempt to make and sell meanings and pleasures – they do, but their failure rate is enormous (1987, p. 313, original emphasis).

Therefore, according to Fiske, texts are a ‘site of struggle’ between the intended meaning of the producer and the (often resistant) meanings interpreted by the consumer. In this formulation, he maintains that consumers actively create *their own* popular culture hence; the ‘consumer’ becomes ‘producer’. Furthermore, Fiske argues that such activity may constitute instances of ‘micro-rebellion’, the net effect of which acts to affect change at a structural level through small, incremental, incursions on dominant ideology.

A criticism that has been levelled at this work, as commentators have noted (Gauntlett, 2002, p. 28), is that it is over-optimistic in its claims that the audience can resist dominant ideology through uses of popular culture. Nevertheless, Fiske’s approach offers an alternative to deterministic models which continue to conceptualise the audience as ‘cultural dupes’, and his ideas have evident currency in theoretical approaches to fan culture. For example, Henry Jenkins’ (1992) studies of

fan culture identify numerous examples of the audience literally, rather than figuratively, becoming producers:

Fans produce meanings and interpretations; fans produce artworks; fans produce communities; fans produce alternative identities. In each case, fans are drawing on materials from the dominant media and employing them in ways that serve their own interests and facilitate their own pleasures (p. 214).

Rather than view fans as a particularly aberrant subgroup of the audience, Jenkins understands fans to be active and empowered readers reworking mainstream media texts to produce their own media materials. In some instances these works are transgressive, for example queer readings of *Star Trek* (Jenkins, 1985) and lesbian texts based on *Xena: Warrior Princess* (Gwenllian-Jones, 2003), but in any case they typically link the original narrative to some aspect or concern of the fan-producer.

However, Barker and Brooks (1998a) question the legitimacy of the notion of the 'active audience' in their book *Knowing Audiences: Judge Dredd, Its Friends, Fans and Foes*. They state that Fiske makes an error in his assumption that 'active' is synonymous with 'resistant', observing that an audience can *wilfully* seek passivity. Furthermore, they assert that the active/passive model of understanding the audience is redundant and propose that the position of the audience must be recontextualised in terms of the pleasure it gains, or fails to gain, from a text. Barker and Brooks outline a number of pleasures – or what they term 'vocabularies of involvement and pleasure' (p. 143) – and claim that audience members will predispose themselves to expect certain pleasures from a particular text. These 'V.I.P.'s fall into a series of patterns or positions; for example, writing specifically about the film *Judge Dredd* they identify:

1. The joys of being 'done to' by a film: the pleasures of being physically affected by a film, in terms of shock, excitement, pace.
2. The pleasures of the spectacle: pleasures gained from being awed by a film's novelty, scale and special effects.
3. Dredd's desserts: in this particular case, the audiences pleasure in seeing a comic strip hero 'where he belongs' on the screen.

4. Sylvester's measure: pleasure gained from the iconic presence of Sylvester Stallone in the film.
5. The magic of cinema: pleasure gained from the occasion and environment of seeing a film in a cinema.
6. The pleasures of talk and the dangers of 'sad': pleasures gained from discussing the film after it has been seen, as a social event – rather than being a 'sad fan boy' (see pp. 146-148).

Using this formulation, Barker and Brooks demonstrate how pleasures gained from a film are dependent upon the *particular* pattern adopted by the viewer; for example their study indicated that audience members adopting pattern 1 were disappointed by the opening of *Judge Dredd*, whereas those adopting pattern 3 'raved' about the film (p. 149).

Furthermore, Barker and Brooks argue that not only does the term 'active' need to be separated from 'resistant', but researchers need to investigate *kinds and degrees* of activity. To enable this they introduce the concept of *investment* in media texts to describe the measure to which 'people *care* about their participation or involvement in a leisure activity' (1998b, p. 229, original emphasis). For example, a low investor, they claim, will have little stake in a particular product; they may see a film merely to pass the time or to fulfil a social obligation. On the other hand, a high investor will have a more committed involvement with the text in question; this viewer may read relevant reviews and articles before seeing the film, and may engage in vigorous discussions after the event. Thus, by foregrounding the role of pleasure and investment in regard to media consumption, Barker (1998) specifically argues that rather than attempting to identify and categorise 'the audience', research must engage with what 'concrete audiences do and say with their media' (p. 190). This, he claims, will facilitate the 'study of the *actual* audience in lived experience' (*ibid.*, original emphasis).

### 3.11 Creative Audience Research

In an attempt to pursue the study of ‘actual’ audiences in lived experience, and create a methodology that will avoid many of the shortfalls of the research methods outlined above, Gauntlett (2004) proposes a strategy of ‘creative visual research’. In this model he suggests a ‘turn towards creativity, the visual and the imagination’ (p. 1) in the study of the audience and the media. Gauntlett states that previous studies have considered people as an audience of particular isolated texts, forms or genres; whereas, in lived experience, an individual is saturated by the output of multiple media sources. Furthermore, Gauntlett notes that popular media constitute a significant component of our experience and understanding: we are always media consumers and media inflected thinkers (p. 3). Gauntlett’s research is grounded in the audience, not reporting on media images or texts *per se*, but creating *their own* visual materials as a means of investigating their relationship with the media. In so doing, he claims to have overcome limitations of previous work; for example, instant and verbal/written responses are limited by their very nature, whereas the prolonged act of creation enables participants time and opportunity to reflect as well as express their responses without the stabilising confines of language. He further notes that visual materials are non-linear and therefore do not prioritise elements of the response. In addition, the production of visual media engages the participant in different cognitive processes that will produce new perspectives on the issues in question.

Taking note of feminist criticism of traditional research methods, Gauntlett states that the creative methods employed allow participants the opportunity to influence the research itself, rather than confining them within a predetermined structure. In this formulation, materials produced are not interpreted by the researcher, but by the participants themselves. Thus, the findings are a product of dialogue between researcher and participant, emerging not only from the creative product, but from the creative process itself. As Gauntlett says, this methodology enables ‘studying media and its place in the everyday world *through* working with people in the everyday world to make media productions’ (p. 15, original emphasis).

### **3.12 Summary**

A survey of the literature suggests that conceptualisations of the audience vary significantly between theoretical paradigms. The chapter has outlined a number of critical perspectives on audiences and examined how understandings of the audience have been developed and revised. Furthermore, it identified that audience research must consider media consumption in the context of lived experience and highlighted creative audience research as a potentially valid and useful approach. Therefore, the following chapter goes on to look in greater detail at a variety of studies which use creative and visual research methods to explore the experiences and self-identities of individuals.