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Television Culture

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out of any direct relationship with a "cause." Television does not "cause" identifiable effects in individuals; it does, however, work ideologically to promote and prefer certain meanings of the world, to circulate some meanings rather than others, and to serve some social interests better than others. This ideological work may be more or less effective, according to many social factors, but it is always there, and we need to think of it in terms of its effectivity in society at large, not of its effects upon specific individuals or groups. "Effectivity" is a socio-ideological term, "effect" an individual-behavioristic one.

And finally, in this preview of some of the terms used in this book, we come to that most important and slippery concept of all – "culture." Culture is concerned with meanings and pleasures: our culture consists of the meanings we make of our social experience and of our social relations, and therefore the sense we have of our "selves." It also situates those meanings within the social system, for a social system can only be held in place by the meanings that people make of it. Culture is deeply inscribed in the differential distribution of power within a society, for power relations can only be stabilized or destabilized by the meanings that people make of them. Culture is a struggle for meanings as society is a struggle for power.

This book is structured into two unequal sections. The next two chapters, like the first half of this one, investigate the forces of cultural domination. They explain how the dominant ideology and the social groups that it favors have their political and cultural interests promoted by television. The rest of the book explores the ways in which television can serve the interests of subordinated and oppressed groups. For television is a complex cultural medium that is full of contradictory impulses which enable it, on the one hand, to make profits for, and promote the ideology of, the few, but, on the other hand, to promote an oppositional, intransigent, or, at least, *different* cultural capital for the subordinated groups that constitute the majority of our divided society.

Chapter 2

Realism

The *Hart to Hart* segment is "realistic," not because it reproduces reality, which it clearly does not, but because it reproduces the dominant sense of reality. We can thus call television an essentially realistic medium because of its ability to carry a socially convincing sense of the real. Realism is not a matter of any fidelity to an empirical reality, but of the discursive conventions by which and for which a sense of reality is constructed.

The most obvious is that it presents itself as an unmediated picture of external reality. This view of television realism is often expressed by the metaphors of transparency or reflection – television is seen either as a transparent window on the world or as a mirror reflecting our own reality back to us. It is significant that both these metaphors invoke a sheet of glass as an impersonal, noncultural medium of reproduction – the human or cultural agency in the process is masked: this means that the finished representation is naturalized, that it is made to appear the result of natural rather than cultural processes, it is taken away from the realm of history and culture and moved towards that of universal truth. Taking the metaphors to their logical extreme like this reveals their obvious inadequacy to explain the way that television gives us representations of the world, but some professionals still cling to what media theorists call "the transparency fallacy" (the first of our metaphors), and the use of the reflection one is quite common even in relatively thoughtful discussions of the medium. The way that I phrased it at the beginning of this paragraph does allow it some validity, for it does assume that it is *our* reality, not *the* reality, that is reflected; in other words it admits that reality is the product of people, and not a universal object that people merely observe from the outside. What I wish to do in this chapter is to study the ways by which television produces "reality" rather than reflects it.

Realism can be defined in a number of ways, for it is actually a fairly slippery concept capable of a variety of inflections. Ian Watt (1957) and Raymond Williams (1977) tend to define it by its content. Watt traces its origins to the rise of the novel in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Realism developed alongside empiricism, individualism, humanism, and the bourgeoisie, so it is not surprising that it should share characteristics with all

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of them. For Watt realism depends on the belief in an objective reality that can be accurately experienced by the human senses: this reality is made up of an infinity of unique objects, people, places, and actions. So for him realism characteristically represents particular events happening to individualized people in specified places and time spans. The senses and experience of the individual are seen as the prime way of making sense of this universe of phenomena, and if social, moral, religious, or political ideas intrude, they must always be expressed within the forms of individual experience.

Raymond Williams (1977), whose historical perspective covers the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, lists three main characteristics of realism in drama: he finds that it has a contemporary setting, that it concerns itself with secular action – that is, with human action described in exclusively human terms – and that it is “socially extended.” By this he means that it deals with the lives and experiences of ordinary people, not kings and social leaders; in particular, that inflection of realism which we may call “social realism” and which Williams’s definition is inclining towards deals with the working class’s experience of subordination in an industrial society. In so far as this is portrayed sympathetically (though not uncritically), Williams is able to add a fourth characteristic of realism, that it consciously interprets this experience from a particular political point of view, normally from the left. The first three characteristics explain realism’s particular suitability for television: television’s audience, like realism’s content, is socially extended, unlike the more selective audiences of theater or many cinema films; television is particularly well suited to representing human action in human terms – its small screen and comparatively poor definition lead it to concentrate on mid-shots and close-ups of people acting, reacting, and interacting. Its repetition and its origins in studios rather than exterior locations lead it to rely on familiar interior settings of a human domestic scale that fit comfortably into the family room within which it is usually viewed. Television typically deals with the contemporary – this holds good as a generalization despite the popularity of historical drama as a genre. Indeed, critics like Feuer (1983) and Heath and Skirrow (1977) have identified as one of the defining characteristics of television its “nowness,” the sense of being always “live” which it constantly tries to promote. Film presents itself as a record of what has happened, television presents itself as a relay of what is happening. Even at the micro level this sense of the present is conveyed by television’s technical processes. Cheaply produced dramas, such as soaps and sitcoms, are normally shot with multiple cameras in the studio and have limited or no post-production editing. This means that the time taken to perform an action on television coincides precisely with the time taken to perform it in “real life” – dead time in the middle cannot be edited out as it is on film. This absence of authorial (or editorial) intervention adds subtly to the sense of realisticness,

the sense that the camera is merely recording what happened, and to the sense of liveness, that it is happening now – the same perfect match between represented television time and the lived “real” time of the viewer is, after all, characteristic of genuinely live television, such as sport.

Marion Jordan (1981), in her excellent discussion of the social realism of the English soap opera *Coronation Street*, lists characteristics that are perfectly compatible with those of Watt and Williams:

Briefly the genre of Social Realism demands that life should be presented in the form of a narrative of personal events, each with a beginning, a middle and an end, important to the central characters concerned but affecting others in only minor ways; that though these events are ostensibly about *social* problems they should have as one of their central concerns the settling of people in life; that the resolution of these events should always be in terms of the effect of personal interventions; that characters should be either working-class or of the classes immediately visible to the working classes (shopkeepers, say, or the two-man business) and should be credibly accounted for in terms of the “ordinariness” of their homes, families, friends; that the locale should be urban and provincial (preferably in the industrial north); that the settings should be commonplace and recognisable (the pub, the street, the factory, the home and more particularly the kitchen); that the time should be “the present”; that the style should be such as to suggest an unmediated, unprejudiced and complete view of reality; to give, in summary, the impression that the reader, or viewer, has spent some time at the expense of the characters depicted. (p. 28)

Williams’s emphasis on social extension and Jordan’s on the working class should alert us to the fact that most American television realism is not “social realism” with its implied criticism of “dominant” realism. Television’s world is much more centered on the middle class which provides its typical content and viewing position.

Our discussion of realism so far has concentrated on its content and the definition of the social world which it provides. We have looked at its form only to stress its so-called transparency. But form is just as much a bearer of meaning and culture as is content, and many would argue that, as a bearer of ideology, form is considerably more effective than content. Obviously the definition of the world and the agenda that constitutes the world are important, but it is the form that they are given that produces the point of view from which we look at them, and thus the sense we make of them, and, paradoxically, the sense they make of us. For making sense is always a two-way process: understanding the object necessarily involves defining the subject who is doing the understanding.

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□ The form of realism

So realism can be defined by its form, as well as by its content. This relates it to what it does rather than to what it is or what it shows (its content). Realism does not just reproduce reality, it makes sense of it – the essence of realism is that it reproduces reality in such a form as to make it easily understandable. It does this primarily by ensuring that all links and relationships between its elements are clear and logical, that the narrative follows the basic laws of cause and effect, and that every element is there for the purpose of helping to make sense: nothing is extraneous or accidental. Thus the flowers in the Harts' cabin are not just accidental decoration, they signify the Harts' class, taste, and wealth, and they also carry the values of being a popular hero/ine, those that constitute attractiveness.

I have assumed that realism is typically narrative in form, and this assumption holds good; indeed some, such as Barthes (1975a), imply that realism is always narratorial; even a photo or a realistic painting is a frozen moment in a narrative, and understanding it involves reconstructing the narrative on either side of the moment presented to us.

This definition of realism is particularly relevant for television because it admits of fantasy. *Wonderwoman* or the *Six Million Dollar Man* are "realistic" because their "fantastic" actions and abilities conform to the laws of cause and effect, they are related logically to other elements of the narrative, and work according to what Belsey (1980) calls a "recognizable system."

Davies (1978/9) develops this point in her argument that Hollywood cinema appeals as widely as it does not because it is a visualization of the nineteenth-century realist novel, but because its realism is able to embody a variety of popular forms:

What we have in Hollywood cinema is not so much a transference onto the screen of the dominant realist narrative form (which was principally concerned with interior moral life) but a fusing of popular forms (melodrama, romance, adventure, Gothic thriller, detective story, etc.) with a realist *politique*. (p. 61)

Her use of the word "politique" is significant for it implies that the mode of realism itself is political, is ideological. The politics lie in the way it "contains" the world within Belsey's "recognizable system." Realism is thus defined by the way it makes sense of the real, rather than by what it says the real consists of. Watt (1957) refers to this way of understanding realism when he points to its historical conjuncture with empiricism, individualism, humanism (or secularism), and bourgeois capitalism. The way we make sense of a realistic text is through the same broad ideological frame as the way we make sense of our social experience in the industrialized west (the art of

non- or pre-capitalist societies is rarely realistic), and both involve the way we make sense of ourselves, or rather, the way we are made sense of by the discourses of our culture.

One way in which we are made sense of is described in screen theory by the phrase "the positioning of the reading (or viewing) subject." We will be exploring the issues involved in the question of subjectivity in chapter 4: for the moment we need to note that the text produces a socially located position that it invites the viewer to occupy in order to understand it easily and unproblematically. Thus the *Hart to Hart* segment invites the viewer to "be" white American, male, and middle-class. Realism achieves this positioning of the reading subject through its form.

MacCabe (1981a) claims an essential formal characteristic of realism is that it is always structured by a "hierarchy of discourses." By this he means that a realistic narrative will contain a range of different and often contradictory discourses, which are usually explicitly recognized as such, but that these are low down in the discursive hierarchy. Taking precedence over them is an "unwritten" and therefore unrecognized discourse which tells the "truth," that is, it provides us (the reader-spectator) with a position of all-knowingness from which we can understand and evaluate the various discourses of the narrative. In fiction, this is provided by the implied author, in film and television by the filmic/television discourse through which the story is told; this comes down finally to how the camera and the microphone represent the real and how the editor puts the results together. Thus in the *Hart to Hart* segment there is a discourse of heroes and a discourse of villains, but the television discourse (which we have already analyzed into its elements of setting, lighting, dialogue, music, etc.) gives us the means to understand and evaluate both discourses and set them in a sense-making relationship to each other. This unspoken, unrecognized discourse which MacCabe calls the "metadiscourse" gives us a more privileged position than either the hero/ine or the villains. This position of spectatorial privilege from which the world makes perfect realistic sense MacCabe calls "dominant specularly."

This position of privilege is, as the word implies, one that is ideologically active. The *Hart to Hart* segment attempts to position us as white, male, middle-class Americans, and by adopting this comfortable and ideologically rewarded position we are not just making easy sense of the text, we are reproducing the dominant ideology in our reading practice and are thus maintaining and validating it. Ideology, according to Althusser (1971), is not an abstract, stable set of ideas that we unconsciously adopt, but a practice: it exists and works only through practices, and here we are concerned with the simultaneous and inseparable practices of making sense of the text and thus of constituting ourselves as subjects-in-ideology. By this I refer to the process whereby understanding the realistic, obvious sense of the segment requires

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viewers to adopt the social position and thus the social identity that the text has prepared for them. In this case it is that of the white, middle-class male. In doing this viewers are making a particular sense of themselves and of their social relations and are thus actively participating in the practice of maintaining the dominant ideology.

Closely related to the hierarchy of discourses and dominant specularity in MacCabe's theory is realism's inability to deal with the real as contradictory. Contradictions that may exist in reality are inevitably resolved in realism by the discourse at the top of the hierarchy. Colin McArthur (1981) argues against MacCabe here by citing an instance of television handling contradiction:

In *Days of Hope*, there is a scene in which Pritchard, the gentlemanly Northern coal owner, lectures Ben and the three arrested Durham miners on the excellence of the British tradition of peaceful, gradual and constitutional reform while, in the background, the soldiers brought in to suppress dissent in the coalfield indulge in bayonet practice. (p. 308)

MacCabe's (1981b) answer to this clarifies the working of the hierarchy of discourses in the resolution of contradictions:

What McArthur here confuses is the narrative's ability to state a contradiction which it has already resolved, and the narrative's ability to produce a contradiction which remains unresolved and is thus left for the reader to resolve and act out. In other words while McArthur looks simply for contradiction in the text, we must look at how contradiction is produced in the audience. In the example McArthur cites there is a contradiction between what the mine-owner says and what the picture shows. But this is exactly the classic realist form which privileges the image against the word to reveal that what the mine-owner says is false. In this manner our position of knowledge is guaranteed – we may choose to disagree with what the narrative tells us but if it has already placed us in the position where we are sure we are right, it has not questioned the very construction of that position. (p. 312)

This televisual metadiscourse which produces this position of "dominant specularity" for us uses a number of formal devices developed by Hollywood for what Monaco (1977) calls the "omniscient style" of the classic Hollywood realist film. This depends on motivated editing (sometimes called continuity editing, e.g. by Bordwell and Thompson 1986), and its essential components, the shot/reverse shot technique and the 180° rule, the eyeline match and the action match.

Motivated editing, which developed as the classic Hollywood realist style, tries to make the work of the editor and director as invisible as possible. It

does this by giving the impression that the edits are always required or motivated by the events in the "reality" that the camera is recording; they are never the result of the desire to tell a story in a particular way. This produces the effect of seamlessness, of a continuous flow, with no manufactured joins or edges. Of course this is, in practice, all nonsense – television is heavily edited, with cuts occurring on average about every seven or eight seconds. This maintains a high degree of visual stimulation – constantly changing signifiers is a televisual characteristic – and seems to be required by television's less than imposing visual image and its typical mode of reception.

The shot/reverse shot (or shot/countershot) is a typical stylistic device of motivated editing, and it is worth looking at in some detail to work out how it produces this "realism effect." Let us take a specific, but typical, example, a short sequence from an episode of *Cagney and Lacey*.

As Cagney replaces the phone after a call from a man she has just met, the camera holds Lacey and her in a two-shot, establishing the spatial relationship between them. It is shot more from Cagney's point of view than Lacey's, and thus has Lacey in almost full face. This is "motivated" as it is she who opens the conversation, and Cagney's view of the phone call that we are most interested in:

□ Camera

Shot 1: Two-shot,
focused on Lacey

Shot 2: CU of Cagney

Shot 3: CU of Lacey

Shot 4: CU of Cagney

Shot 5: CU of Lacey

(Cu = Close Up)

□ Dialogue

LACEY: So he's
gorgeous and he's not
a policeman. Did he
ask you out? /cut/

CAGNEY: He gave me
his number. OK?
/cut/

LACEY: Well, did you
tell him you would go
out with him? /cut/

CAGNEY: Did you hear
the word "yes" pass
these lips? /cut/

LACEY: I didn't hear the
word "no" either.
/cut/

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Each cut coincides precisely with a change of speaker, so the editing and camera work appear to be determined by the action: it disguises its highly conventional, planned form in favour of an appearance of naturalness. Caughie (1981) distinguishes usefully between the types of camera work that are appropriate to the two styles of realism that he calls the dramatic look at the real and the documentary look. By the dramatic look he refers to:

the system of looks and glances which is familiar from fictional film, and which works to produce the consistency and movement of the narrative, placing the spectator in relation to it – the rhetoric, that is, of narrative realist film: eye-line match, field/reverse-field, point-of-view. This rhetoric centres the narrative: it establishes, within a world of events, scenes, characters, and little narratives, the line and the connections which are to be privileged. It orders the world into a readable hierarchy. (p. 342)

This *Cagney and Lacey* sequence exemplifies his definition precisely. The shot/countershot (or field/reverse field) pattern is working here to position the spectator in MacCabe's dominant specularly. The establishing two-shot gives us knowledge of the whole scene: we then see each speaker from nearly the point of view of the listener. We know, in shots 2 to 5, through the conventions of eyeline match and the 180° rule, exactly whom each speaker is looking at and talking to, even though she is not shown on the screen. This knowledge given by the metadiscourse of camera work and editing is superior to that possessed by either of the characters: we "see" into each, under their words, and into the relationship between them more clearly than either of them can. Thus it is important that the camera does not replace one of the characters, does not position us exactly in her position, for this would position us as one of them and deny us this superiority. More importantly, it would also mean that the speaker would appear to address the audience directly and would thus appear to recognize our presence. The omniscience given us by this dominant discourse of the camera depends also upon our position as an invisible eavesdropper-voyeur who can hear, see, and understand all without the characters' knowledge. "Reality" is laid bare before us.

Another effect of these conventions of shot/reverse shot and motivated editing is what is called "suture." This literally means "stitching," and works in two dimensions. The first is within the film (or program) itself where it refers to the way that the construction of the film, the way it is stitched together, is made invisible by these conventions so that our experience of it is one of "seamlessness." The second is the way that it stitches the spectator into the narrative: by allowing the spectator to see and understand the action from (nearly) the points of view of the characters it maintains the impression that the screen gives us direct unmediated access to the action, and thus allows the filmic/televisual metadiscourse to remain invisible, unspoken.

This attempt at seamlessness is not confined to fictional realism. In news or current affairs programs location interviews are normally shot with a single camera trained on the interviewee. After the interview is finished, the camera is then turned onto the interviewer who asks some of the questions again and gives a series of "noddies," that is, reaction shots, nods, smiles, or expressions of sympathetic listening. These are used to disguise later edits in the interviewee's speech. When a section of this speech is edited out, the cut is disguised by inserting a "noddy," thus hiding the fact that any editing of the speaker's words has occurred. Without the "noddy," the visuals would show an obvious "jump" that would reveal the edit.

The camera work and editing in this *Cagney and Lacey* sequence have produced a "hierarchy of discourses." The lower positions in the hierarchy are occupied by the discourses of Cagney and Lacey which come from the social bases of the traditional woman who believes that a woman's happiness depends upon her having a "meaningful" relationship with a man, and that of the newer "liberated" woman who challenges this. These are both what MacCabe (1981a) calls "written" or "spoken" because they are explicitly part of the drama. The invisible metadiscourse, however, which takes hierarchical precedence over them, is not: it is the filmic/televisual discourse which, by explaining and making sense of the lower discourses, confers upon the viewer the position of omniscience. From here the viewer can understand the partiality of each woman's discourse, and thus can see that in "reality" the "truth" lies somewhere between the two.

Caughie (1981) contrasts these conventions of dramatic realism with those of documentary realism:

By the "documentary look" I mean the system of looks which constructs the social space of the fiction, a social space which is more than simply a background, but which, in a sense, constitutes what the documentary drama wishes to be about, the "document" which is to be dramatised. Thus, *Cathy Come Home* and *The Spongers* wish to be about the social environment of sections of the community and the bureaucracy which oppresses them; *Days of Hope* claims as its subject the whole of the labour movement from rural community to organised labour. This attention to the social environment and to the community is what connects documentary drama with the ideology of naturalism. (p. 342)

He goes on to give a good example of this documentary look:

At another, and I think more fundamental level, the documentary look finds its consistency in the rhetoric of the "unplanned" or "unpremeditated" shot: the camera surprised by the action. In the last episode of *Days of Hope*, Sarah and Philip are in a pub; Sarah raises her pint of beer and proposes a toast to the success of the General Strike; a voice off-camera

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responds, "I'll drink to that"; Sarah, still in mid close-up, acknowledges the speaker, still off-camera; and only then does the camera pan round to look for the person who had taken it by surprise. The little scene denies a script, denies planning, denies rehearsal, and establishes in their place a complete world which the camera can only capture, cannot have constructed, a world which goes on beyond the fiction. . . . It is spontaneous, therefore true. (p. 344)

Other differences that Caughie notes between dramatic and documentary realism include the dramatic's reliance on an invisibility of form and on a spectator who forgets the camera, whereas the documentary appears to use an objective, but recognized camera, and thus uses conventions like the hand-held camera, the cramped shot, and "natural" lighting, often supported by unclear or inaudible (and therefore "natural") sound. The documentary conventions are designed to give the impression that the camera has happened upon a piece of unpremeditated reality which it shows to us objectively and truthfully: the dramatic conventions, on the other hand, are designed to give the impression that we are watching a piece of unmediated reality directly, that the camera does not exist. This may seem paradoxical in view of the careful matching of camera scripting to dialogue and action, but the conventions of dramatic realism abound with such paradoxes, all carefully disguised.

The conventions of the dramatic look are ideally suited to the classic realism that makes the individual's experience the "natural" way of understanding reality. Those of the documentary, however, shift the emphasis onto the environment of the protagonists, onto social factors, and away from the individual. They are thus better suited to the politically aware social realism that Williams (1977) finds in *The Big Flame*, and that may be called "progressive" if not "radical" (see p. 46-7): they are consequently less common in typical prime-time television.

There is another scene, later in the same episode of *Cagney and Lacey*, when the conventions of motivated editing and shot/reverse shot are used differently. The scene opens with a shot of Christine Cagney at a restaurant table. The man she is waiting for (who is the one who had phoned her in the earlier scene) is seen through the window behind her. He enters the restaurant off-camera, speaks his first lines off-camera, and then enters the frame to join Cagney at her table. As he does so the camera pulls back to give the establishing two-shot:

☐ Camera

Shot 1: Establishing shot: Cagney waits, the man enters the frame, and forms a two-shot

☐ Dialogue

MAN (off camera): Hi Christine.
CAGNEY: Oh, sorry, I just went ahead and ordered, I hope you don't mind, I'm kinda pressed for time.

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MAN: Oh no, oh no, it's fine, I hope there's no problem.

CAGNEY: No, I have six and one half minutes. Besides, I wanted to see you. /cut/

Shot 2: ECU of man

MAN: Oh good, listen, I don't remember if I told you but /cut/ last night was . . . different.

Shot 3: CU of Cagney's reactions; his shoulder is visible

CAGNEY: Well the restaurant was anyway.

MAN: Do you know what I'm saying, Christine?

Shot 4: ECU of man

Shot 5: CU of Cagney, tighter than shot 3

CAGNEY: Yes I do /cut/ (she pauses) /cut/ as I said, I went ahead and ordered basically whatever they had prepared, because – er – the truth is I don't know what you like to eat.

MAN: I'm an adventurer, remember?

CAGNEY: That's right, where did you say you went to school? /cut/

Shot 6: ECU of man

MAN: University of Pennsylvania. /cut/

Shot 7: CU of Cagney

CAGNEY: Right, in Philadelphia.

MAN: Uhum.
 CAGNEY: Right ... You went on a basketball scholarship?
 MAN: Uhum.
 CAGNEY: Right.
 MAN: Is everything OK?
 CAGNEY: It's perfect. Why?
 MAN: You just seem a little nervous.
 CAGNEY: Oh no, I'm just interested, I would like to get to know you. */cut/*
 MAN: I think we know each other pretty well. */cut/*
 (Cagney looks at him.) */cut/*
 CAGNEY: Oh thank you (to waitress bringing their meal).

Shot 8: ECU of man

Shot 9: CU of Cagney

Shot 10: Two-shot, as shot 1

(CU = Close-up, ECU = Extreme Close-Up)

Here the narrative emphasis and viewer interest focus upon Cagney's suspicion of the man and of her own attraction to him, so this motivates the editing to keep the camera on her and her reactions even when he is speaking, thus keeping her in shot for much longer than him. Her suspicion of him is conveyed to us by her tone of voice and dialogue: the unspoken televisual metadiscourse of the editing, camera work, and lighting "tells" us that her suspicion is justified. The "truth" of the scene lies in her experience of it, not in his. The editing we have already mentioned, but it is worth noticing how the camera uses the variants of the close-up shown in shots 2, 3, and 5. The man (shots 2, 4, 6, 8) is always shot in tighter close-up than Cagney is, and in

chapter 1 we have noted that extreme close-up is more likely to be used to portray villains than heroes; this is not to suggest that the man is a villain, but to swing our sympathy away from him, to see him from Cagney's point of view. Cagney, at the beginning and ending of the scene (shots 3, 9), is shot in "normal" close-up. In shots 5 and 7, however, she is more worried about him and about her feelings concerning him, so the camera moves in slightly to convey this anxiety, but not far enough for the shot to become an alienating extreme close-up: The camera's attempt to position us physically and emotionally with Cagney is supported by the lighting: the man's face is slightly less well lit than Cagney's, and her hair has back-lighting to give her a "halo" effect. Both of these are standard conventions of realistic lighting used to position the viewer "with" one character and "against" the other.

The metadiscourse of television realism is giving Cagney's discourse hierarchical precedence over the man's, and makes the scene easily readable by us in our position of dominant specularly. It works to defuse the contradictions in Cagney's experience by "explaining" to us her suspicions of the man and of her feelings for him. Our understanding of the scene is omniscient, and therefore hierarchically superior even to Cagney's.

□ Realism and radicalism

The theory of realism that we have been following so far is leading us to the conclusion that realism is inevitably reactionary, it finally represents the world to us in a way that naturalizes the status quo. This provides us with a point of entry to the debate that has lasted for at least the last twenty years about television's role in an industrialized society. This debate focuses around the question of whose interests does television serve, and whose, if any, are disadvantaged by it. It is a debate that, in one form or another, underlies the whole of this book.

For the moment I wish to confine it to the relationship between realism and radicalism, and by radicalism I mean a critical interrogation of the dominant ideology and of the social system which it has produced and underpins; this entails an awareness of the inequalities and of the arbitrariness of late capitalism, which in turn produces the desire to hasten social change and the willingness to work for it.

Analytically it is convenient to identify two main foci of this definition of radicalism, which correspond roughly to our two ways of theorizing realism – via its content and via its form.

The clearest example of the debate is that centered around the British television mini-series *Days of Hope* in *Screen* in the late 1970s. The main participants were MacCabe and McArthur, though Tribe and Caughie also

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made valuable contributions. Their articles have been collected in Bennett *et al.*, 1981: pp. 285–352. *Days of Hope* was a series of four television plays that told the story of the rise of the British labor movement from 1916 to the General Strike of 1928 through the experiences of three main fictional characters. It provoked numerous public complaints, which fell into two main categories – those objecting to the BBC's screening of “left-wing propaganda” and those questioning the historical accuracy of its details, whether of dress, setting, or action. It is significant that the complaints brought together questions of ideological truth or falsity and ones of realistic accuracy or inaccuracy. Ideology and realism are inseparable.

Tribe (1981) makes the point that the letters from the public concerning the veracity of the image – the clothes, the buttons, whether the army marched in threes or fours in 1916 – were not just concerned with historical accuracy, but that this concern was itself an ideological practice and related to the ideological work of the text:

It can be suggested that this veracity of the image is the vehicle for the veracity of the history that it constructs. This history is itself conceived as the truth of a past, a set of political events that we can draw lessons from. The project of *Days of Hope* is thus associated with the writing of a popular history along historicist lines. This history is however recognised as ‘Truth by the viewer not by virtue of the “facts” being correct, but because the image looks right. The recognition effect “that’s the way it was” is a product not of the historicity of the plot but of the manipulation of the image.’ (p. 324)

The realisticness of the image directly affects its believability and thus is a vital part of the cultural form through which the ideological practice operates.

Obviously, *Days of Hope* was a potentially radical television drama, and was seen as unacceptably so by (presumably) right-wing members of its audiences. Its radicalism lay in the way it provided a realistic view of recent history from a self-consciously left-wing political viewpoint: it thus conformed perfectly to Williams's (1977) defining characteristics of realism – it was contemporary (or nearly), secular, socially extended, and explicitly political. It was broadcast in a capitalist society, and it attempted to present a left-wing, critical view of that society. So its content challenged the dominant ideology of the time, and even its harshest political critics, of whom MacCabe was the most articulate, allowed that it was “progressive” if not radical. Its progressiveness lay in the way that its content opposed the dominant ideology and its concomitant social system. But, according to MacCabe, it failed to achieve the status of the radical because its form was that of conventional dramatic realism. MacCabe admits the progressiveness of the content of

Realism

Days of Hope, but finally condemns it politically because its potential is defused by the way it is made sense of and understood within the ideological frame of bourgeois capitalism as it is activated by the drama's realistic form.

This may seem a tortuous argument, and to understand its more general theoretical implications we need to go back to the notions of the hierarchy of discourses, of dominant specularly, of contradictions, and of transparency. Realism for MacCabe is necessarily reactionary because it proposes a notion of the “truth” that is seen as factual, not as a construct of discourse and culture. This “factual truth” is conveyed by the unspoken discourse at the top of the hierarchy, which he calls the metadiscourse, and which positions the viewer at the point from which this truth is made to seem objective, adequate, and therefore natural:

The simple access to truth which is guaranteed by the meta-discourse depends on a repression of its own operations and this repression confers an imaginary unity of position on the reader from which the other discourses in the film can be read.

(MacCabe 1981a: 310)

It is the transparency of the metadiscourse (the “repression of its own operations”) that guarantees its truthfulness because it disguises its arbitrariness and therefore its political effectivity. It positions the viewer in “an imaginary unity of position” which is a crucial point in MacCabe's argument, for it is this that denies contradictions, or rather provides a means of resolving contradictions that may be expressed lower in the discursive hierarchy. The point is that realism resolves contradictions and does not leave them unresolved and reverberating in the reader. Unresolved, active contradictions working in the reader's consciousness would destroy the unified position of dominant specularly, and the complacent acceptance of omniscience that goes with it, and produce instead discomfort, uncertainty, and an active desire to think through these contradictions not just in textual terms but in terms of the reader's social experience. This is the radical frame of mind that is the necessary condition for the desire for social change. The crucial distinction is the one between contradictions in the text (which realism can handle comfortably without disturbing its reactionary entrenchment) and contradictions in the reader (which are a precondition for radicalism, and which the form of realism can never produce).

In chapter 6 we will discuss an alternative, and more productive, theory of contradictions in the text, one that emphasizes the impossibility of resolving them finally. MacCabe's theory stresses the power of realism, even when dealing with radical content, to leave viewers always in a reactionary frame of mind because its form enables them to use the dominant ideology to make dominant sense of a radical movement and thus to defuse its radicalism.

Realism, in this view, is a reactionary mode of representation that promotes and naturalizes the dominant ideology. It works by making everything appear "realistic," and "realisticness" is the process by which ideology is made to appear the product of reality or nature, and not of a specific society and its culture. Thus, if the Hispanic villain in *Hart to Hart* had triumphed over the white hero, it would, in our society, have appeared "unrealistic." Similarly, though differently, if the ship's cabin had had square windows instead of portholes it would have appeared "unrealistic." Realism involves a fidelity both to the physical, sensually perceived details of the external world, and to the values of the dominant ideology. In this way ideology is mapped onto the objective world of "reality," and the accuracy of realism's representation of the details of this "real" world becomes the validation of the ideology it has been made to bear – and I use the term "made to" in both its senses of "constructed in order to" and "required to." Realism's desire to "get the details right" is an ideological practice, for the believability of its fidelity to "the real" is transferred to the ideology it embodies. The conventions of realism have developed in order to disguise the constructedness of the "reality" it offers, and therefore of the arbitrariness of the ideology that is mapped onto it. Grounding ideology in reality is a way of making it appear unchallengeable and unchangeable, and thus is a reactionary political strategy.

Chapter 3

Realism and ideology

□ Popularity

There are a number of questions raised by the previous chapter's discussion of realism and the construction of the viewing subject, particularly ones about its pertinence to television. For its origin is in film theory, and although film and television share many characteristics, they also have crucial differences. The most important of these cluster around the different conditions of viewing, but there are also related differences in the nature of the text, and in the conditions of production. These form the substance of later chapters in this book. For the moment I wish to discuss the relevance of the concept of a radical text to mainstream broadcast television.

Television is, above all else, a popular cultural medium. The economics that determine its production and distribution demand that it reaches a mass audience, and a mass audience in western industrialized societies is composed of numerous subcultures, or subaudiences, with a wide variety of social relations, a variety of sociocultural experience and therefore a variety of discourses that they will bring to bear upon the program in order to understand and enjoy it. For its own purposes television attempts to homogenize this variety so that the one program can reach as many different audiences as possible. It tries to work within what these different audiences have in common, but it also has to leave a space for their differences to come into play in their readings of the program. We will go into this more fully in chapter 5, but for the moment we should note that the way that MacCabe gives the text almost total power to position the viewing subject denies the differences between different audiences and between the meanings they can, and do, construct from the same program.

But these differences operate in a constant tension with cultural homogeneity. This common ground is to be found firstly in a shared dominant ideology and secondly in a set of textual conventions that producers and readers share because they are part of a common history and experience. Television is a conventional medium – its conventions suit both the audiences with their needs for familiarity and routinization and the producers, for