Television Culture

John Fiske

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To Lucy and Matthew

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The name on the spine of a book identifies only the hand that wrote the words. The voices that are assembled here are those of colleagues and students whose work I have read, or listened to at conferences, and with whom I have conversed to my enormous pleasure and profit over the years. I thank you all. Those whose words I have quoted directly are, I hope, adequately acknowledged in the references. Those others, whose input has been just as important if less direct, must be content with a more generalized expression of gratitude: they are mainly, though not exclusively, my colleagues and students at Curtin University of Technology, at Murdoch University, at the University of Iowa, and at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. In particular, the graduate students at Curtin, Iowa, and Madison have been intimately involved in the development of these ideas: they will recognize many, and may even feel responsible for some.

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Cultural Studies. I hope readers who have come across these articles will find that their development in this book will compensate for any sense of familiarity as they reread them.

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I apologize for the absence of illustrations to the transcripts of *Cagney and Lacey* and from *Miami Vice* in Figure 13.1: the fees demanded by the producers were beyond the scope of an academic book. I regret that their desire for additional profit overrode the value the illustrations would have had for students.

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April 1987

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Chapter 1

Some television, some topics, and some terminology

Any book about television culture is immediately faced with the problem of defining its object. What is television? And, equally problematically, what is culture? In this book I work with a definition of television as a bearer/provoker of meanings and pleasures, and of culture as the generation and circulation of this variety of meanings and pleasures within society. Television-as-culture is a crucial part of the social dynamics by which the social structure maintains itself in a constant process of production and reproduction: meanings, popular pleasures, and their circulation are therefore part and parcel of this social structure.

Television, its viewers, and the ways it functions in society, are so multifarious that no tightly focused theoretical perspective can provide us with adequate insight. The theoretical and methodological roots of this book lie in that loosely delineated area known as "cultural studies" which derives from particular inflections of Marxism, semiotics, post-structuralism, and ethnography. This area encompasses both textually inflected and socially inflected theories of culture, and requires theoretical, analytical, and empirical approaches to rub together in a mutually critical and productive relationship. The book will focus on the problem of how the textuality of television is made meaningful and pleasurable by its variously situated viewers, though it will also consider the relationship between this cultural dimension and television's status as a commodity in a capitalist economy.

But we start by considering television as a cultural agent, particularly as a provoker and circulator of meanings. How meanings are produced is one of the central problematics of the book, but a convenient place to start is with the simple notion that television broadcasts programs that are replete with potential meanings, and that it attempts to control and focus this meaningfulness into a more singular preferred meaning that performs the work of the dominant ideology. We shall need to interrogate this notion later, but I propose to start with a traditional semiotic account of how television makes, or attempts to make, meanings that serve the dominant interests in society, and how it circulates these meanings amongst the wide variety of social groups that constitute its audiences. I shall do this by analyzing a short segment of two scenes from a typical, prime-time, long-running series, *Hart to Hart*, in order to demonstrate some basic critical methodology and to raise some more complex theoretical questions that will be addressed later on in the book.

The Harts are a wealthy, high-living husband and wife detective team. In this particular episode they are posing as passengers on a cruise ship on which there has been a jewel robbery. In scene 1 they are getting ready for a dance during which they plan to tempt the thief to rob them, and are discussing how the robbery may have been effected. In scene 2 we meet the villain and villainess, who have already noticed Jennifer Hart's ostentatiously displayed jewels.

☐ *Scene 1*

HERO: He knew what he was doing to get into this safe.

HEROINE: Did you try the numbers that Granville gave you?

HERO: Yeh. I tried those earlier. They worked perfectly.

HEROINE: Well you said it was an inside job, maybe they had the combination all the time.

HERO: Just trying to eliminate all the possibilities. Can you check this out for me. (*He gestures to his bow tie.*)

HEROINE: Mm. Yes I can. (*He hugs her.*) Mm. Light fingers. Oh, Jonathon.

HERO: Just trying to keep my touch in shape.

HEROINE: What about the keys to the door.

HERO: Those keys can't be duplicated because of the code numbers. You have to have the right machines.

HEROINE: Well, that leaves the window.

HERO: The porthole.

HEROINE: Oh yes. The porthole. I know they are supposed to be charming, but they always remind me of a laundromat.

HERO: I took a peek out of there a while ago. It's about all you can do. It's thirty feet up to the deck even if you could make it down to the window, porthole. You'd have to be the thin man to squeeze through.

HEROINE: What do you think? (*She shows her jewelry.*) Enough honey to attract the bees?

HERO: Who knows? They may not be able to see the honey for the flowers.

HEROINE: Oh, that's the cutest thing you've ever said to me, sugar. Well, shall we? (*Gestures towards the door.*)

☐ *Scene 2*

VILLAIN: I suppose you noticed some of the icing on Chamberlain's cup cake. I didn't have my jeweler's glass, but that bracelet's got to be worth at least fifty thousand. Wholesale.

VILLAINESS: Patrick, if you're thinking what I know you're thinking, forget it. We've made our quota one hit on each ship. We said we weren't going to get greedy, remember.

VILLAIN: But darling, it's you I'm thinking of. And I don't like you taking all those chances. But if we could get enough maybe we wouldn't have to go back to the Riviera circuit for years.

VILLAINESS: That's what you said when we were there.

VILLAIN: Well maybe a few good investments and we can pitch the whole bloody business. But we are going to need a bit more for our retirement fund.

☐ The codes of television

Figure 1.1 shows the main codes that television uses and their relationship. A code is a rule-governed system of signs, whose rules and conventions are shared amongst members of a culture, and which is used to generate and circulate meanings in and for that culture. (For a fuller discussion of codes in semiotics see Fiske 1983 or O'Sullivan *et al.* 1983.) Codes are links between producers, texts, and audiences, and are the agents of intertextuality through which texts interrelate in a network of meanings that constitutes our cultural world. These codes work in a complex hierarchical structure that Figure 1.1 oversimplifies for the sake of clarity. In particular, the categories of codes are arbitrary and slippery, as is their classification into levels in the hierarchy; for instance, I have put speech as a social code, and dialogue (i.e. scripted speech) as a technical one, but in practice the two are almost indistinguishable: social psychologists such as Berne (1964) have shown us how dialogue in "real life" is frequently scripted for us by the interactional conventions of our culture. Similarly, I have called casting a conventional representational code, and appearance a social one, but the two differ only in intentionality and explicitness. People's appearance in "real life" is already encoded: in so far as we make sense of people by their appearance we do so according to conventional codes in our culture. The casting director is merely using these codes more consciously and more conventionally, which means more stereotypically.

The point is that "reality" is already encoded, or rather the only way we can perceive and make sense of reality is by the codes of our culture. There may be an objective, empiricist reality out there, but there is no universal,

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Figure 1.1 The codes of television

An event to be televised is already encoded
by *social codes* such as those of:

Level one:
"REALITY"
appearance, dress, make-up, environment, behavior, speech,
gesture, expression, sound, etc.

these are encoded electronically by
technical codes such as those of:

Level two:
REPRESENTATION
camera, lighting, editing, music, sound

which transmit the
conventional representational codes, which shape the
representations of, for example:
narrative, conflict, character, action, dialogue, setting,
casting, etc.

Level three:
IDEOLOGY
which are organized into coherence and social acceptability by
the *ideological codes,* such as those of:
individualism, patriarchy, race, class, materialism,
capitalism, etc.

objective way of perceiving and making sense of it. What passes for reality in any culture is the product of that culture's codes, so "reality" is always already encoded, it is never "raw." If this piece of encoded reality is televised, the technical codes and representational conventions of the medium are brought to bear upon it so as to make it (a) transmittable technologically and (b) an appropriate cultural text for its audiences.

Some of the social codes which constitute our reality are relatively precisely definable in terms of the medium through which they are expressed – skin color, dress, hair, facial expression, and so on.

Others, such as those that make up a landscape, for example, may be less easy to specify systematically, but they are still present and working hard. Different sorts of trees have different connotative meanings encoded into them, so do rocks and birds. So a tree reflected in a lake, for example, is fully encoded even before it is photographed and turned into the setting for a romantic narrative.

Similarly the technical codes of television can be precisely identified and analyzed. The choices available to the camera person, for example, to give meaning to what is being photographed are limited and specifiable: they consist of framing, focus, distance, movement (of the camera or the lens), camera placing, or angle and lens choice. But the conventional and ideological codes and the relationship between them are much more elusive and much harder to specify, though it is the task of criticism to do just that. For instance, the conventions that govern the representation of speech as "realistic dialogue" in scene 1 (pp. 2–3) result in the heroine asking questions while the hero provides the answers. The representational convention by which women are shown to lack knowledge which men possess and give to them is an example of the ideological code of patriarchy. Similarly the conventional representation of crime as theft of personal property is an encoding of the ideology of capitalism. The "naturalness" with which the two fit together in the scene is evidence of how these ideological codes work to organize the other codes into producing a congruent and coherent set of meanings that constitute the *common sense* of a society. The process of making sense involves a constant movement up and down through the levels of the diagram, for sense can only be produced when "reality," representations, and ideology merge into a coherent, seemingly natural unity. Semiotic or cultural criticism deconstructs this unity and exposes its "naturalness" as a highly ideological construct.

A semiotic analysis attempts to reveal how these layers of encoded meanings are structured into television programs, even in as small a segment as the one we are working with. The small size of the segment encourages us to perform a detailed analytical reading of it, but prevents us talking about larger-scale codes, such as those of the narrative. But it does provide a good starting point for our work.

☐ CAMERA WORK

The camera is used through angle and deep focus to give us a perfect view of the scene, and thus a complete understanding of it. Much of the pleasure of television realism comes from this sense of omniscience that it gives us. Chapter 2 develops this point in more detail. Camera distance is used to swing our sympathies away from the villain and villainess, and towards the hero and heroine. The normal camera distance in television is mid-shot to close-up, which brings the viewer into an intimate, comfortable relationship with the characters on the screen. But the villain and villainess are also shown in extreme close-up (ECU). Throughout this whole episode of *Hart to Hart* there are only three scenes in which ECUs are used: they are used only to represent hero/ine and villain/ess, and of the twenty-one ECUs, eighteen are of the villain/ess and only three of the hero/ine. Extreme close-ups become a codified way for representing villainy.

This encoding convention is not confined to fictional television, where we might think that its work upon the alignment of our sympathies, and thus on our moral judgment, is justified. It is also used in news and current affairs programs which present themselves as bringing reality to us "objectively." The court action resulting from General Westmoreland's libel suit against the CBS in 1985 revealed these codes more questionably at work in television reporting. Alex Jones recounts their use in his report of the trial for the *New York Times*:

> Among the more controversial techniques is placing an interviewee in partial shadow in order to lend drama to what is being said. Also debated is the use of extreme close-ups that tend to emphasize the tension felt by a person being interviewed; viewers may associate the appearance of tension with lying or guilt.
>
> The extreme close-up can be especially damaging when an interview is carefully scripted and a cameraman is instructed to focus tightly on the person's face at the point when the toughest question is to be asked. Some documentary makers will not use such close-ups at all in interviews because they can be so misleading.
>
> The CBS documentary contained both a shadowed interview of a friendly witness and "tight shots" of General Westmoreland. Such techniques have been used in documentaries by other networks as well.
>
> Even the wariest viewer is likely to find it difficult to detect some other common techniques. "I can't imagine a general viewer getting so sophisticated with techniques that they could discount them," said Reuven Frank, a former president at NBC News who has been making documentaries for about 30 years.
>
> (*NYT*, February 17, 1985: 8E)

There are two possible sources of the conventions that govern the meanings generated by this code of camera distance. One is the social code of interpersonal distance: in western cultures the space within about 24 inches (60 cm) of us is encoded as private. Anyone entering it is being either hostile, when the entry is unwelcome, or intimate, when it is invited. ECUs replicate this, and are used for moments of televisual intimacy or hostility, and which meanings they convey depends on the other social and technical codes by which they are contextualized, and by the ideological codes brought to bear upon them. Here, they are used to convey hostility. The other source lies in the technical codes which imply that seeing closely means seeing better – the viewer can see *into* the villain, see *through* his words, and thus gains power over him, the power and the pleasure of "dominant specularity" (see chapter 2). These technical and social codes manifest the ideological encoding of villainy.

Most of the other technical codes can be dealt with more quickly, with only brief comments.

☐ LIGHTING

The hero's cabin is lit in a soft, yellowish light, that of the villains in a harsh, whiter one. (I am reminded of Hogben's (1982) anecdote about the occasion when he was given a hostile treatment in a television interview. He did, however, manage to convince the interviewer that his point of view deserved more sympathy, whereupon the interviewer insisted they record the interview again, but this time without the greenish-white studio lighting.)

☐ EDITING

The heroes are given more time (72 secs) than the villains (49), and more shots (10 as against 7), though both have an average shot length of 7 seconds. It is remarkable how consistent this is across different modes of television (see Fiske 1986b): it has become a conventional rhythm of television common to news, drama, and sport.

☐ MUSIC

The music linking the two scenes started in a major key, and changed to minor as the scene changed to the villains.

☐ CASTING

This technical code requires a little more discussion. The actors and actresses who are cast to play hero/ines, villain/esses and supporting roles are real people whose appearance is already encoded by our social codes. But they are equally media people, who exist for the viewer intertextually, and whose meanings are also intertextual. They bring with them not only residues of the meanings of other roles that they have played, but also their meanings from other texts such as fan magazines, showbiz gossip columns, and television criticism. Later on in the book we will discuss intertextuality and character portrayal in greater depth: here we need to note that these dimensions of meaning are vital in the code of casting, and that they are more important in the casting of hero/ines than of villain/esses.

Characters on television are not just representations of individual people but are encodings of ideology, "embodiments of ideological values" (Fiske 1987a). Gerbner's (1970) work showed that viewers were clear about the different characteristics of television heroes and villains on two dimensions only: heroes were more attractive and more successful than villains. Their attractiveness, or lack of it, is partly the result of the way they are encoded in the technical and social codes – camera work, lighting, setting, casting, etc., but the ideological codes are also important, for it is these that make sense out of the relationship between the technical code of casting and the social code of appearance, and that also relate their televisual use to their broader use in the culture at large. In his analysis of violence on television, Gerbner (1970) found that heroes and villains are equally likely to use violence and to initiate it, but that heroes were successful in their violence, whereas villains finally were not. Gerbner worked out a killers-to-killed ratio according to different categories of age, sex, class, and race. The killers category included heroes and villains, but the killed category included villains only. He found that a character who was white, male, middle class (or classless) and in the prime of life was very likely, if not certain, to be alive at the end of the program. Conversely characters who deviated from these norms were likely to be killed during the program in proportion to the extent of their deviance. We may use Gerbner's findings to theorize that heroes are socially central types who embody the dominant ideology, whereas villains and victims are members of deviant or subordinate subcultures who thus embody the dominant ideology less completely, and may, in the case of villains, embody ideologies that oppose it. The textual opposition between hero/ine and villain/ess, and the violence by which this opposition is commonly dramatized, become metaphors for power relationships in society and thus a material practice through which the dominant ideology works. (This theory is discussed more fully in Fiske and Hartley 1978 and in Fiske 1982.)

The villain in this segment has hints of non-Americanness; some viewers have classed his accent, manner, and speech as British, for others his appearance has seemed Hispanic. But the hero and heroine are both clearly middle-class, white Americans, at home among the WASPs (White Anglo-Saxon Protestants). The villainess is Aryan, blonde, pretty, and younger than the villain. Gerbner's work would lead us to predict that his chances of surviving the episode are slim, whereas hers are much better. The prediction is correct. She finally changes sides and helps the hero/ine, whereas he is killed; hints of this are contained in her condemnation of the villain's greed, which positions her more centrally in the ideological discourse of economics (see below).

These technical codes of television transmit, and in some cases merge into, the social codes of level 1. Let us look at how some of them are working to generate meanings and how they embody the ideological codes of level 3.

☐ SETTING AND COSTUME

The hero/ine's cabin is larger than that of the villain/ess: it is humanized, made more attractive by drapes and flowers, whereas the other is all sharp angles and hard lines. The villain wears a uniform that places him as a servant or employee and the villainess's dress is less tasteful, less expensive than the heroine's. These physical differences in the social codes of setting and dress are also bearers of the ideological codes of class, of heroism and villainy, of morality, and of attractiveness. These abstract ideological codes are condensed into a set of material social ones, and the materiality of the differences of the social codes is used to guarantee the truth and naturalness of the ideological. We must note, too, how some ideological codes are more explicit than others: the codes of heroism, villainy, and attractiveness are working fairly openly and acceptably. But under them the codes of class, race, and morality are working less openly and more questionably: their ideological work is to naturalize the correlation of lower-class, non-American with the less attractive, less moral, and therefore villainous. Conversely, the middle-class and the white American is correlated with the more attractive, the more moral and the heroic. This displacement of morality onto class is a common feature of our popular culture: Dorfman and Mattelart (1975) have shown how Walt Disney cartoons consistently express villainy through characteristics of working-class appearance and manner; indeed they argue that the only time the working class appear in the middle-class world of Ducksville it is as villains. Fiske (1984) has found the same textual strategy in the *Dr Who* television series.

☐ MAKE-UP

The same merging of the ideological codes of morality, attractiveness, and heroism/villainy, and their condensation into a material social code, can be seen in something as apparently insignificant as lipstick. The villainess has a number of signs that contradict her villainy (she is blonde, white American, pretty, and more moral than the villain). These predict her eventual conversion to the side of the hero and heroine, but she cannot look too like them at this early stage of the narrative, so her lips are made up to be thinner and less sexually attractive than the fuller lips of the heroine. The ideology of lipstick

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