

themselves do not perceive their romance habits in political terms, Radway needs to concoct an interpretation of their reading practices as 'political' activities. Her claim that the love of romance can be seen as a hidden protest against patriarchal culture has much in common with the work of authors like Angela McRobbie, Dorothy Hobson, Mary Ellen Brown and John Fiske, who examine how women use traditionally female forms to resist their situation under patriarchy.⁴ In the case of romance reading, this means a claim to leisure time otherwise denied to the ordinary housewife and a possibility of withdrawing from the caring and self-sacrificing role expected of them. Furthermore, the texts offer fantasies of a utopia in which women are nurtured by men, compensating for the lack of nurture they experience themselves. According to Radway 'critical power . . . lies buried in the romances as one of the few widely shared womanly commentaries on the contradictions and costs of patriarchy' (p. 18).

Left by itself, however, that critical power will not develop into conscious resistance against patriarchy, Radway fears, since the overall ideological effect of reading romance is to reconcile women with their unfortunate fate. She claims that several narrative and linguistic techniques render the romance itself a source of learning, as a description of reality. The fact that the romance is a story constructed by an author is denied by employing devices that position readers as if they were reading narratives of real events: historical accuracy and descriptive detail; realistic characters; temporal and spatial specificity; direct referential language and a limited vocabulary. Given that the readers take the historical and descriptive detail as true, teaching them about life beyond their horizon, it is likely – according to Radway – that they will take the romance's assertion that men can fulfil women's need as true also.

It is precisely because the romance's surrounding universe is always portrayed so convincingly that romance readers might well be persuaded to believe that the romantic action itself is not only plausible but . . . inevitable. Repetitive engagement in it would enable a reader to tell herself again and again that a love like the heroine's might indeed occur in a world such as hers. (p. 207)

For Radway to argue convincingly that the hegemonic power of the romance will be more powerful than the hidden protest she sees embodied in its reading, she needs to deny that the readers will be capable of distinguishing between the different levels of the text: that of historical description and that of romantic fantasy. A collapse of the two would enable the ideological effect Radway fears and would deprive the hidden protest of its potential. The task of the feminist critic therefore is to exploit the threads of dissatisfaction expressed in reading romances and help the readers understand that a better world is possible in which 'the vicarious pleasure supplied by . . . reading would be unnecessary' (p. 222).

While Radway's attempt to understand women's pleasures under patriarchy has been widely acclaimed, her political recommendations and conclusions have been subject to considerable criticism (for example, Ang, 1988; Modleski, 1991). Being the feminist expert, knowing the true nature

of the romance and thus rejecting it, she constructs a considerable distance between herself and the ordinary romance fan who still enjoys romances and does not recognize her own dissatisfaction with patriarchy. Otherwise the fan would have found a lifestyle (or a husband) in which she does not need the compensatory literature. Radway puts the feminist critic in a position where it is neither possible nor necessary to resort to the vicarious fulfilment of romantic desires. Popular pleasures and feminist politics are constructed as mutually exclusive; being a feminist and still enjoying romance novels is seen as utterly inconsistent and undesirable. It is on such a conclusion that Radway's book has often been criticized, the critics raising the issue of how 'pleasure' and 'politics' can be related, rather than claiming that they cannot exist alongside each other. Ang (1985), for instance, proposes to consider the fantasies and pleasures involved in consuming popular culture as independent and relatively isolated dimensions of subjectivity that make daily life enjoyable in expectation of feminist utopias, but which do not relate directly to forms of feminist politics. Brown (1990a) on the other hand collapses the distinction between pleasure and politics by appreciating the gendered reception of popular culture as a form of 'feminine discourse' that resists hegemonic definitions of femininity and masculinity by privately making fun of it. The discussion on the (lack of) political or feminist potential of popular cultural forms has also informed research about soap operas, women's magazines and other popular genres, and is – as said earlier – one of the key issues in feminist media research. It will be taken up in more detail and depth in the final chapter.

Radway's analysis is an early sign of the changed focus in feminist media studies, now directed at the meaning of media in the context of everyday life. Radway showed how women use popular cultural forms to make do with their social situation, how they actively react to and shape their own pleasures and desires. Although the question of the subversive or repressive impact of these reading practices remains unresolved, Radway's analysis makes quite clear that the earlier feminist conceptions of the audience as 'mass', implying a composition of isolated individuals easily manipulated by media messages, needs revision.

Television and the family

In many societies the common social context in which individuals watch television is the family (or any other social arrangement that has replaced it). Of course, in student dormitories, kindergartens, schools and bars, television is important as well, but the home is the place where TV is watched most often and which is assumed in programme policies (Leman, 1987).

Increasingly therefore, researchers choose the family as the appropriate unit of analysis for the study of TV audiences. James Lull (1990), for

instance, has examined the way in which interpersonal communication in the family is structured by television and other media. Jan-Uwe Rogge (1989) claims that the media, and television in particular, form a part of the family system that define the interpersonal relationships and the emotional and communicative climate in a family. Both authors, however, ignore how power and gender relations within the family intervene in the interaction of the family with its media, in other words they neglect the gender politics of the living room. According to Brunsdon (1986), Gray (1987), Hobson (1980) and Morley (1986) it is crucial to acknowledge the different social positions that women and men have in the traditional nuclear family. Whereas for men the home is a site of leisure, clearly marked by a temporal and spatial distance from the workplace, for women it is a place of work inhabited by husband and children who require continual emotional and material care. It would seem inevitable therefore, that gender differences will occur in the use and appreciation of the family's media. Furthermore, contrary to the image of the family as a 'haven in a heartless world', it is the site where gender conflicts and power differences are directly and incessantly experienced, fought out, modified and accommodated, in an often tacit and inconspicuous process (Komter, 1985). Inevitably, the resulting gendered balance of power will be articulated in the use of the family's mass media too.

Informed by this perspective on gender and the family, David Morley examined how working class and lower middle class families in Britain actually watch television, and how this is linked with the family's particular biography, habits and rituals. He concludes that 'the one structural principle working across all the families interviewed is that of gender' (1986: p. 146), affecting among other things programme choice and preferences, style and amount of viewing, and the operation of the video recorder. It appeared that the men and women whom Morley interviewed have distinct programme and channel preferences which could be a potential source of conflict within the family. From Morley's data an almost caricatured gender difference emerges with women preferring fictional programmes, romances, local news over national news and ITV programmes (Britain's premier commercial channel), and men favouring factual programmes, sport, realistic fiction and BBC output. A similar picture comes from Dorothy Hobson's analysis (1980) of the media preferences of housewives and from Ann Gray's research (1987, 1992) on domestic uses of the VCR.

Both Morley and Gray warn against taking these gender differences too rigidly. In Morley's research, for instance, the few families in which the woman held a dominant position in terms of cultural capital did not follow the usual gendered pattern. He therefore claims that it is the confluence of gender and social position that accounts for particular viewing habits. On the other hand, Gray's respondents were drawn from various social positions, but still showed remarkable similarities in the way they spoke about their viewing practices. Against the backdrop of rating figures, which

generally show a less extreme gendered pattern of viewing preferences, Morley wonders how to interpret the data from his own research. The difference can be explained partly by the distinction between 'viewing' as measured in the ratings, and 'viewing attentively and with pleasure' as examined in Morley's research. More interesting however, is Morley's assumption that the way wives and husbands report their viewing preferences might be misleading because of their tendency to live up to their socially expected roles:

The fact that the respondents were interviewed *en famille* may have predisposed them to adopt stereotyped familial roles in the interviews which, if interviewed separately, they would not adhere to – thus again leading to a tendency towards misleading forms of classical gender stereotyping. (1986: 166)

This misleading representation of the self is not only a methodological problem, but points to a more fundamental issue that Morley unfortunately only touches upon briefly. What might be involved is not so much a false and misleading account but a construction of an appropriate gender identity within the context of family relations. In that case, the relation of gender and media consumption would need to be conceptualized in a radically different manner. To (over)simplify: it is not the fact of being woman or man that explains programme preferences, but programme preferences that construct a particular and appropriate gendered identity. Such an interpretation is more in line with the overall theoretical position taken up in this book and will be developed in the conclusion of this chapter.

Despite the major differences in programme preferences among the members of the family, none of the families in Morley's and Gray's research reported excessive conflicts over watching television. In general, the husband (or the eldest son) decides what will be watched, a decision that is not so much the result of an open discussion but already taken for granted, being an extension of male power in the family. The use of the remote control is almost exclusively reserved to the men, making the device 'a highly visible symbol of condensed power relations'. This pattern is only slightly disrupted in the few families that have female breadwinners. Given such a division of power, it is not surprising that women do not often consult the TV guide, nor do they take much initiative in watching television. They do not seem to care very much about what is on, with the exception of their favourite serials. Still, they watch as much as their husbands and children do, only in a completely different way. While the husbands watch attentively, in silence and without interrupting the flow, their wives perform a host of domestic duties and leisure activities like ironing, sewing, crocheting, knitting or reading a book. Obviously, it is difficult for housewives to step out of their working day while still being in the home. From the many comments quoted in Morley's and Gray's research, it appears they consider 'just watching television' a waste of time. Another aspect of their particular style of viewing also testifies to their particular position in the family. Most women tend to talk while the set is

on, commenting on what they see and grabbing the occasion to divert into the family's daily life. Herman Bausinger (1984) has interpreted this kind of behaviour as an extension of the social and psychological tasks women are responsible for in the family, as an attempt to make and maintain contact between family members. Morley concludes in a similar vein that women maintain their role as domestic managers while watching television.

All in all, from the research on television and the family it appears clearly that within the context of the traditional western nuclear family, watching television is a leisure activity for husbands, but an extension of domestic labour for wives. To enjoy television as a leisure activity, women must take special measures which they occasionally do, although often troubled by feelings of guilt. A prerequisite for enjoyable viewing seems to be the absence of family members whose presence exerts claims on them as housewives and mothers, or who in many cases will ridicule their particular preference for romance and weepies. Many of Morley's female respondents say they enjoy watching television on Sunday mornings while the rest of the family are sleeping in. Others arrange to watch taped programmes or rented videos with female friends during the afternoon. Gray, for instance, reports that some of her interviewees living in the same neighbourhood come together weekly to watch videos. They also like soap operas and record episodes for each other. According to Gray, 'these popular texts form an important part of their friendship and association in their everyday lives and give a focus to an almost separate female culture which they can share together within the constraints of their positions as wives and mothers' (1987: 49). However, the experienced pleasures are not totally uncomplicated but are constrained by feelings of guilt and obligation. Taking time out to indulge in their own choices undermines their sense of being a good wife and mother, defined as the ever-available, self-sacrificing and happy housewife/mother. Furthermore, their particular programme preferences are often downgraded by their husbands, many of whom think their wives watch silly or 'badly acted' programmes. Clearly, domestic power relations also includes the definition of bad taste and forces women to watch their favourite programmes secretly. In this respect watching favourite television programmes bears the same feelings of guilt that Radway found among the romance readers.

Most of this kind of research has been carried out within traditional, white, nuclear families. It should be emphasized again that the observed gender differences are a product of the particular social positions that women and men occupy in such families. It is quite likely that other patterns will emerge in families from other ethnic and class backgrounds, and in less traditional 'family' arrangements such as working couples, single parent families, homosexual couples etc. Such research has not yet been widely conducted, although Frissen and Meier (1988) partially replicated Morley's research in the Netherlands and asked traditional housewives and single working women about the role of television in their

lives. The experience of the housewives was much the same as that of Morley's and Gray's respondents. They have similar programme preferences which most of their husbands despise and ridicule. They often find themselves watching programmes they do not particularly like, and perform a variety of domestic tasks while watching TV. Television appears to be much less significant in the lives of the working women. They watch only occasionally and prefer to fill their leisure time with social activities such as going to the movies, to the sports club or to the pub with friends. Thus television for them was found to be a second choice, a too solitary activity. Once in a while they would deliberately watch television for a 'good cry'. As one of them said: 'Then, I am totally absorbed by the programme, It is as if I inhabit the space they show. I become totally intoxicated. I take my handkerchief and cry. Wonderful!' (Frissen and Meier, 1988: 88).

Women and soap operas

The research on women and soaps is primarily cast in terms of the articulation of pleasure and politics. As Ien Ang wonders in *Watching Dallas*: 'The widespread and continuing popularity of soap operas among women has attracted a lot of attention from feminists. How must the fact that so many women obviously get pleasure from watching soap operas be judged politically from a feminist perspective? Is *Dallas* good or bad for women?' (1985: 118). The issue therefore is not only why and how women watch and interpret soaps but also whether and how the construction of meaning through the interaction between text and audience contributes to the subversion, negotiation or maintenance of hegemonic gender discourse. The answers to such questions vary as widely as do the ways in which they are arrived at. Tania Modleski contends that a certain critical distance from mass cultural products and their audiences is necessary to formulate a comprehensive cultural critique. According to Modleski audience researchers run the risk of falling in love with their subjects. 'As a result they may unwittingly wind up writing apologias for mass culture and embracing its ideology' (1986: xi). She therefore consistently employs textual analysis to explore the meanings of popular culture (for example, Modleski, 1991).

Many other authors, however, try to combine an empirical finding of audience pleasure with a critical feminist viewpoint. The first concern in these projects is to examine the particular viewing experience engendered by soap operas. Ang (1985), for instance, found that Dutch fans of the American soap *Dallas* experienced the series as realistic drama, in spite of the critics' claims that *Dallas* offers only fantasy and escape. While her respondents acknowledged the unrealistic nature of the complicated family relations and the excessive richness of the environment, they recognized the emotional predicaments of the characters, and found the tragic

sequence of rows, intrigues, happiness and misery 'realistic'. Ang therefore calls the realism of *Dallas* emotional realism: 'what is recognized as real is not knowledge of the world, but a subjective experience of the world: a "structure of feeling"' (1985: 45). Ang's research on *Dallas* has been followed up by numerous other inquiries into the gendered pleasures of soap, to the extent that it has now become a dominant area in feminist media research. A common theme in these projects is the mixed positions of soap opera viewers, who alternate between a critical mode of reception and an involved way of viewing. Dorothy Hobson (1989, 1990) interviewed British working women and examined how watching soaps contributes to the interpersonal relations and the culture of the workplace. In several groups of women working together soaps appear to be a daily subject of conversation. Hobson observes two ways of talking about soap operas between which individual audience members easily 'commute'. First, there is a more or less detached way of looking that acknowledges the constructedness of the story. The women she interviewed tended to speculate about narrative development, and the future feelings of characters based on their own opinions about realistic plots and stories. They tried to 'co-author' the soaps, so to speak, exploiting bits of information about actors from gossip magazines, other media and talks with colleagues, which shows that other texts than the soaps themselves play a part in their reception. Such comments underscore the importance of the 'intertextual' reception of popular culture: 'any one text is necessarily read in relationship to others and . . . a range of textual knowledge is brought to bear upon it' (Fiske, 1988: 108). This detached way of looking has also been observed by Katz and Liebes (1990) in their research on cross-cultural variations in the reception of soaps. They refer to this detachment as a critical mode of reception, characterized by comments such as 'they cannot be happy otherwise we would not have a story next week', or, 'she will die because I have read that the actress wants to leave the series'. Secondly, there is a much more emotional and involved way of relating to soaps. In Hobson's research among working women, it turns out that they use soaps to think and talk about their own lives. This has been coined as a referential mode by Katz and Liebes (1990) and involves comments such as 'I would never behave like Pamela', or 'that man is very much like my own boss'. According to Hobson such referential comments may invoke discussions about personal problems and emotions that might have been too painful to talk about in any other way. Hobson's respondents easily alternate between the two modes of reception, both engaging critically and being involved with the narrative and the characters. In their discussions in the workplace they will catch up with the storyline, speculate about what will happen next and discuss what they would do if they were in the same circumstances. Hobson concludes that 'these accounts disprove the theory that watching television is a mindless, passive event in the lives of viewers. On the contrary, the events and subjects covered in television programmes often act as a catalyst for wide-ranging and open discussions. The com-

munication was extended far beyond the moment of viewing' (Hobson, 1989: 66).

Ellen Seiter found similar patterns among American working class housewives, who frequently criticized their favourite shows and expressed a sophisticated knowledge of the codes and conventions that rule the genre (Seiter et al., 1989). At the same time, however, these women extrapolated the events on television on to their own lives, feeling intimately connected to the characters on the screen. Seiter's team therefore conclude that the appeal of soaps lies in their capacity simultaneously to engage and disengage the viewer, to allow critical comment and psychological investment at the same time, providing at once a sensation of analytical competence and a feeling of emotional involvement. An extensive textual analysis of American and British soaps carried out by Christine Geraghty (1990) shows how the particular organization of time and space, and the contradictory aesthetics of light entertainment, melodrama and realism construct a spectator position which is characterized by the ambiguity of distance and involvement.

Still, the conclusion that soap pleasures basically consist of alternating between critical and involved ways of watching is premature. Katz and Liebes' research (1990) on the cross-cultural reception of the American soap *Dallas* points out that there is considerable variety of viewing practices among ethnic groups. Russian immigrants now living in Israel mainly commented critically on the series, seeing it as an extension of American capitalism, while Israelis of Moroccan descent predominantly used the series to reflect on their own circumstances. Press' analysis (1992) of class differences involved in watching soap operas seems to suggest that middle class women more often adopt a critical viewing style, whereas working class women tend to project the series on to their own lives.

One might argue that the double pleasure of involvement and detachment does not need to be gender-specific. In fact, many soap analyses give little attention to the particular enjoyments of female and male audiences, and ignore the obvious articulation of gender and genre present in the soap experience (Gripsrud, 1990; Katz and Liebes, 1990; Schröder, 1988). Why do soaps attract female audiences specifically, and which pleasures can be considered as distinct to gender? A rather straightforward answer is suggested by the particular scheduling of soaps. Whereas the audiences of prime time soaps consist of men as well – although not in equal numbers – women are the main viewers of soaps broadcast during the daytime, a time at which more women than men are available as viewers. Seiter's research among American working class housewives shows that daytime soaps tend to function as an integral part of a housewife's working day. Some women have managed to organize their working day like a well-run business with rigid schedules, and for them daytime soaps signify the lunchbreak:

People know not to call me between 12.30 and 3.00 unless it's a dire emergency. If it is really something they can call me at 1.30, 'cause *Capitol* is on and I don't

really watch it. . . . All of my friends know, do not call at that time. My husband . . . if he comes in he's very quiet and just goes right on out. (Seiter et al., 1989: 230)

These women use soaps to divide work from leisure, a division much more clearly marked for women and men working outside the home. For housewives with a more chaotic routine, for instance because they have small children at home, TV soaps are more like radio soaps and are watched only at the really important moments: 'I listen to them, honest to God, I never sit!' Obviously, one needs to be highly selective and very well informed about the genre and the particular soap in order not to lose touch with the complicated narratives. Friends and family are indispensable sources for help. In fact, many women in Seiter's research were introduced to soaps by their mother or another expert.

Informed by a textual analysis of soaps, Modleski (1984) claims that it is not only the scheduling of soaps that is particularly appealing to housewives, but the narrative structure of the genre as well. She describes women's work in the home as a sequence of incoherent, widely divergent and boundless activities characterized by repetition, interruption and distraction. They will easily recognize and be able to relate to the fragmented and cyclical narrative patterns of soaps. 'The formal properties of daytime television thus accord closely with the rhythms of women's work in the home' (Modleski, 1984: 102). Modleski's arguments can partly be refuted by referring to the numerous women who are not housewives and yet still enjoy soap operas. Other authors have used essentialist arguments to account for the popularity of soaps among women, assuming the genre's universal appeal to the female audience. Modleski mentions the work of Marcia Kinder, who suggests that 'the open-ended, slow paced, multi-climaxed structure of soap-opera is in tune with patterns of female sexuality' (Modleski, 1984: 98). Mattelart contends that the time patterns of soaps, distinguished by repetition and eternity, are linked to the female timescale, 'a cycle that links it into cosmic time, the occasion for unparalleled ecstasy in unison with the rhythm of nature, and along with that infinite, womb-like dimension, the myth of permanence and duration' (1986: 15).

While these are not arguments I would endorse,⁵ it is important to incorporate the thematic and narrative structures of soaps in order to account for the pleasures they invoke in women. The soap's focus on family life and personal relations is thought to be one of the factors explaining the genre's popularity among women. Even if the world of business and work enters the series, as happens in prime time soaps aimed at a general audience, the narratives remain concentrated on the personal relations and problems of business men, workers, secretaries etc. Some authors argue that the particular style in which these problems are addressed – endlessly talking about them rather than undertaking direct

actions to solve them – is also appealing to women. Furthermore, in the context of the soap narrative, women express perfectly efficient and rational behaviour, a feature quite rare in other televised women. It is therefore alleged that soaps offer a 'feminine culture' of themes, values and styles that women know particularly well, and that is not otherwise very highly appreciated in contemporary society. Brown claims, for instance, that 'soap operas, like women's talk or gossip and women's ballads, are part of a women's culture that exists alongside dominant culture' (1990a: 205). Within the boundaries of women's culture 'it is acceptable behaviour to watch soaps. The boundaries establish for them a locus of empowerment for their own brand of pleasure.' Also, the specific treatment of personal themes and relationships is a source of pleasure. From Seiter's research it is evident that narratives in which traditional family values and structures are undermined are notably enjoyable: 'Women openly and enthusiastically admitted their delight in following soap operas as stories of female transgressions which destroy the ideological nucleus of the text – the sacredness of the family' (Seiter et al., 1989: 240). The vicious heroine is celebrated and the wife who opposes her hopeless marriage by beginning an affair can count on much support: 'O Bruce, my husband, gets so angry with me when I'm watching the show and they're married and I'm all for the affair. It's like [voice changes to imitate Bruce]: "I don't like this, I don't know about you." And I say: "Dump him!"' (p. 240). Christine Geraghty's (1990) textual analysis of shows provides an interesting clarification to these saboteur qualities of soaps. She contends that American soaps, like *Dallas* and *Dynasty*, turn around the problem that male 'patriarchs' have in keeping their family together. Their efforts are incessantly undermined by women, for instance ex-wives or adulterous daughters-in-law. Their presence and actions are a continual threat to the well-being of the family, always in danger of being torn apart. Apart from emotional tension, this narrative structure also produces the pleasurable knowledge that male power, embodied in the head of the family, is never complete and always under pressure. In British soaps like *Coronation Street* and *Eastenders*, women – often older characters – often function as head of the family. The pleasures derived from the female protagonist do not stem from their subversive qualities towards the patriarchal family as in American soaps, but from their positions of power.

To sum up: the particular gendered pleasures of soaps are thus seen to originate in the centrality of themes and values associated with the private sphere. The focus on women as protagonists, on their rational and calculated actions and the mischievous attitude towards male power form some of the sources of pleasure for the female audience. Further pleasures stem from the ability of soaps to evoke a mode of reception that is simultaneously critical and involved. The particular scheduling of daytime soaps ensures that the audience will consist of housewives and others working outside of the 9 to 5 labour market.