1 Media texts
Features and deconstructions

texts are important as a result of their ubiquity and because there is widespread belief that they contribute to the production of our ‘common sense’ understandings of the world. As such, media texts are thought to affect, in a very real sense, the way in which we understand ourselves/others and the way we lead our lives.


1 Introduction

One may start with media texts because they are a dominant feature of our environment – socially in terms of what we talk about; physically in terms of what we see on our streets; culturally in terms of the time we spend absorbing ideas from screens and pages. The presence of texts is taken for granted and may well be treated uncritically. They are commonplace in both domestic and public environments: music in a department store, or a television set left on at home. Media texts are constantly appearing and changing – street posters come and go. Media texts are continually being produced and renewed. Media texts intend to engage people, to convey some kind of information, and to produce reactions in their audiences which justify their continuing production.

Even when treated as part of the environment they can never be seen as passive in the way that the facade of a building or wallpaper is passive. They are active in their capacity to produce meanings in the minds of the audience. Throughout this book, I want to argue that this production of meaning is what makes media study very important. We live by meanings. This production of meanings happens whether or not we engage intentionally with a text. Even when the text is attended to, there are meanings which the reader is conscious of, and yet other meanings which may be produced unconsciously. In this sense the reader of texts is not entirely in control of their engagement with the text. Equally, I am not arguing that the text maker is entirely in control of the production of meaning. The text becomes an interesting place of engagement. Things happen through the text, not all of them predictable or manageable.

What we call ‘the text’ is not a given thing with given meanings. It means different things to different people at different times. It appears to have a material existence – the DVD, the magazine, even the broadcast live programme. But actually it really exists in an immaterial form, in the mind, and only when it is seen, read or heard. The text that we criticize lies at an intersection between the media producer (institutions) and the media audience. It acts as a stimulus to produce meanings.
6 Media texts

2 Major questions

Texts
1 In what respects is the media text both a material object or a set of meanings?
2 How far are those meanings determined by the producer or by the reader of the text?
3 How may we use forms of textual analysis to investigate meanings and their influences, especially with relation to ideology?
4 How may we understand the work of conventions in structuring the text and meaning, in relation to narrative, realism and genre in particular?

Representation
5 How are representations constructed, and what do they construct for us?
6 How do representations naturalize ideology?
7 In whose interests do representations work?
8 How do representations link with the construction and expression of identities?
9 Why are representations attractive to the producers of media texts?

Genre
10 What characterizes genres, and gives them significance among texts?
11 In what respects are genre texts attractive to institutions and audiences?
12 What is distinctive about the relationship between genre texts and their audiences?
13 In what respects are genre texts ideological, and the producers of myths?
14 How do genres relate to determinist and pluralist positions, with relation to debates about media and society?

3 What is a text?

In a broad sense, in relation to the study of culture, anything may be described as a text if people can engage with it to produce meanings about themselves, their society and their beliefs. Yet media texts are objects produced with the explicit intention of engaging an audience. In some cases (movies in a theatre) they are transient. Even where they are permanent (e.g. a copy of a magazine), there is a kind of impermanence in the fact that they are continually being produced – the next edition, the next in the series. In this way, media texts comprise a torrent of materials and produce a flood of meanings. They are a moving target, and textual analysis is in some ways an attempt to stem that flow, and subject it to careful attention.

Media texts also have a variety of forms both within media (publishing newspapers or novels) and across media (the front page of a website to the titles of a TV programme). This variety has to be taken into account when one engages with what I take to be the central project when studying text – the production of meaning and the process of influence.
Graddol and Boyd-Barrett (1994) discuss the nature of text, its range and its materiality. They point out that, even in respect of the original definitions of text, an insistence on written forms excluded other, verbal forms and attributes – spoken and non-verbal. But then they also identify two kinds of materiality to the wider range of texts (including media). On one level they refer to ‘communicative artefacts’, to ‘commodities which can enter social and economic relations’; these could be DVDs. On another level they talk about ‘semiotic materiality’. In this respect Graddol and Boyd-Barrett (1994) argue that, however semiotics seems to be about immaterial meaning, in fact it is also about the material signifier. One might refer to the smile of the model on the magazine cover. This then leads on to immaterial factors.

Tolson (1996) talks more about the ‘reader’ of texts, and about the process of making sense of them: ‘meanings are derived from meaning systems to which everyone in our culture has access. The text itself works to structure these meanings’, but also the reader ‘comes to the text with all sorts of prior knowledge and expectations . . . The modern consumer of the media is a reader of many different kinds of text, which inter-relate and feed off one another.’

The constructed text
The familiarity of texts in our lives can divert attention from the fact that they are made objects. This is important because one must then ask questions about who made the text and with what intentions. In whose interest is the existence of the text and its apparent meanings?

Some of the remarks on analysis which follow – especially those which draw on kinds of structuralist approach – do try to explain the nature of the construction. But one always needs to go beyond the descriptive to the interpretive. A clock is not to be understood by an account of its parts and their workings. It is the idea of ‘clock-ness’ and of time which matters. It is the effects on our social relations of having clocks which are important.

4 Texts and meanings

The connection between text and meanings is also about the relationship between media and audiences, or between media and society. One kind of model tends to assume that the text is a vehicle for meaning. Early effects theory (the hypodermic theory), or deterministic media – society models (classic Marxist models), and at least some structuralist analysis, all assume that the text carries messages which are either conveyed into the consciousness of the audience and/or do something to the receiver.

Another kind of model sees the text as a kind of stimulus at the interface between producer and audience. The stimulus may be designed to achieve certain kinds of response, yet may also achieve unexpected reactions. In this respect one may cite Barthes’ notion of writerly and readerly texts. The readerly text is one in which familiar features (see conventions) make it ‘easy’ for the reader to make sense of it. It is undemanding. Barthes identifies a narrative feature of such texts – the hermeneutic code – which closes down the reader’s ability to look for choices of meaning. Genre material, with its strong conventions, and assumptions about how it is to be understood, fits this version. The writerly text is
one in which conventions and predictability do not figure so boldly, and the text may stimulate reflection and alternative meanings for the reader, who in effect becomes a writer of meanings.

![Figure 1.1: The Relationship of Key Concepts](image)

In terms of the production of meaning, the interrelationship between notions of text and of audience is so close that one might equally make audience the focus of this model. In general, you will find that these concepts make sense in relation to one another rather than on their own – rather like the signs in semiotics!

(Graeme Burton 2009)

A third model is one in which the text is seen as a kind of booty to be plundered by the reader. Meanings are there for the taking. This kind of audience-centred and postmodern analysis is represented by writers such as John Fiske (Television Culture, 1987) and Henry Jenkins (Textual Poachers, 1992).

Clearly it is reasonable to assert that meanings are ideas which exist only in the minds of people – producers or audiences. But what kinds of meanings appear in the reader’s mind, and why, is another matter. On the one hand, texts are organized, in various ways for various reasons: so it is not possible to argue that they are neutral goods with which readers can do anything that they please. On the other hand, texts are not so absolutely predictive, and audience members not so lacking in the capacity for critical interpretation, that text makers can produce any kind of meaning or interpretation and impose it.

It would seem that a dynamic model is the most plausible one. Some texts for some audience are more able to determine meaning outcomes than others. Halliday (1996), in discussing sociolinguistics and text, produces a useful phrase – ‘meaning potential’. Media texts have this potentiality. One might argue that media producers have created the potential, and it is the audience that realizes it.
5 Text and contexts

A criticism of some examples of textual analysis is that they operate in isolation. The text is everything. This may be seen partly as a need, for example, to look at the conditions of production that make the text, or at the nature of the audience in relation to what is made of a text. But even as commodities, texts exist in contexts, as do the readers who produce meanings from the text and who may be influenced by it. This sense of context and its influence is complex and far reaching. Any media text exists in the context of all other media texts, especially those which bear particular comparison with it (see Intertextuality). Readers have a residual, even unconscious knowledge of at least some of those other texts. They use them to make sense of the text. They are part of a kind of conceptual context.

There is also a material context when texts are part of a flow of reading. A news article is a text which is part of larger text – the whole newspaper being read. A TV programme may be part of a flow of programmes in an evening’s viewing. There is an environmental context in which both text and reader exist. A movie viewed in the home via DVD with others will be viewed differently from the same movie as text viewed individually in a theatre. There is a social context which is part of the environment. This is defined in various ways. It is partly a matter of social conventions, in which, if reading a newspaper in a public place, one is not at liberty to turn to a stranger to discuss what is read – as one would be if sitting at home with a partner. It is also a matter of reading conventions, in which one is not expected to engage with a TV programme as intensely in private as one would be in public as part of an audience for a performance of a play. This social context will affect what is attended to and how. There is an experiential context which the audience brings to its understanding of media texts. That is to say, we have an ever expanding experience of texts and of ways of understanding them, which we bring to bear unconsciously on any individual text. Then there is an ideological context: the dominant values held by the culture which produces and consumes the text. These values inform the text as it is made and the text as it is read. This is a context of ideas.

6 Deconstructing texts

6.1 Textual analysis

The analysis of texts is a process of deconstruction that investigates the operations of texts, their constructions, the ways they produce meanings, what those meanings may be. Deacon et al. (1999) define the approach as one where ‘the organization and meaning of the material itself are the major focus of research’. However, they also warn of the dangers of making assumptions about the validity of any one analytic method – for example, assuming ‘a transparency between the structures of media texts and the social meanings made of them’. I would add a rider about the obvious limitations of textual analysis – that in isolation it analyses neither the audience as reader of the text nor the institution as producer.

Thwaites et al. (2002), while rather wedded to the methodology of semiotic analysis, make a useful point about texts as ‘socially constructed to have certain meanings’, and about textual analysis as a way of breaking through a ‘façade of naturalness’.
Methods of analysis are various. They have different advantages and disadvantages. They may focus on different features of texts – their conventions of realism, or their endorsement of cultural myths, for example. ‘Textual analysis’ is a general term which includes various and particular methodologies. For example, **linguistic analysis** might concentrate on the potential effects of style of address. **Content analysis** attends to the repetition and frequency of features, their proportions within the text, and consequent assumptions about significance. The percentage of advertisements of a certain type within a newspaper may, for instance, be significant. **Ideological analysis** of a text would concentrate on meanings about power, and may well seek to reveal contradictions between ideological positions which inform the text. **Narrative analysis** (see following section) has its own kinds of inflection and concerns – structure, or reader positioning. **Discourse analysis** seeks out specific uses of language which signal a certain kind of discourse which has certain kinds of assumed meaning about its subject – the dominant discourse and language of gender, for instance, signalled by such words as ‘mankind’.

### 6.2 Textual codes

The notion of **codes** is one which is especially associated with semiotics and with genres (see below). There is a problem with the rather inconsistent use of the term in critical writing, and it should recognize a set of textual elements that work together according to conventions, which may be loosely understood as kinds of language. The term may be used to describe ‘the language’ of dress and fashion or the ‘technical language’ of use of camera, for instance.

What is more helpful in the first place is to grasp the dominant codes or kinds of language which are found in most media texts. These languages speak meanings to us, often working together or striking off one another. They may be summarized as follows:

- **Written language**: the dominant code of this book; this is much less dominant on television.
- **Spoken language**: a dominant code of radio; this is otherwise present in film and TV.
- **Non-verbal language**: a dominant code in the case of all representations of people in the media.
- **Visual language**: a dominant code of all ‘image media’; this is the language of images in photography, film and TV, which I take to cover features such as use of camera or of composition.

Clearly this account is not inclusive. It does not refer to important codes of number or of music, for example. But it does foreground major areas of attention in any attempt on textual analysis. These languages speak to us from the text. They are significant in the production of meaning.

### 6.3 Semiotic analysis

Semiotic analysis regards texts as collections of signs or **paradigms** and possible meanings, operating within the bounds of various codes. Its benefit is that it causes one to attend to the question of what actually generates meaning for the reader – the **sign** – and to the problem of texts having to some degree different meanings for different readers at different times.
A brief survey of key terms and principles now follows, drawn mainly from Barthes’ work. The sign is conceived of as having two elements:

- The **signifier**, which classes it as a sign with the potential for meaning.
- The **signified**, which stands for its possible meanings. Because there are many possible meanings, one sign may have many signifieds.

The connection between signifier and signified is arbitrary and not absolute. What tends to tie down the meaning of a sign, to make one meaning more probable than others, is context. This context certainly includes the other signs in the text, and would apply most firmly to genre texts. In such cases readers have a lot of textual experience to go on, which in turn includes repeated conventions and strong expectations.

**Figure 1.2** Happy Families on Holiday

In semiotic terms, this image denotes a collection of males and females of various ages in a certain place. However, it connotes ideas about the family, pleasures and holidays. We are positioned as privileged spectators, looking upon this scene. The image represents the family on holiday, and works with other such images, from domestic snapshots to television programmes. The representation works to construct meanings (among others) about how the holiday is an approved cultural activity (rather than a commercial transaction); it is to be equated with happiness and bonding of the family (rather than a time of stress); it is about beaches and sunshine (rather than mountains and walking).
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Signs also work on at least two levels, the one more specific, the other more general. This is best understood through example. In written codes, letters are signs which follow rules (conventions) to make up words (rules of spelling). Words may then themselves be described as signs, at a second level. We usually look for meaning in words or strings of words. These strings are themselves bound by conventions of grammar and syntax, to produce phrases and sentences. Similarly, in visual codes the use of colour or camera angle may act as a sign on a primary level. But then the whole image (a collection of primary level signs) may also be described as a sign, on a secondary level. In the case of film and television the image would be a shot, which works in relation to other shots. Where one has a string of words or a string of shots which add up to a meaningful unit of narrative, then in formal semiotic terms these would be called a syntagm (see also the work of Christian Metz). Less formally one might talk about a phrase in a novel or a sequence in a movie.

Other books provide effective examples of semiotic analysis, to which you may refer. Among others are Tolson (1996), Bignell (2002) and Thwaites et al. (2002). It is Bignell (2002) who makes the apt comment that ‘There is no perfect analytical method for studying the media since different theoretical approaches define their tasks, the objects they study or the questions they ask in different ways.’

I would also refer you to Roland Barthes’ own work, not only for examples of analysis, but also for a wider discussion of two categories of sign referred to through the concepts of denotation and connotation. In effect, denotative signs and their meanings would be at a ‘first level’ which would, for example, refer to those aspects of an image that refer to a real world. These are elements about which one can make apparently objective statements: ‘The person is wearing clothes made of a blue fabric.’ Connotations are meanings at a second level, which is more subjective and contestable: ‘The clothes are fashionable, suggesting that the person has status and wealth.’ Two seminal works of Barthes are Image, Music, Text (1977) and Mythologies (1973).

6.4 Image analysis

In terms of image analysis, it is important to attend to primary level signs in visual codes, most obviously for examples of still photography. In fact, for all examples of naturalistic imagery, from paintings to advertising images, I would suggest an additional approach to the discussion of textual meaning. This approach categorizes signs in three ways:

- **Position:** refers to signs which tell us where we are placed in relation to the content of the image. Mainly, this is signified through the placing of the camera, which then becomes the location from which the spectator is forced to view the content. We may, for example, be placed at an angle to the subject, behind the subject, viewing the subject as if secretly.

- **Treatment:** refers to those primary signs, often part of the technique of photography, which are about how the image is made. The uses of colour, of focus, of lighting, for instance, will all contribute to the meanings that we make of the image.

- **Content:** refers to objects represented within the image, which may signify to us because of, for example, their symbolic power or because of their composition in relation to each other. For example, one surrealist television advert included the motif of a lion walking through various urban locations – the lion as masculinity and nature. It included a final
shot in which a woman is choosing underwear in a department store: the juxtaposition of animal gaze, female gaze and briefs in centre frame creates a whole set of meanings which are greater than the parts of the image.

6.5 Discourse analysis

This is about the recognition of discourses at work within a text, and of the features of language which identify those discourses.

The terms 'discourse' and 'discourse analysis' are somewhat complicated by their histories and by their different uses by different disciplines. For example, ‘discourse’ originally applied to modes of conversation, and in linguistics one deals with ‘units of utterance’. Howarth (2000) provides useful discussion of these differences. He talks of a ‘relationship between discourses and the social systems in which they function’. Certainly the ways in which the media ‘talk about’ social systems helps to define them: equally, our social systems provide a kind of framework within which the media operate. Howarth (2000) describes a kind of Marxist inflection to the understanding of discourse (after Fairclough and Wodak 1997), when he writes: ‘The task of discourse analysis is to examine this dialectical relationship’ – i.e. between discourse and social systems – ‘and to expose the way in which language and meaning are used by the powerful to deceive and oppress the dominated.’ Whereas, in terms of poststructuralist and post-Marxist perspectives, Howarth (2000) describes a different inflection: ‘Discourses constitute symbolic systems and social orders, and the task of discourse analysis is to examine their historical and political construction and functioning.’

What I now propose draws on such views, but (I hope) makes understanding and use of the terms more straightforward. Discourses are linked to ideology and representations, and involve ways of using language – verbal, visual or whatever code – about a subject, so as to produce particular meanings about that subject. Our communication is full of discourses, which shape how we understand our world, how we deal with others, how we make sense of everyday experience. So it is that we talk about parenthood, we talk to parents, we talk as parents, in different terms to those we use towards and about children. Such discourses may well shift from culture to culture, because different cultures think differently about parents and parenting, because they value it in different ways. The essence of a discourse is the ‘meanings we have about’ its subject. So the discourse of death is not so much about corpses as about ‘death-ness’. It is about how we talk dominantly about death; about what death means to most of us in our culture. This talk happens in everyday life, as well as through the media. The meanings that it produces interlock with social practices around death, such as the funeral.

In that the meanings of discourses are about dominant beliefs and values, it follows that discourses are, as it were, ideology in communicative action. Add to this the view that representations do the work of ideology, and you can see how close the connections are between these key terms.

If the discourse lurks within the text, then the language of the discourse is the visible evidence of it – signs which emerge to link us with the invisible discourse and its meanings. To recognize the existence of discourse, the textual reader needs to be conscious that we have ‘taken for granted’ ways of talking about subjects: this actually means we have ‘taken for granted’ ways of understanding and thinking about subjects. The selectivity of verbal
and visual language can become startlingly obvious if you are able to switch off those assumptions in your head.

For example, the discourse of war is recognizable through language such as ‘victory’, ‘defeat’, ‘outflank’, ‘skirmish’, ‘manoeuvre’ and ‘troops’. The meanings of the discourse derived from the use of these words refers to ideas about ‘aggression’, ‘conflict’ and ‘winning’. Now look at ways in which your newspaper talks about politics or economics or football. The odds are that you will find this discourse of war used in an account of a match or of disagreement between political parties. You are so used to it that you do not notice this is happening. But it certainly skews our thinking about the activity called ‘sport’, or about the process called ‘politics’.

The language of discourse is in some ways the word association that we make with the subject – what we think of first – because it is so embedded in the way we talk and think. Gender is a powerful example, in which many words are, for instance, associated with the female subject – ‘soft’, ‘emotional’, ‘intuitive’, ‘caring’, ‘illogical’, ‘maternal’ and so on. Similarly, we take it for granted that images of women may use soft focus, position the lens or viewing eye to look at their breasts, or show women crying. This selective language (selective use of signs) produces selective meanings about how females think about themselves and about how they are thought about by others.

The discourse is also marked by what it is not, by what it is opposed to. Just as war is opposed to peace, so female is opposed to male. The words and images I mention are not used for males. Indeed, they are seen in opposition to being male, to ideas about masculinity.

So texts may also throw up discourses and their meanings if you attend to what are called binary oppositions. Textual analysis from the work of Barthes and Lévi-Strauss onwards has referred to patterns of opposing meanings in various ways. Lévi-Strauss noticed that tribal myths contained within stories were often centred on the opposition between characters, and by the association of ideas about what was good as opposed to what was evil. Other narrative analysis has exploited this opposition in terms of motifs, or themes, or dramatic conflict. The approval of a given ideological position may be reinforced through evident disapproval of an opposing view, and vice versa.

So the discourse of war used in political news stories tells us that politics should be competitive. The discourse of masculinity used in the same stories may also tell us that winning is everything, that men are assertive and ‘right’: conversely that to admit you are wrong is unmasculine and weak.

A given text may contain a number of discourses. Some may oppose one another. And the language of a discourse, however dominant in a culture, may not be entirely consistent. Ideological positions vary. Ideologies are not self-perpetuating, unvarying sets of beliefs, however slowly shifts can take place. So, one kind of text and its discourse about the subject of nature may be dominated by meanings about beauty and sentiment, while another may be dominated by meanings about loss and the need to preserve species. In this case, what is also interesting is, for example, to see how nature is generally talked about now, compared with language about nature used, say, a hundred years ago. Then, nature was about ‘plenty’, now it is about ‘endangered species’; then, it was about ‘exploration’ and ‘adventure’, now it is as much about ‘conservation’ and ‘protection’.

Discourse analysis, then, is the analysis of a text through identification of language, so as to reveal its discourses and to comment on their meanings. It is also about the revelation of the ideology behind the text. It is about certain understandings of the subject of the discourse.
Critical thinking: discourse

Michel Foucault

Foucault crosses over areas of philosophy, semiotic analysis, post-Marxism, and even postmodernism. His view was that knowledge was power, as were the ways that knowledge was thought about. It may be argued that his ideas are especially useful when he writes about the power of discourses. He distinguishes discourses from ideology, where others would say that the power of ideas carried by discourses is a part of the power of ideology, working for the power of social elites. He would argue that the way we think about any aspect of our society or culture – say, death – creates a kind of truth and reality about that subject. And the way we think about something like death is affected by the social practices and institutions around dying. These practices and institutions reinforce the ‘truth’ of the beliefs about death. You only have to consider how notions of the afterlife, of heaven, are wound into funeral services to see this. One could also argue that the way a culture thinks about death shapes the way that its social practices and institutions are built up. It is hard to think outside the ‘box’ of these ideas and practices. For example, Foucault refers to the way in which masturbation became ‘demonized’ in children for centuries, defined as ‘unnatural’ by teachers, doctors, parents and psychologists.

Foucault became especially interested in the ways in which certain kinds of behaviour were dealt with, and came to be defined as ‘problems’ – sexuality, for example. He examined thinking about women and madness, going back to medical practices in the nineteenth century. He looked at the treatment of women for something called hysteria, at the incarceration of women in asylums, at the ways in which women were talked about in terms of intellectual and emotional weakness and instability. His arguments and source materials came together to demonstrate the power of the discourses of subjects such as ‘madness’. The ways in which women were thought about, related to the ways that they were talked about (and pictured). Other discourses such as the subject of sexuality were also part of this process. And the ways that they were thought about were made the more ‘real’ by the ways that hospitals or asylums treated them. All of this conspired to subordinate them. And this working of discourses has a historical dimension in that these ideas – and I would say that they are ideological – were established as being ‘true’ over a period of time. They continue to inform our cultural views of women as ‘emotional creatures’, as well as, some would say, shape cultural practices within the field of medicine.

Foucault himself talks about ‘the problematization of madness and illness arising out of social and medical practices, and defining a certain pattern of “normalization”’ (Du Gay et al. 1997: 364, citing Foucault 1987). In the same work Foucault (1987) talks about ‘discursive practices’ (i.e. discourses) which when analysed show how ‘sciences’ (institutions and areas of knowledge) come to help define the reality (indeed ‘truth’) of subjects such as sexuality, madness and criminality.

7 Texts and narration

Media texts tell stories; they have a narrative. Narratives are about storytelling and story meaning. As with previous discussion of meaning, it may be argued that the narrative and its meanings are in the shaping of the text, and then work on the reader. But they are also in the mind of the reader because of what that reader does with the text.
A structuralist approach will demonstrate that there are features of a text which present an order, a form, cues to the reader, all of which give shape to that thing called narrative. Those features lead to meanings. A more audience-centred, even cognitive approach, will look at the audience as the active element in the construction of meaning. The audience draws on knowledge of conventions, of other texts, to construct things like storyline and the significance of the narrative. The idea of ‘a narrative’ is a construct in our minds; it is the product of a set of textual features. Narrative itself is made up of ideas such as place, time, character and relationship. Often the function of narrative is to generate these elements in such a way that engaging with the text is an experience in which a kind of reality is created. Different modes of narrative create an illusion of reality for as long as we are textual readers. They do not have to imitate life experience to work. We can go along with flashbacks or jumps in the action, so long as the narrative is consistent to itself – to the rules of the game which it has set up, and with which we are familiar because of our history of reading texts. Most narratives are dominated by two significant features. One is the unfolding of events (plot). The other is the unfolding of emotional states and of ideas (drama), through the representation of characters and relationships, and through the device of the authorial voice.

One needs to take on the idea that there is no such thing as the story. There are indeed some texts where readers will probably make pretty much the same story and the same meanings (genres). But there are others where they will not. We tend to assume that the narrative is an object to be uncovered, to which the reader stands in some relation. This is not true. Rather, it is a set of ideas to be put together (by the reader), and the way that they are put together sets up an imagined relationship with the reader. We may feel that there is a story out there, to which we relate differently, for example, if it is autobiographical rather than conventional third person. But there is no story out there. And the sense of authorial voice is just a trick. We are persuaded that we have some position in relation to a truth, but it is an illusion. The sense of a narrative or of a reader relationship gives substance to the illusion of events actually taking place. Indeed this helps create the diegesis, or self-contained reality of the story. It kids us that we as individuals have a privileged and intimate view of that reality. It enhances a sense of the truth, of the validity of what we experience – but it is just a story, just a set of representations. In fact the illusion is just another kind of meaning produced by the words and images. A sense of truth and actuality may serve only to convince the reader of other meanings to be drawn from a given narrative – the nobility of the human spirit, the power of love, the rightness of a given social order. Such meanings may in fact equally be arrived at through semiotic analysis or discourse analysis. They are also ideological.

I am not saying that the sense of a narrative, the sense of a reader relationship, the very pleasure of reading, is not significant. The experience may well be valued. But still it is important to establish that a narrative is a conceptual construction, and has no materiality, however it may refer to material objects such as places and people. Narratives are common, in most texts, in all media. Narratives may be read in factual as well as fictional material. They may be read in still images as much as in sequences of images. We tend to think of them as emerging from fictional, naturalistic material – of which there is a lot in the media. But there are very few examples of media communication of which one may say – no one can make a story out of that. A television documentary orders its material to produce a line of argument, to introduce and conclude its subject, perhaps even to impose some dramatic development on the subject. This is no different from a television news item or a drama. We look at still photographs, especially those dominated by human figures, and construct a
story around the scene, the people. This narrative may be limited in extent, compared with a whole movie, but it is narrative none the less.

One may argue that people have an inclination to make narrative out of most experiences, not least media experiences: that we take pleasure in following the cues of media material to make narratives. In a sense narrative is a consequence of the particular cognitive skills of our species. We have a sense of time: we conceive before, now and after. We have a sense of place: we conceive here, there, elsewhere. So we conceptualize where and when. We also construct motive: we have a notion of human psychology, of the reasons for and consequences of people’s actions. We may not always be right about people. But we do it. Time, place, motive, cause and effect dominate all narratives. The text does not have to supply the narrative. We can do that. A photograph of an old couple sitting on a park bench leads to narrative speculation. What happens next? Why are they there? What is being said about the elderly? The possibilities of narrating are in our heads, not just locked in the text. Narratives – documentary or fiction – are not just artful imitations of some kind of reality. They also signify meanings about their subjects, about society and about the times in which they are created. They are inevitably ideological.

**Narrative structures**

Narratives have shape and structure. This is much related to order of events and the arrangement of dramatic episodes and resolution. With relation to binary oppositions, I have already referred to one kind of structure. This might emerge through pairs of people, opposing sets of characteristics, pairs of places, and certainly through sets of ideas. The most common narrative structure may be described as mainstream narrative or as the **classic realist text**. It has become a benchmark by which other kinds of narrative and other evocations of reality are measured. This is characterized by a progression of events through time, by conflict between characters, by problems for the protagonist(s), by a series of dramatic moments. Events move forward towards an eventual denouement, a resolution of the problems. Such a narrative structure has **closure** – it is tied up at the end – as opposed to being open-ended. It is the work that the narrative does, as a vehicle for ideas, which makes the structure significant.

**Mainstream narrative** imitates our lived sense of things moving forward, our beliefs in the linkage between events in our lives, our need to resolve problems. And in this mixing of experience and endorsement of how we feel life is lived, so also such a narrative structure endorses the plausibility of its own ideas. The same may be said of other structures and structural devices. **Circular narratives**, in which the beginning of a story is its end, are a kind of reflection on how we reach points in our lives. The main body of such a narrative is an extended flashback, a disquisition on our belief that our past affects our present. **Parallel narratives** are those in which two or more plot lines are dealt with alternately and eventually brought together. These construct an imitation of our recognition that events coexist in our lives, that coincidences do happen, and that we live within a context of simultaneous and related events and people. Parallel narrative reflects on the significance of one part of our life story to another.

Narrative structures and various features of narrative are largely invisible to the average reader because they are so familiar and conventionalized. The rules or **conventions** by which plot is organized, drama is evoked, time and place are understood, are so well understood by media producers and audiences that the construction called narrative is invisible. It is a corollary of the power of these conventions that narrative which disobeys the usual rules of
story development or of keeping the other invisible (for example) may described as ‘alternative’. We notice the rules when they are broken. Such conventions may work against an effect of naturalism, against plausibility, against narrative as a reproduction of lived experience. For instance, movies will, by convention, abridge time and place. The story does not move forward at the pace of real time. Bits are ‘missed out’. Screen time is not real time. Certain conventions or narrative cues may well help us understand, unconsciously, what is going on. In a movie a character will announce that they have to see someone; then we jump forward to another place and to that meeting. But we do not see that as bizarre or unrealistic because we have been cued to expect it. No more do we crib about the sound of music appearing from nowhere (perhaps to induce emotions that relate to the drama). In fact the music would be described as non-diegetic, or outside the scope of the actual story (the diegesis).

If narrative is also a feature of representation, then we become all the more aware of its constructedness. It is just another way of ordering and evoking meanings. Narrative is so often validated critically in terms of its ability to imitate experience of a physical world, or of the psychology of character and relationships. But in fact what it is really about is comment upon and meanings about our material and conceptual worlds. Analysis of narrative features, and of their significance, leads to meaning and to visions of how the world is.

Reader positioning

Our recognition that there is a construction called narrative depends to an extent on reader positioning. I have already referred to that mode of narrative called autobiography. This addresses the reader directly. It constructs the idea of there being a narrator. It helps authenticate that which is being talked about. It contrasts with the more frequent third person form, in which that which we call ‘the story’ is apparently told by an invisible narrator, neutrally, as a given thing. But, of course, the idea that there is a narrator is in itself just a device, another aspect of narrative. The narrator is actually a function of the text. The idea that the reader is positioned is more accurately about how the text influences the reader’s understanding of what the text means. Identification describes the effect of involving the reader with the story, of constructing it as truth. It produces a meaning of truth – a belief in the validity of the text and of all the other meanings that we make from it. Alienation is about devices of disengagement from the story – positioning us ‘outside’ it, as opposed to feeling we are ‘inside’. Brechtian alienation in theatrical terms was a self-conscious narrative device intended by the playwright to draw attention to the fact that something called narrative does exist and is manipulative. But alienation may exist only at the level of a degree of detachment for the reader. Such detachment may be useful when, for example, the producers want to moderate the possible effect of emotionally charged material. If one moves the camera (and therefore, the spectator) to an apparently concealed position in some bloody battle scene then this can make violence more bearable.

The positioning to which I refer has spatial, temporal and psychological dimensions. In a movie like Gladiator (2002), one may be positioned in relation to the action in the arena, in relation to the Roman times of the story, and in relation to the protagonist and his feelings about combat. Feuer (1995) refers to a level on which this relationship may be seen in terms of a whole medium, as much as the individual text – ‘television’s foremost illusion is that it is an interactive medium, not that we are peering into a self-enclosed diegetic space’ (as is true for many movies). So narrative and the act of narrating is a core feature of many media texts, and this dominates the output of most media.
8 Texts and realism

It may be argued that realism is a function of narrative – the way the story is told – not a separate textual feature. But again it may be argued that where narrative includes content (an account of material elements in some kind of order or relationship with one another), realism is only about form (how that account takes place).

As a notion about the quality and value of some text, of some medium of representation, realism has its own creative and critical history. The nineteenth century, especially in respect of art and the novel, was dominated by aspirations to make paintings ‘true to life’. What ‘true’ and ‘life’ mean is another matter. As Furst (1992) says, in relation to the novel, ‘realism cannot . . . vouchsafe access to an innocent, uncoded or objective experience of an independently existing real world’. Nor is it the case, of course, that all texts even propose manufacturing a ‘real world’. Certainly in media studies we would understand that all media are only forms of communication which represent something. That thing may not be life as it is experienced, it may be an experience which is only imagined. And in any case one has to acknowledge the ‘problem’ of mediation, in which the act of communication must in some way transform the ‘event’ which it seeks to represent.

There are a number of reasons why realism is much discussed in relation to media texts. There is that kind of material analysis which is intrigued with the illusion of reality – the kind of text which convinces its reader of the authenticity of character or place – naturalism. The fascination is with language used in such a way as to construct an apparent material or behavioural truth. The discussion is about how it is done.

But then, perhaps along with such analysis, is the validation of the text on the grounds of its qualities of realism – value analysis. There has been a strong tradition in Western representational systems of striving after actuality, and of proposing the creative superiority of such texts. The traditions of Victorian naturalistic painting, then of photography, followed by film and television, are all media in which realism as actuality has predominated (though by no means suppressed other modes of realism). In this case the debate is about the merit of what has been achieved – the approval of one mode of representation above others.

Then there is a kind of philosophical analysis which is concerned with the very concept of reality, as well as the style of realism which purports to achieve this reality. The quality of seeming real may be as much to do with a sense of truths about human relationships, or about the characteristics of a healthy society, for example, as it is to do with what seems to be authentic or probable. This is about ideas, not form. It is about the representation of an immaterial world. The notion of reality as truth links with the realism that achieves truthfulness. So it may be that a treatment of the text which we describe as surreal, for instance, is as effective in achieving truth as is naturalism. Formalist styles such as Expressionism in the 1920s or film noir in the 1940s may not be ‘realistic’ but they are about realism. They draw attention to the form of the text, but also point symbolically to truths about the darkness in the human soul, to the truth that evil matters.

If one follows this argument that form links with the ideas within the text, then it is fair to say that to discover the qualities of realism in a text is also to discover meanings about realism. If we say that a scene in some TV drama seems to be realistic because the interaction of the characters is plausible, then we are also saying that one meaning of realism is ‘the mimicking of everyday life’. However, another drama in some formalist style might
not have naturalistic interaction. But it could still be validated as, for example, ‘getting at real truths about how people can play power games with one another’.

This leads one to the idea that one can also talk about something like ideological realism, following on from the notion of truth. The audience or reader might well approve the realism of a given text because it expressed what they took to be valid ideological positions. But in ideological terms, that which seems valid often also seems to be the truth because ideology generally works to exclude other ways of looking at its subjects. A narrative which describes a man being manipulated by a woman may be seen as having realism and as expressing a truth about gender behaviour – if the reader believes that view of the world which sees women as being manipulative in relationships and men as being incompetent to deal with such manipulation.

In this respect it may be said that the importance of realism in relation to media texts lies in the views of the world which it endorses. Even a text which is marked by authenticity and naturalism is significant not just for its appearance, its ability to reproduce the physical world (or even the social world). It is significant because it endorses beliefs about that social world, about the value systems behind the material appearance.

So realism is a feature of a text. It is one measure by which that text is validated in its own right. It is a measure by which it may be valued in comparison with other texts. Indeed Hallam (2000) argues that one can define realist styles only by comparison with other styles, given that there is no absolute style of realism to act as a reference point. The criteria for that realism operate both out of what we know of the real world, as well as out of the constructed world of the text. This is realism as ‘part of discursive struggle to make sense of our realities’ (Hallam 2000).

We may use the real world as a measure for the authenticity of the appearance of objects and places. We may use real-world experience by which to measure the plausibility of human behaviour, or the probability of character motivation. Real-world experience may determine our judgement on the probability of plot and on the nature of coincidence. But those same measures also depend on our experience of the text in question and of other texts. The text being judged can produce its own set of rules, which in turn relate to what we see as its mode of realism, what we should expect. In adventure, action or horror movies we expect some improbability in terms of the real world. But we suspend this relative judgement in the cause of genre pleasures, and go along with what is possible in the film world. In other words, realism is indeed relative, not absolute. Realism may be at work even in texts which on a relative scale of values we might describe as being unrealistic – a number of genre films, such as Horror.

Bordwell (1988) points out that ‘intertextual motivation’ in genres means that part of their realism for the viewer actually demands that they should include, for example, a stock situation like the shoot-out. But this expectation, this repetition and its satisfaction is in another sense unrealistic. Similarly, Bordwell’s (1988) notion of ‘artistic motivation’ suggests that the shoot-out can happen in slow motion or with much intercutting. We could expect this and feel that it is consistent to the genre. Yet, in its artifice, in that the medium draws attention to itself, one may say that such a device makes the movie unrealistic. It is only in terms of genre and its own rules that one has a sense of realism.

Other media texts become a measure of realism because they supply us with other information, depictions of other places, or possible patterns of behaviour. We may not have been to Chicago, but, even subconsciously, we will judge the realism of some depiction of Chicago on the basis of other things we have seen or read about the city. Indeed, it
may be argued that we are inclined to forget that many sources of information are merely representations, not first-hand experience, and that they can become as ‘true’ for us as any real-life experience.

It may be said that realism is nothing but a combination of conventions within the text. Some of these combinations form what are called **modes of realism**: they are kinds of category. We may use specific terms to describe these – documentary, fiction, fantasy. This categorization, as with genre, sets up expectations of the nature of the text. Such expectations are useful for media producers – for example in scheduling TV programmes by type, or in marketing books. They also help the reader to make mental adjustments in terms of how they will interpret and value the text. There is a kind of axis of realism, with the most factual material at one end and the most fantastic treatments at the other. On the one hand the real world of social experience and material objects becomes a benchmark. On the other, improbability and impossibility become accepted hallmarks.

What we need to remember is that texts are only kinds of representation. So television news may be relatively more real than a satirical novel about the future. But neither is it reality. Because it brings us real-time images of people and places that does not make its meanings true. Equally, the novel may be unrealistic in a material sense, but truthful in an ideological sense.

The idea of **hyper-reality** (e.g. Baudrillard 1988) in the context of postmodernism proposes the fusion of real life and media life into something new. It proposes that the world of media, of electronic representations, of television in particular, has become as real to people as their everyday social world. Reality shows on television are an example of how the medium short circuits distinctions between the two realities. The ordinary citizen (e.g. the late Jade Goody) can become a celebrity. Celebrities become familiar through their appearances on the screen in the home. The Royle family on television are actors who become celebrities because of their pastiche of the everyday, of the lives of ordinary people, who as the audience for the programme both live the everyday and elevate its depiction on screen to celebrity status.

### 9 Texts, representations, ideology, identity

The idea of representation is central to understanding the production of meaning through texts. Texts are nothing but representations in both a material and an ideological sense. In the material sense the text is a made thing, a product of technology, an image on a screen, a set of marks on the page. In semiotic terms, the signs stand for what is represented, objects or ideas. But they are not the thing itself. In an ideological sense, texts do indeed represent ideas. The reader interacts with the text. The interaction produces the ideas, perhaps preferred by the producer, perhaps more critically manufactured through the mental work of the reader.

The car in a magazine advert is a mental construct produced via a process of perception, using representational features such as hue, shade and outline. And, of course, that construct includes concepts represented about the nature of the car, the desirability of the car, its place in our lives.

Debates about representation in part centre around alternative notions of reflection or of construction. With visual media there is a temptation to follow the ‘mirror of reality’ approach because of iconographic nature of images in photography, film and television. The
pictures look like what they are meant to refer to in the real world (see the idea of denotation). Such ‘reflectionist’ arguments also link with certain notions of realism. The visual text may be praised for its invocation of physical authenticity (an aesthetic judgement). The text may also be ‘approved’ of for its representation of, for example, ‘natural’ social behaviour, or for the ‘truth’ of lifestyles and attitudes. This kind of value judgement is still very apparent in press reviews of film and television. As Sturken and Cartwright (2001) say: ‘Despite the subjective aspects of the act of taking a picture, the aura of machine objectivity clings to mechanical and electronic images.’

Barsam (1974) is part of the critical history of this approach when he speaks approvingly of the qualities of free cinema or of cinema verité documentary film movements – ‘the camera work is intimate, often giving the viewer the immediate sense that he is “there”’ – and of a particular film – ‘a beautiful study of ordinary people in ordinary jobs’. But of course representation is anything but ordinary. The ‘constructionist approach’ emphasizes the illusion of the representation, and falsity of a number of the ideas which it may propose about people and society.

Corner (1996) robustly critiques the idea of documentary as a ‘referential record’. He talks of a critique ‘interested in questions of representational form’ ‘which aims to “uncouple” the relationship between putative reality, pro-filmic reality and screened reality which much documentary depends upon’.

Stereotypes and ideologies

When representation is discussed in terms of social groups and images of people, its significance is not simply about appearance. It is about the substance of ideas invoked about that group. This is in no way to dismiss the significance of stereotypes, or the examination of images of people. But one does need to get beyond discussion of things like physical characteristics or even patterns of behaviour for their own sake, and get to the ideas that are represented. For instance, the femme fatale as a female type goes back to texts from the beginning of the twentieth century, to Georg Pabst’s 1920s film vamp, Lulu, for example. But in examining such a type it is inadequate merely to catalogue features such as dark hair or dark clothes; to identify characteristic behaviours such as a seductive manner; or even to describe conventional plot functions such as temptation of the hero. What matters is the representation of ideas about women, perhaps especially in the context of the era in which the text is made. These ideas are ideological. Representations give substance to ideology. Textual analysis reveals ideology in action. The femme fatale is about gender and power. It is about the male fear of being ‘unmanned’ by the sexual power of the woman, a fear of ‘losing control’. In the 1950s, representations of such a type would include condemnation (sexuality was allied with murderous tendencies) and retribution (such characters were likely to die or to end up alone, without a man). By the 1990s, the films of John Dahl, for example The Last Seduction (1994) or Red Rock West (1993), represent the femme fatale as strong, and the male often as weak or indecisive or pointlessly violent. The woman is not necessarily punished, sometimes not even for a crime.

Representations tend to reflect the ideological positions of the times in which they are created. They tend to be most conservatively ideological in genre material. Sometimes those reflections are of contradictions between one ideological position and another, or of kinds of challenge to the ideological status quo. Considering the contradictions between the various role expectations of women, it would not be surprising if media representations reflected
good examples of those contradictions – e.g. woman as passive beauty object versus woman as active earner. ‘Ideological analysis is... about recognizing the semiotic and discursive contradictions and tensions within a representation... at the core of these contradictions and tensions is the potential to challenge particular power relations and concepts of identity’ (Ferguson 1998).

Gunter (1995a) says of the representation of women on television:

there is a gross under-representation of women in action-drama shows in terms of actual numbers relative to the presence of men;... even when women do appear, they tend to be portrayed only in a very narrow range of roles.

(Gunter 1995a: 4)

These comments suggest that representations reveal their negative ideological credentials through who is presented (or not), and how they are shown. The contradictions between the world on screen and the world as we experience it, reveal ideology at work, display a partial view of social relations and dispositions of power.

Social types

Representations of people involve a typology of repeated surface characteristics – appearance and behaviour – that through repetition reinforce ideas about the type and/or group depicted. This typology falls into three main categories, marked by the intensity of recognition, and depth of cultural history: archetypes, stereotypes and types.

Archetypes are characters which are recognizable across genres, have few but very dominant features and characteristics. They are in effect a distillation of ideas about gender, or possibly about well-known occupations. For instance, the heroic male adventurer who is physically powerful and irresistible to women repeatedly emerges in popular texts. He is Caucasian in appearance and marked by loyalty in male bonding and persistence in pursuing quests. His provenance is legendary – Theseus or King Arthur. Such archetypes tend to emerge in texts set in a more fantasy mode of realism. But the impact of the ideas is no less significant for this. Notably he appears in novels and films made from novels – James Bond, Luke Skywalker, Total Recall (1990), Lord of the Rings (2001), Die Hard (1988). The heroic male adventurer is almost always a protagonist, rather than a supporting character. He very much links with genre myths and with a cultural idealization of masculinity.

Stereotypes are equally recognizable, but rather less mythic. They tend to belong to genres rather than to cross them. They may distil the characteristics of specific social roles, or of more contemporary occupations. But they also generate meanings about the stereotype which come out of conservative and dominant aspects of ideology. The stereotypical barmaid has big boobs and a big heart. What she stands for are ideas about sex without danger for the man, listening without criticism, the boosting of self-esteem, and above all a woman who knows her place in a male universe.

Types are the least distinctive category, perhaps because they are also the most sketchily drawn, the least represented and so the least reinforced. They are supporting players. One must acknowledge a degree of subjectivity in how characters are judged in this respect. But examples might be the stupid gang member, as parodied in Bugsy Malone (1976), the bucolic farm worker, as represented in a television adaptation of H.E. Bates’ The Darling Buds of May (1991), or the sharp young party-goer, who appears in material such as Bridget Jones’s Diary (2001).
In terms of meanings about social groups being constructed through representations, it is worth noting that what is not said about the type may be significant. It could be said that these ‘meanings by omission’ also emerge through analysis which looks for binary oppositions. So racism may emerge in texts first through roles which the subject is not given: how many actors from non-white groups appear in mainstream television drama? Barnard (2000) comments that even in a non-visual medium, ‘it is the lack of black and Asian voices on mainstream, daytime radio that reflects least kindly on British radio’s representation of non-white listeners’.

Second, this kind of prejudice by default could be shown through representations of race in association with crime: if, say, black comes to equal criminal through representations, then what it does not equal, by implication, is ‘law-abiding’.

It will have become apparent that much concern about textual representation is about its negativity. Travellers are often constructed as feckless and deviant. Such constructions also imply the opposing norms of behaviour and belief. Again, one is looking at ideological statements. To be nomadic is to be deviant, to be settled is to be normal. To have no fixed address means one can evade some state controls: this is threatening to the state.

Naturalization

The notion of norms also links to the idea that representations are given force through a process of naturalization. This means that it is seen as natural that a given social group should be represented in a certain way. It is seen as natural that the representation should carry particular ideas about that group – and not other ideas. It makes negative ideas seem normal and unchallengeable. In fact it makes those ideas invisible. This naturalization also underpins hegemony and the uncritical acceptance of the attitudes and values of the dominant ideology. Indeed one may also hear appeals to ‘nature’ in terms of genetic inheritance when even casual social judgements are made. Women, so goes the popular myth, are ‘known’ not to be good drivers; they cannot park a car properly, which has to do with their lack of spatial awareness. To represent women in this way ignores three things. Parking a car is not ‘natural’ but a learnt skill. The premise about spatial awareness is a false one. Good driving is defined in many other ways; for example, women generally drive more carefully than men, because they are less inclined to take risks.

Media representations of social groups purport to show to others what those groups are ‘really’ like. They also in fact show to members of the subject group both how they may be seen by others and how they ‘should’ be seen. This could mean that black teenagers

- are seen as being likely involved with crime and drugs
- believe that they are seen by others as being so involved
- believe that it is normal to be seen like this.

Subjects of representation

Finally one needs to recognize that the subjects of representation are not simply social groups. The term applies to a much wider range of subjects. At its most basic, representation is ‘construction of ideas about a subject’ through some means of communication. One can talk about representations of institutions or even of social practices. So TV hospital dramas
such as *ER* in the USA or *Holby City* in Britain represent not only an occupational group called nurses, but also the institution of the hospital, and the collection of practices known as medicine. Investigative documentaries and news reports will, for example, contribute to the accumulative process of representation, as much as fiction drama. There has been *The Trust* (Channel 4, 2002) about the institution of a large British regional health authority and its hospitals, or *How to Build a Human* (BBC2, 2002) about genetics and the possibilities of medicine. And the range of media that construct representations such as the one whose subject is medicine, extends beyond television, for example newspaper articles on the health service and advertisements for ‘health products’. There is a symbiotic relationship between representation and discourse, in which the former takes on a range of discourses to help make meanings about its subjects – nursing or hospitals or medicine – just as it may be said that the discourses contribute to the representation. For instance, whatever the subject of hospitals (and their representation) means to us includes discourses of gender, technology and sickness – to mention only three. Discourses are kept alive through the continued use of language which rehearses their meanings.

*Identities through texts*

Representations of social groups help create identities for their subjects. The concept of identity is one that is often examined within the sphere of cultural studies. However, at least some comment is appropriate at this point. One can start from the point that representations create meanings not only for the media audience as onlookers, but also for the audience as individuals and as subjects of the representation. Representation is something that is about us, not just about other people. It constructs a sense of identity for us individually, as well as about others. Identity has many dimensions beyond that of mere appearance. I have already referred to characteristic behaviours – what is inferred as being typical, and those which are characterized for the group – what is assigned as typical, whether that is true or not. Then there are the ‘meanings about’ which refer to assumptions about personality, emotional make-up and attributes, such as the mean, dour Scotsman with a liking for whisky! There are the ‘meanings about’ which refer to beliefs, attitudes and values. This point intersects with ideology. Our Scot believes in being frugal, has contempt for Sassenachs and is very patriotic.

But more than these dimensions are those which focus on a sense of common culture, of belonging, of being distinctive and different. These aspects of identity are those felt by the subject, not by others. They are taken on by the Scot as subject – not assigned by others, because others cannot feel the force and meaning of such identity dimensions. For the Scot, one might be talking about things like a Presbyterian background; a sense of place (Highlands or ‘classical’ Edinburgh); a feeling for clan; a sense of history (awareness of the Highland clearances or of emigration pressures); a sense of class.

So identity has a number of dimensions. It may be about a sense of place – belonging to a community in a certain city or country. It may be about history – having a certain shared background of events and experiences. These may go back to the past of previous generations – being a New Yorker, or being a Polish person in New York. It may also be about family and history – the stories around a dead grandmother and where she came from. It may be about cultural practices – from the observance of religious occasions to the rituals of family holidays. It may be about role and relationship – taking on the experiences and obligations of fatherhood. It could be about occupation. It is most likely to be about a combination of some or all of these factors.
Most intangibly, identity has been described in terms of being part of a *diaspora* – a sense of belonging to cultural practices and an ethnic background which seems to transcend place and time. One might talk about a Jewish diaspora to which many people, not necessarily practising Jews, feel spiritually attached.

The notion of identity is linked to ideas about personality. There is a debate around the traditional view of a core personality (or fixed identity) and the opposing view that personality and identity is much more mobile. It is unfixed or flexible. Chris Barker (1999) talks about ‘the de-centred subject, the self as made up of multiple and changeable identities’.

There may be dominant personality traits, but otherwise personality is actually a response to different social situations. The idea of a fixed identity has attractions because it is securing, it provides a stable view of people. But in truth all we know of people is to do with their behaviour. Personality and identity is to do with their inner lives. These are ideas which we construct from the evidence of behaviour. Identity is something which we feel we have, it is to do with how we see ourselves, but it is also something which is ascribed to us by others. The identity which others believe we have may not be the kind of identity which we ourselves believe in. Representations are very much about ascribing identities to others.

The terms in which one talks about representation and identity continue to overlap in many respects. One may feel positive or negative about one’s sense of identity and difference. The onlooker may see the identity in a positive or negative light. Much critical work focuses on negative constructions, not least in trying to explain prejudice, social divisions, or social conflict. But this negativity should be qualified by recognition of all the positive views of identities, in which people take pride in their culture, take pleasure in their sense of place, place value on their own social practices. It is not always true that social groups or ethnic groups see themselves as being diminished and less worthy by comparison with some other dominant culture (and dominant ideology). It could be argued that the media notably add to the possibility of feeling diminished because they carry the images, information and ideas of powerful cultures. They diminish global isolation, yet make more possible global comparisons – perhaps to the disadvantage of some cultures. Yet it is possible to have celebration as much as denigration. The multiplying channels of broadcasting make it very possible to present multicultural material and to address a range of audiences. In Britain there are, for instance, satellite channels that address Asian communities.

Gilroy (1996) talks about there being a high profile to identity issues and identity politics because of the proliferation of media material. He refers to

the increased saliency of identity as a problem played out in everyday life, and... identity as it is managed and administered in the cultural industries of mass communication that have transformed understanding of the world and the place of individual possessors of identity within it.

(Gilroy 1996)

It remains true that in critical studies the concepts of *difference* and of *otherness* are often used to emphasize the negative: ‘sameness and difference are marked both symbolically through representational systems, and socially through the inclusion or exclusion of certain groups of people’ (Woodward 1997).

The concern is that the representation constructs detrimental ideas about the difference of the subject from others: constructs feelings of being ‘other’ in the sense of being less. When the subject is looked upon it is seen as the other and not as worthy or ‘normal’ as the
onlooker and their identity. The gay person and the state of being gay is often represented in this negative way. This may be done crudely by exaggerating the appearance and mannerisms of the opposite gender in the subject: to emphasize the idea of not-man or not-woman. It may be done through the representation of relationships, in which the subject is shown to be unhappy with their sexuality or unable to have a happy same-sex relationship. It may be done through narrative resolutions in which the gay character ends up alone or hurt in some way. Of course, by implication, all this says a lot about what one ‘should’ be like in gender terms, how one should behave, how one will achieve a happy life. It implies the absent opposite – those cultural norms which ‘should’ prevail.

It is possible to celebrate difference and to challenge norms by in effect exposing the discourses. So it is that black activists of the 1970s used the slogan ‘Black is Beautiful’, and gay rights activists of the 1990s publicized the phrase ‘Proud to be Gay’. Campaigning drew attention to social inequality. How far such slogans caused most people to think again about difference in its negative sense is less certain. But such public campaigns and debates about the status of given identities does take one into the area of what is called identity politics. These may relate to geography – Jewish and Palestinian assertions about their identity being bound up with certain places. They may relate to spirituality – the claims by Australian Aboriginal people for return of the bones of their ancestors from British museums. They may relate to history – the various arguments put forward by Native Americans about the rights that historical treaties should give them, not least to land. In fact these examples, not surprisingly, can be seen as being about all three aspects of identity; about political issues centring on the importance of having a sense of identity and of worth, as expressed by beliefs, origins, backgrounds.

10 Genre texts

Genre texts dominate media output. Some genres have enjoyed a lot of attention – most obviously news. Film studies has been seminal in exploring the characteristics of certain genres – the western or film noir – and in exploring their ideological implications. There is a fair range of material on TV genres such as soaps and crime thrillers. In general, there is a lot said about the features of genres, and to some extent about what these repeated features may signify. But not so much is written on ideas about genre as a concept, not so much development of the idea of genre itself.

Genre texts are in fact very interesting because they clearly yoke institution and audience around text. Genre texts satisfy the market interests of media institutions, as well as the private interests and pleasures of audiences. They can be intensely conservative in ideological terms, and yet sometimes adroitly subversive of the dominant ideology. They run against that Western tradition of individual artistic achievement as mass product, and yet can occasionally achieve originality. They raise the hackles of those supporting an aesthetic valuation of texts, because they are seen as the creatures of commerce. And yet those same self-interested commercial enterprises have sometimes nurtured genre texts which have been acclaimed as something called Art. They work on principles of repetitive conventions, and yet much of the time manage to reinvent themselves before reader exhaustion sets in. They would appear to resist social change and yet can provide a map of this, as well as sometimes exploring the possibilities for that change.
10.1 The formula

We have already established that genres are full of representations, with all that implies about the production of meaning. The repetitious nature of genre elements is at one with the repetition of types in genres.

Many accounts of genre start by establishing repetition, conventions and the formula. I am assuming that this is largely familiar to the reader, probably in terms of particular genre examples. It is worth emphasizing the idea of formula, which transcends genres, and which provides a perspective on the building blocks of narrative. I am talking about the elements of hero and villain; stock characters; stock situations; iconic objects, characters and background features; mainstream narrative plot structure. The idea of formula is the idea of an overarching blueprint. This blueprint – remembering structuralist approaches – does seem to pivot on opposing elements where oppositions have to be resolved, and on a developmental narrative in which progression, learning and the classic Todorovian equilibrium have to be achieved (for an account of Todorov’s ideas about narrative and generic structures, see Hawkes 1977).

Of course the exact nature of the elements and of their combination is so varied that the formula can be satisfied (and the audience), without the progress and outcome being entirely predictable. The formula is dominated by fictional examples, but is not peculiar to fiction. The very existence, the life of the formula is prolonged and made known to the audience precisely because the media use it so much. Even game shows work to this formula: the

Figure 1.3 Genre: The Circle of Repetition and Reinforcement
Pleasures for the audience and profits for the institutions help maintain a continuous relationship between the two, as well as reinforcing both conventions and their meanings. (Burton, G. (2000) Talking Television: An Introduction to the Study of Television. London: Arnold)
Quiz master is a narrator; the contestants are protagonists in opposition to one another; the studio set is iconic; sometimes the contestants (personalities who return week after week) become stock characters; the plot line resolves with one team winning but everyone going away as friends.

The formula and its patterns satisfy in the audience a need for predictability, for security: variations on the formula satisfy a need for some excitement, for risk and the unexpected within a safe framework. Neale (1995) emphasizes the point that the formula creates repetition, yet also frees up a genre creatively so that it can be different: ‘genres are best understood as processes. These processes may, for sure, be dominated by repetition, but they are also marked fundamentally by difference, variation and change.’

Problems of genre

The formula becomes a way of identifying a genre – perhaps where this is not immediately obvious. It links to Barthes’ readerly texts, where textual patterns and meaning are, at least in the first place, familiar and easy for the reader. Implicitly it identifies those texts which are not genres: the writerly texts where the audience has to work harder on the material to produce meanings. What is not useful, I suggest, is to engage in debates of the ‘when is a genre not a genre’ variety. I happen to think that film noir is a style, to be found in a range of genres, but mainly linked with crime thrillers. Similarly, I would argue that melodrama can most easily be seen as a mode of realism and as a matter of style. It is not formulaic in the way that a soap is. I find it confusing when people talk about autobiography as a genre, when it has only one dominant feature, or about children’s programmes, which have nothing predictable in common. They are generic in terms of being a category, but not a genre as such. But in the end, what we define as genre formulaic material is significant for what it is, rather than for how it is. What matters is what genres reveal about industrial practices, about its representations of social reality, about its relationship to ideas such as hegemony or identity.

These comments pick up some of the ‘problems’ of genre study. As Feuer (1992) points out, much genre study has been partly an exercise in taxonomy, partly a critical attempt to promote the value of one genre, or of certain examples of genre texts above others. Film criticism in particular has a tradition of talking up the worth of popular genre material (e.g. Warshow 1970; Sobchack 1988; Maltby 1995) and its industrial origins, in opposition to an aesthetic tradition which (put simply) valued the art film and the work of the auteur.

Feuer (1992) usefully summarizes three approaches to genre study:

- ‘The aesthetic approach includes all attempts to define genre in terms of a system of conventions that permits artistic expression.’
- ‘The ritual approach sees genre as an exchange between industry and audience, an exchange through which a culture speaks to itself.’
- ‘The ideological approach views genres as an instrument of control . . . genres are ideological insofar as they serve to reproduce the dominant ideology.’

There is also the question of genre critiques which are inflected either by the medium analysed, or by the critical approach imported to inform that criticism. So, one may argue that looking at TV genres is not the same as looking at film because of the different nature of
the industries involved and because of the different nature of the audience – text relationship. Similarly, it matters if one uses a specific critical approach through which to analyse a given TV genre.

For example, Mary Ellen Brown (1990) writes of soap operas first in terms of their generic characteristics as a product of TV in particular, ‘whereas traditional literary narratives have a beginning, a middle and an end, soap opera consists of an ever-expanding middle’. But then Brown chooses to interrogate the genre in terms of feminine discourse and the notion of ‘carnival’. Among other points, she concludes that whereas dominant discourse represents the position of mothers in society as unproblematic, in soaps the feminine discourse ‘plays with conventions’ and recognizes problems. Bakhtin’s (1968) ideas about ‘carnival’ are invoked in relation to an argument that female viewers are invited to ‘participate’ in the world of the soaps, and perhaps to challenge the conditions of the world in which they live.

Brown (1990) is interested in texts as they are ‘read’, not in isolation. This is also the case for Gauntlett and Hill (1999), in a piece on gender and television. What is interesting is their reference to ‘history’ and to ‘change’, for both TV genres and their audiences. One is not talking about a static form:

the soap operas that were largely shunned by 1970s men were clearly different in content from the soap formulas which have become relatively popular with men today. Therefore the percentage of ‘men who watch soap operas’ actually has a different meaning.

(Gauntlett and Hill 1999)

The writers argue that a study of gender representations from a TV genre text broadcast many years ago does not have much relevance to a contemporary study, least of all in respect of influence and gender formation. In this sense, genre study must be ongoing and updated.

10.2 Expectations

Producers and audience are linked by their knowledge of the formula. Sometimes this relationship is even self-conscious, as with the Wes Craven series of Scream movies (1996–2000), which partly depend on viewer knowledge of other horror movies and of what has gone before in the series.

Expectation becomes a creative advantage when the producers know that there are some things they do not have to explain. So the formula is both a cage within which the producer must operate and a framework within which the producer can build different versions. It is both a trap for the imagination of the reader and a structure on which that imagination can build. It closes down some meanings, yet opens up others. It depends on producing preferred readings about the genre in general, but allows for oppositional readings. So in the case of a film like Black Hawk Down (2002), expectations are ideologically satisfied in terms of reading ideas about masculinity, heroism and patriotism. But, oppositionally, military authority and the state behind it may be read as being seriously incompetent.

Expectation turns into a commercial tool when marketing campaigns are designed to raise hopes and tap into prior knowledge, to create anticipation of fresh pleasures to come on the basis of past pleasures enjoyed. Expectation satisfied through the text, through the anticipation of the formula and the challenge of the unexpected, turns into an audience pleasure that depends on the fact of the material being genre.
10.3 Conventions

What is expected are the conventions which rule the construction of the genre. The elements of the formula are conventions: the ways that they are used can also be called conventions. So not only is the car chase a conventional piece of content, of plotting, in a crime thriller, but also its use in showing off the quality of the hero, or pitting hero against villain, is a convention. In addition, one may argue that creating the excitement of the chase by using the squeal of tyres on the soundtrack is a convention of form.

So this prior knowledge of the ‘rules’ of genre helps the reader anticipate what will happen and how. It helps the reader to make sense of the text. It not only closes down meanings but also gives the producer a clear foundation on which to compose the text. The operation of conventions in genres is comparable to the formal definition of conventions within semiotics – rules about the combination and use of signs which help make sense of them. It opens up the same debates about how far textual meaning is predictable and can be the preference of the producer (a closed text), and how far texts may be genuinely polysemic and open to the preferences of the reader (an open text). Conventions have to be strong enough that some meaning is possible, and so that a degree of social sharing of meaning is possible. Genres take this sharing on to a central area of common ground, where beliefs and values as meanings have a pretty wide currency. There is, as it were, an ideological consensus which is appealed to and reaffirmed, about such subjects as masculinity, heterosexuality, loyalty, social roles. But also from this common ground, from the security of this consensus, genres are also able to question and re-evaluate some subjects.

Conventions are powerful in the way that they frame meaning and make some meanings predictable. They give power to the producer to play games with the audience’s understanding of the text. They give power to the producer as a marketer of texts: conventional and iconic elements of genres tap into beliefs and pleasures of the reader. So they are part of the influence of the marketing devices which sell novels or movies by referring to these elements. Audiences are brought to want to consume the text because they want to revisit the emotional turmoil of a battle scene or of a love affair, for instance.

They also give a kind of power to the reader, the power to predict some of the meanings that the text will propose. The reader can predict some content and narrative development, and is left freer to attend to how these things are handled. This position on reader power implicitly says that media producers do not absolutely dominate just because they make the texts in which the conventions appear. The idea of conventions, the idea of ‘genre-ness’, is something which lives in a cultural space. It is not an object like a spring washer, to be copyrighted and controlled by the source of production, and which can only be used in a particular way. Convention is more like a force which producer and reader can tap into. At the same time, one has to accept that the relationship between producers and readers is unequal, in that this force is contained by the producers in the first place, within the construction called the text. Reader power depends on accessing the force of conventions and reusing it.

Critical approaches: postmodernism

This approach has been used in particular to explain some changes in the characteristics of some media texts since around 1980. But it has also been used more generally to
explain and describe social and cultural changes. By definition postmodernism contrasts itself with modernism (see below). But the idea that we have entered a completely new era in terms of society and the media is a false one. It is marked by the following:

- A recognition of some fragmentation of social structures and social institutions
- Interest in the ways that at least some texts have come to privilege form and style, play games with realism, but let go of narrative structures
- A recognition of uncertainty and fluidity in terms of people’s sense of identity, of what we may call ‘real’, and in terms of the intermixing of cultures (also related to globalization)
- An emphasis on expressions of popular culture
- An emphasis on very specific studies – of audience consumption, of textual characteristics.

In terms of media studies postmodernism is characterized by a reaction against modernist interests in structures, in the big picture, in broad effects analysis. The view taken is that any possible relationship between media and society as a whole is so complex in its range of variables that nothing meaningful can be said about it. It is proposed that what relationships there are, work on a tighter level. The text and the audience are predominant. It isn’t really possible to talk about a postmodernist perspective on the relationship between media and society. Postmodernism rejects teleology, or certainties about how society works; there are no absolute truths.

In terms of texts, this critical approach tends to privilege ideas about form and style, about irony, referentiality and intertextuality, about text as a manifestation of popular culture. In terms of audience, the approach explores them as players with cultural texts and artefacts, as much as consumers. These players channel hop, Net skip, put together their media experience from a changing variety of sources. They incorporate media texts within their identities, but also use ever-changing fashions to fluid and hybrid identities. Bricolage describes the plundering and recombining of source material for entertainment, for making music, for the very clothes on one’s back.

Postmodernism sees identities and realities as having become fragmented. Hyperreality blurs the boundaries of the media world and real life so that the audience sees both as being equally valid. Nothing is certain. Everything is relative. A painting of ideas using elephant dung is as good as a painting of a person using oils. Politicians can appear in the news and in quiz shows. An African fashion model can come to earn thousands in the fashion industry while her former neighbours are earning pennies.

Audiences are seen as making sense of texts in ways which suit them and which give them pleasure. There is a sense in which postmodernism has been a celebration of audience power, perhaps to be contrasted with post-Marxism’s anxieties about institutional power. But political economy approaches would contest this celebration.

This ‘power to the people’ approach is probably best exemplified in the work of John Fiske, and certainly represents a view opposed to those which seek to privilege study of the power of media institutions (often tied in with a belief in the power of ideology).

But it does not have to be an ‘either-or’ situation. Popular culture is of course a legitimate object of study, as are the ways in which cultural texts are lived out through the lives of audiences and social players. But it does not make institutions go away and it does not strip them of their power.

Certainly postmodernism has been criticized for kinds of wooliness, for making everything relative, for skimming over the possibility of media influence, for avoiding the ‘realities’ of media power in relation to social inequalities. Philo (1999) says: ‘This focus on the text and the negotiation of meaning has reduced the ability to study the real and
often brutal relationships of power which form our culture.’ The Glasgow University Media Group, of which he is a part, are firm in their use of content, semiotic and discourse analysis of television texts in order to expose the working of ideology as it reinforces inequalities based on class, gender, race in our society. So you may see postmodernism as being another critical approach to media, with a certain set of preoccupations.

It is closely bound up with what is called a cultural studies approach. It is about ideas and their implications, as much as having an analytic method like semiotics. With cultural studies, it has helped open up fields of criticism in respect of gender, ethnicity and sexual orientation. It is part of other kinds of social, textual and cultural shift, identified through study areas such as postfeminism, or postcolonialism.

10.4 Intertextuality and postmodernism

The idea of the reader using the text, even playing with it, is one part of postmodern views on genres. In one sense, this idea has been around for some time through, for example, material like the murder mystery thriller series or the action hero comics. In these cases, the ‘writers’ know that they have a fan base which enjoys being teased by thwarted expectations, which enjoys meeting familiar characters. The fans write in to the producers about questions of continuity, probability, scientific possibility. This exchange cannot take place in real time because of the nature of the medium, the mechanics of production and distribution. But there is an intensity about the relationship, through the genre material, which pushes towards the quality of a live, real-time conversation. The writer plays with the reader: the reader knows that the writer is doing this, and the writer knows that the reader knows. The writer invites the reader to enjoy their shared world.

In this shared world (as with a soap opera) one text about Inspector Morse or Spiderman is understood with reference to another. This cross-referencing is what intertextuality is about. It works on many levels of generality or particularity. It works both on an unconscious level in the mind of the reader, but also consciously, as with the example just given. Unconsciously, one may cross-refer an archetypal protagonist in one genre with the hero in another genre. One may understand the importance of a chase scene in a road movie with reference to a similar scene in a spy thriller. But then the references may operate within the genre – kinds of robot in science fiction. The references may operate temporally, when scenes or characters refer back to earlier examples. This intertextuality, it is argued, has a special intensity in defining postmodern texts. Pam Grier was used as an actress in Tarantino’s film *Jackie Brown* (1997) partly because she had previously appeared in Blaxploitation thrillers of the 1960s and 1970s. Another example is Colin Firth, who played Mr. Darcy in the BBC’s *Pride and Prejudice* (1995) and was later cast as the arrogant *Mark Darcy* in *Bridget Jones’s Diary* (2001).

Not all postmodern texts are genres, but genre has always depended on referentiality. So it lends itself to this intertextual intensity, where form and style lead over content and structure. Even back in the late 1970s a film like Walter Hill’s *The Driver* (1978) was a distillation of other heist/crime movies. This film self-consciously did not name its characters because they referred to generic types in other movies. And if the quality of irony includes a certain cynicism about the world, plus juxtaposition of characters and events to create this ambience, then again genre films lend themselves to this quality of postmodernism. A film like Hill’s *Last Man Standing* (1996) is intertextual in its debt to Akira Kurosawa’s movie...
Figure 1.4 Radio Times Cover: Exposed

This image of the actress Patsy Kensit is a good example of referentiality (and the post-modern text). Her pose on the chair mimics that of Christine Keeler in the 1960s. Keeler was involved in a much reported sex scandal which included a leading politician. The chair pose has become iconic, and has been copied by others.

- Can you think of your own examples of a media text in which full understanding of it requires the audience to pick up on various references?
- What questions does all this raise about the way in which meaning is taken from a text?
Yojimbo (1961); it also contains ironic comment on the quality of heroism and the lack of integrity in human nature.

Intertextual qualities can reduce a text to an anorak’s game of ‘spot the reference’. But they can also add resonance and layers of meaning. Genres lend themselves to intertextuality because the audience already knows the essentials of plot and character. It is also true that at least some of the audience for a given genre form a committed fan base, and this means that they have the intensive knowledge of, say, gothic horror or romantic melodrama which is there to be woven into the text.

**Critical thinking: postmodernism**

**Jean-François Lyotard**

Lyotard brings out a number of points about postmodernity, mainly in *The Postmodern Condition* (1984). He develops the idea that such a reaction against modernity has been around for a long time, and does not simply follow some firmly definable period of modernity. He also rejects the idea of some grand narrative behind all texts, previously pursued through the analytic work of writers such as Vladimir Propp and Christian Metz. He is interested in the smaller narrative structures and devices within texts, not least in those twentieth-century novels which challenge a nineteenth-century model of realist narration (see also the classic realist text in film studies). Put simply, Lyotard’s view of texts and social relations is one in which there is complexity and contradiction, rather than simple explanations. He would say that events and experiences can be interpreted, but not explained by any grand designs for society or science or politics.

But Lyotard also argues that significant changes may occur, and interrupt or change anything from politics to art. The worldwide outbreak of demonstrations by the Left and young people in 1968, and in protest against the Vietnam War in particular, is taken to be an example of this. But such events cannot be read as being part of a pattern of history. There is no history and, as Francis Fukuyama said, history is at an end.

Lyotard suggested that the time of absolute truths – the belief in the possibility of these – was over. He thought that the important position of science, as a place where objectivity and truth could be relied upon, was finished. We no longer know what we think we know. One can deal only in the particular, in detail, in specific examples, because general beliefs and critical principles have collapsed.

**John Fiske**

Fiske celebrates the pleasure of the text, the power of the reader to enjoy material. In fact the idea of enjoyment in engaging with a text or narrative is one that goes back once again to the writing of Roland Barthes. Fiske (1989) has a great deal to say about audience pleasures in a postmodernist world, and in relation to popular culture.

Again, one needs to recognize that he draws on the writing of others: for example, the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1984) in suggesting that there are class distinctions in the way that audiences deal with texts. This might be summed up as being about a more detached relationship of the middle-class audience with cultural texts, in which *appreciation* is a dominant response, contrasted with involvement and *participation* for the working-class audience engaging with popular culture texts. This could be said to be the difference between one kind of response to a Jane Austen novel dramatized on television, and another response to a TV game show.

Fiske has written for instance about how audiences engage with wrestling or dating programmes on TV, as well as the promotion of jeans as a cultural commodity. He refers
to the importance of intertextuality, the play of references and of styles, to understanding how audiences respond to popular media material.

He is not interested in general models of the media–society relationship so much as the audience–text relationship as it illuminates audience power. He would discard notions that media simply impose on the audience. Nick Stevenson (1995) says that for Fiske ‘the act of consumption always entails the production of meaning’. You read it, you make sense of it. He criticizes Fiske for ignoring the dimensions of institution and ideology. He suggests that Fiske inserts his own readings of popular texts, as much as he acknowledges the kinds of reading which are actually reported by audiences.

Jean Baudrillard

Baudrillard probably best known for his proposition that hyper-reality has replaced the real. His argument is that media reality has become indistinguishable from experiential reality. The experience of the media has become as valid as other ‘real’ experience. Famously he argued that the Gulf War (1990) did not happen other than in the media construction of it (Baudrillard 1995). The media construction is a simulacrum – a copy of war events on screen. I suggest that he was making a point about how much of our lives and our knowledge of the world are lived through the media. It isn’t that he would deny that tanks rolled across the Iraqi desert, or that lives were lost. But that wasn’t our experience. All we really knew was the version constructed by the press and by broadcasters.

Baudrillard sees us as consumers of signs, of representations, to the extent that we have lost a proper sense of what the sign refers to. Image is everything. Television has consumed public space and has made private spaces public property (e.g. programmes like Changing Rooms). Stevenson (1995) explains it in terms of how ‘the real relations of production and consumption have been replaced by a sign system’. Form predominates over substance. The consumer need is not so much for objects as for social meaning, for a sense of difference. You can see this in all those ads which desperately try to persuade you that you are going to buy individuality along with the product.

Baudrillard saw Disneyland as a metaphor for what is happening in the USA in respect of the merging of social reality and another reality dominated by the media, but extending into leisure worlds like Disneyland (and, we might say, Center Parcs). He would even argue that these alternative realities have become the reality for many people. He might say that while such leisure worlds suggest that there is another adult world where people do not play like children – in fact this is not true either. His postmodernist vision is that we are being encouraged to live in a leisure world, a media fantasy world, all of the time. This would be a world of TV screens, of shopping malls, of being cool on the streets, of holidays.

(It should be said that others would argue against this position, as exaggerating the lived experience of what certainly are cultural and economic changes. Even the well-to-do middle classes can’t afford an escape into alternative realities all of the time. And those who are poor and who have rioted, whether in the suburbs of Paris or of Los Angeles, certainly know that they are not living solely in a world of style, of celebrity, of infantilization. This counter-view would maintain that citizens can still tell the difference between media reality and social reality. Films like The Matrix raise this ancient question about, ‘how do we know what is real, and whether we are we living in reality or not?’)

Certainly Baudrillard identified a change in which economics are mixed up with representations and with ideology. We now live in a world where to produce anything means it has to be sold. Selling is mixed up with celebrity. Economic activity demands the production of representations. Representations produce ideas, they manufacture ideologies.
Films are promoted in the same way as cars. Painters are promoted in the same way as media personalities. Where Fiske’s view of postmodernism tends to celebrate popular culture texts as having a kind of integrity, especially when the audience appears to control their meanings, Baudrillard’s view seems to be more pessimistic, seeing culture as eating itself, losing any sense of value and distinctiveness, and collapsing into a swamp of relativity where nothing is original, nothing seems to matter.

Baudrillard wrote about the ways in which the idea of an original production, an original car, or an original copy of a work of art, has been blown away. On the one hand he is right to point out that much of our art, our popular culture, is all about ‘simulacra’ – copies. Your DVD, your pair of trousers, may be exactly the same as mine. This is about the development of technology and mass production. On the other hand, one can also say that he is wrong to imply that the idea of an ‘original’, of ownership, has been lost. On the contrary, multi-nationals, or book writers, have fought through the courts to maintain the idea of copyright. This is about ownership (and sometimes the production) of the original of something.

10.5 Myths, discourses and ideologies

Generic texts are at the heart of popular culture. They have become generic because they are popular. The TV presentation of a football match works to a formula, as much as a magazine for young women. They are popular because they tell the stories we want to hear. They give us characters we can fit into our view of the world. They give us a view of relationships, motivation, a moral universe, a structure of beliefs which also fits his view of the world. In fact, they give us a view of the world. More than this, they have already given us such a view: we grow up with genres. So if genres contain ideas about who we are, how we should live, what kind of moral and social structure we should inhabit, then they have generated, repeated and reinforced those ideas. Genres are not, of course, the only influence on people as they develop. But, in the context of information about time spent on viewing and reading genre material, then they are at least significant in helping form the ideas by which we live. The very fact of repetition and reinforcement, the inclination to consume genres and their ideas because they are pleasurable, makes them significant among other texts.

Genres are ideological because, for instance, they naturalize ideas about social role, they endorse ideas about social, economic and political power, they promote ideas about what is true and what is false. They are central to a dynamic relationship between media and society in which genre reflect and promote ideological positions. One might say that they draw on what is ‘out there’ and reshape it to some extent. At the same time, society consumes genres and draws on their representations in a process of reinforcing its ideas (but also evaluating them to some extent). There is a complexity to this view of exchange and transformation – dynamic interaction. A simple model of media reflecting society or of a helpless society being shaped by the media will not do.

In the Mafioso television series *The Sopranos*, Tony Soprano is on the one hand a traditional model for the audience of masculine physicality, aggression, social power and paternalism. On the other hand, the motif of his visits to the psychiatrist (with his own reflections on his behaviour), come from a social world in which masculine identity is being questioned. The dynamic, the uncertainty, plays off the genre framework. Traditionally the Mafiosi were certain of their place in the world, of the rightness of their values. Tony is
both certain and uncertain at the same time. The genre framework gives a point of reference from which the questioning can begin. *The Sopranos* is about ideological divisions. If genres are ideological then they are also full of discourses. In *The Sopranos* these are dominant discourses of gender, family and crime. And discourses help construct myths.

**Figure 1.5** Che Guevara on a Bag
The image of Guevara's face has become iconic in our culture. It is also mythic because it has acquired meanings beyond the facts of his life and death. He has come to stand for rebellion and youth, as much as for revolution and politics. The repetition of the image and myth reinforces meanings in the same way that genres reinforce our expectations and understanding of what they are about.

- How do you think that this image, reproduced on a bag, relates to ideas about commodification, referred to elsewhere in this book?

__Myths__ are dominant ideas produced by discourses, about culture and society. Myths centre around dominant ideological positions on their subject, and may be focused through characters and roles. For example, the ‘whore with the heart of gold’ focuses the myth (also seen in other kinds of female character) that there are women ‘out there’ who are into sex for its own sake; can give (the man, of course) sex without responsibility; and will also be kind and non-judgemental. This kind of myth is altogether convenient for and unthreatening to the male.
Myths have deep cultural roots and are part of the history of a given genre. Dracula is clearly a figure of masculine power (the ravisher) yet also an expression of deeper fears about general cultural invasion – evil taking over the world. Star Trek draws on the myth of frontiers and discovery, of uncomplicated codes of conduct, beliefs in order and loyalty – a world where everyone knows their place, and in the end assimilates the universe into that world. ‘Myths and genres are universal forms...they represent “the way in which a particular culture has embodied both mythical archetypes and its own preoccupations in narrative form’’ (Real 1989).

One should be clear that here one is talking about something that is partly to do with Barthean mythologies in semiotics, but which is also to do with wider definitions of mythologizing. Cultural myths structure the text, yet are concealed within it – made invisible by the language of discourse, which naturalizes views about its subject so that one cannot think about them in any other way. So any media text may refer to myths. In Barthean terms one might refer, for instance, to the fact that it is quite common for advertisements to invoke the myth of status linked to the acquisition of certain goods or commodities. As a myth it is merely an idea. Part of its falsity lies in the fact that, for example, wearing a Rolex watch is not a guarantee of status. The myth of status may well be invoked in a piece of genre material, but genres go further into mythologizing, through their repetitions and the development of their histories. They create ‘stories about’ social roles, gender roles, ways of living. They promote myths favourable to the dominant ideology and to a culture’s view of itself. A collection of such myths in American culture has been about how ‘we won the West’, ‘we won the war’, ‘we are winning the fight against crime’.

What should also be apparent is that myths are about illusion and falsity, while not necessarily being simply invalid. We want to believe the ideas that form the myths in genres, even if they are not true. Part of the popularity of genres is precisely because they contain this quota of wish-fulfilment. Romantic novels perpetuate the possibility of the caring, sensitive male – not to mention the primacy of lifelong, committed relationships. There is nothing invalid about either of these ideas. What is mythological is the romantic world in which this man, this relationship, is idealized and out of step with the messy and problematic realities of the world which the reader actually inhabits.

History

These comments remind us that genres do indeed have a history, on which producers and audience may also draw for understanding. It is a history in which the genre develops its repertoire of conventions and renews itself (or not), perhaps be creating new subgenres. But that history is not a matter of truth and document. War films like Saving Private Ryan (1998) may be about actual events, and may indeed be praised for their verisimilitude. But that genre also has its own history of manufacturing heroes, of revisionism in the cause of favouring Western ideology, of negative representations of real or imagined former enemies. Similarly, the history of US gangsters is ‘rewritten’ through the development of the genre to explore the anti-hero, to exploit violence, to investigate the line between legitimate enterprise and illegitimate crime. Facts are changed and personalities are mythologized as the genre develops. And some genres do not have even the semblance of historical fact to secure their narrative. Notably, the horror film draws on cultural myths and seminal texts (usually novels) to build a fictional history that makes yet more myths out of the original
fantasies. So the history of genres can tell us a lot about the times in which the texts were made, but not about historical ‘truth’ as such.

Genres often fall into groups of films – cycles in their history – which in retrospect represent prevailing concerns and beliefs of the period in which they were made. Television series such as *The Sweeney* or *Starsky and Hutch* from the 1970s represent an implied contemporary desire to find action heroes who would deal boldly with crime. Crime was seen as more violent and more of a problem than it was in, say, the 1950s.

‘Genre serves as a barometer of the social and cultural concerns of cinema-going audiences’ (Hayward 2000). As a ‘barometer’ of society, genres cannot help but be profoundly ideological. They may have the power to subvert or challenge, within their traditional form and structure; but they also have that tradition. It would not strike a chord with the audience if it was not about established ways of understanding the world. So, much genre material reinforces traditional gender roles, reinforces traditional ideas about maintaining order in society. Indeed many story lines are about ideological differences, about threats to the status quo and about the restoration of order.

Different genres possess . . . their own ways of resolving the ideological issues with which they deal. The science fiction film is set in the future and deals with the intrusion of ‘others’; the gangster film is set in the present and deals with the contradictions that stem from striving for social and financial success; and the western is set in the past and deals with the ethics of violence.

(Neale 2000)

It should also be said that Neale (2000) balances ideas about ideologically determinist readings of genres with comment on the variety of genre material, and on the complexity of genre background – history and industrial processes. In other words, not all genres are simply vehicles for a dominant ideology.

### 10.6 Genre and the political economy

Genre material is not only attractive to audiences because of its pleasures and its approvable ideological positions, but also attractive to institutions because of its predictability and because of its economies of scale.

The fact of the formula means that the production side of genre material is relatively predictable. The production team has at least some prior understanding of how schemes may be handled, what materials may be used, how the elements may be put together. Its predictability means that it is easier to budget for costs. Its predictability means that it is more possible to predict success in the marketplace; this applies to generic forms such as the series, the serial and the sequel, as well. The familiar profile of genre material, especially iconic elements, means that it is easier to market than one-off, individual texts. It is no quirk of fashion the British television broadcasts fewer original single dramas than it did in the early 1990s, but produces far more examples of genres and of series.

Of course, the drive for success (profit and beating the competition), sharpened by the considerable cost of production (in movies most of all) means that economic imperatives favour genres, yet do them no favours. This means that the ‘play safe’ syndrome favours another series of the television soap *Neighbours* so long as the ratings hold up, but is reluctant to take a risk on a pilot for an unknown series (even one that is within a known genre). This means that more and more genre material is needed. This is especially true
for television, where the number of channels continues to expand. What cannot be bought is the creative impulse which produces new versions of genres. What has happened is that economic imperatives undermine genre when they exhaust them.

Genres become the weapons of the global corporations as they fight in the marketplace for audience share and for the approval of the advertisers. Syndication, spin-off products and different media versions of the text add to the economic lustre of the original, successful genre text.

It may also be argued that, with reference to politics and regulation, that genres are often ideologically conservative or, if subversive, they cloak their opposition with the familiarity of the formula. Not that I am suggesting that genres are always uncontroversial. But the controversy usually relates to sex, violence and ‘bad language’. Government seeks to regulate this in the public interest, but institutions seek to exploit it in the interests of marketing. Controversy can become free publicity. The two great institutions of media and government dance around one another, negotiating their interests. Government invokes criteria of ‘taste’, media invoke criteria of realism or of creative freedom. But neither seriously challenges what some might see as the tyranny of the marketplace, which to a fair extent denies the audience alternative texts. So one might argue that the depiction and presence of violence in many genre texts is not so much a ‘problem’, as is, for example, the implicit endorsement of to whom the violence is done. The idea of regulating out of texts violence done to women, or to other nationalities, or even to criminals, would become a lot more controversial because it is ideological.

10.7 Genre and the illusion of pluralism

The commercial success of generic forms multiplies the amount of media material in circulation. Genres such as news, and looser categories such as children’s programmes, now occupy whole channels of broadcasting. But there is little or no evidence that this expansion of material brings about exploration of the form. We have news or children’s programmes done in much the same way as before, only there are more of them. This is not consumer choice, nor is it pluralism except by numbers. If pluralism is to mean anything then it must involve plurality of forms for a plurality of audiences. It should mean plurality of points of view. It should serve minorities as well as majorities.

A successful genre text in any medium is likely to produce replications of the text or spun-off additions based on the core text. But again, more is the same. Similarly, a successful text will induce imitations with the same characteristics. The novel Longitude (Sobel 1995) was followed by any number of dramatized science factual stories. This is not to argue that all imitations are without merit, but that the extension of generic forms produces only an illusion of pluralism.

The debate about what constitutes pluralism takes an interesting twist when one reflects that the commercial response to criticism is, ‘it is what people want, and it sells, and it keeps some people in work’. Such a material argument neatly avoids any reflection on questions such as: Why do people want such material? How do they come to have such wants? Which people don’t want it? Which people might enjoy texts that are denied production support? How does anyone know what they want if they can’t see what might be on offer? Who really decides what we do or don’t want, anyway?

In terms of genres, one might say that a media model in which the market rules, produces false pluralism – economies of production, targeting of the most profitable audiences (of
whatever size), play-safe production decisions, repetition of formulaic material. A model in which there is disinterested regulation and the protection of experimental and challenging producers and texts, should produce some exploratory and innovative genre material. Genre can provide a shelter under which some ideological goosing of dominant views and of the establishment can take place. Genre formulas can provide a reference point for experiments with form or with the representation of character types. This would be the kind of pluralistic environment in which choice and variety is not just an illusion.

The question is, how may we create that kind of environment, in which multinationals do not determine our choice of texts, and in which we may easily obtain that choice of texts and those points of view which indeed serve a multicultural and varied society?

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Textual features: contrasting the modern and postmodern</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Modernism</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Emphasizes structure (organization of content)</td>
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<td>Emphasizes narrative direction structure (see also closure)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ideological certainties</td>
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<td>Moral certainties</td>
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<td>Classic realist text</td>
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<td>Conceals its artifice</td>
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<td>Art is often equated with high culture</td>
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<tr>
<td>Emphasizes the original work and the boundaries of convention</td>
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<td>Seeks appreciation and a contained audience</td>
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11 Discussion extract

Content analysis makes some claims to being a ‘scientific’ method of textual analysis and seeks generally to reduce messages to quantifiable elements – elements that can be clearly delineated in media output and then counted or measured. Often this is to enable a comparison between one text or series of texts and another, or perhaps to make comparisons between ‘messages’ and reality, and it is often the case that the research seeks to find the ‘truth’ – the true meaning of the text.

Alternative ways of understanding texts draw on constructivist or structuralist understandings of communication and assume that there is no single ‘message’ encoded into media outputs but that communication is one of the ways human beings seek to make sense of the world, and that texts construct meaning rather than carry meaning. In this view, meaning is produced by the interaction of texts and their reader through pre-existing structures. One purpose of textual analysis is to uncover the structures (the
rules that govern the system of communication) that produce texts. Going further, the purpose of textual analysis might then be to uncover the potential meanings produced by an individual text. From this perspective meanings are always potential, to be negotiated between the text and the reader of the text.

Sometimes the analyst is interested in the operations of ideology... And, assuming that texts produce and reproduce ideology, is seeking to analyse the text to understand the operation of ideology, a position that may come close to seeking the ‘truth’ of the text, or to seeing texts as producing ‘misleading messages’.


1 What is objective or provisional in the approaches to textual analysis outlined in the passage?
2 Is there such a thing as ‘the text’, without the interaction of reader and text?
3 Is it possible to identify the truth of a text?
4 How do you understand the phrase ‘operations of ideology’?

12 Further reading