Women Watching Television

By Charlotte Brunsdon

Danish Summary: Charlotte Brunsdon baserer bl.a. sin artikel på henholdsvis David Morley og Ann Gray, som begge har lavet interviewundersøgelser vedrørende TV-adfærd og præferencer.

I hjemmene er det manden, der har magten over, hvad der skal ses i TV. Det er ham, der sidder med fjernbetjeningen - 'Daddy's thing' - og manden ser mere TV end konen. Ikke alene m.h.t. adfærd foran TV er der kønsspecifikke forskelle. Det gælder også TV-præferencer. Mændene foretrækker nyhedsprogrammer, oplysende udsendelser og sport, mens kvinderne foretrækker film og serier. Imidlertid bliver det som regel mandens foretrukne programmer, som ses. Kvinder ser, hvad de har lyst til, når familien ikke er hjemme.

Charlotte Brunsdon beskriver udviklingen indenfor den engelske, feministiske medieforskning: Første stadium er en kritik, der så at sige foregår på alle kvinders vegne. Man kritiserer mediernes stereotype billeder af kvinder og forholder sig på samme måde som venstrefløjen. Begge parter forholder sig kulturradikalt til programmerne. Andet stadium er, at kvindegenrerne bliver positivt vurderet. Man opprioriterer de kvindelige værdier og priser de programmer, der synliggør de hidtil usynliggjorte kvindelige værdier. I tredje fase begynder forskerne at undersøge modtagernes glæde ved at se TV. Hvori består denne 'pleasure', som tilsyneladende er kønsspecifik?

I den type af forskning afdækkes så de modsigelser, som tilsyneladende ligger i den kvindelige seers fascination af bestemte genrer. På den ene side kan kvinder lide kvindegenrerne, som beskriver privatsfæren, og på den anden side er kvindegenrerne generelt lavt prioriterede. Det bevirker, at kvinden fratages glæden ved at se programmerne, og ydermere føler hun sig utilplas ved at give sig sine følelser i vold - f.eks. ved at græde - foran TV-programmer, som manden ikke bryder sig om, og som han forholder sig kritisk og nedladende til.

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This article offers a preliminary account of some of the factors to be taken into account in a consideration of women as an audience for television. Through a survey of some recent feminist research into women as readers and viewers, the absolute (but not necessary) lack of symmetry between masculine and feminine subjectivities is argued to be a major element which should inform our understanding of women as television viewers.

The article is written up from the first half of the spoken paper I gave at the Conference, Women and the Electronic Mass Media. The second half of the paper began an analysis of the successful British television crime series, Widows, in which the crime is carried out by women. This programme was chosen for analysis because it exemplified two trends. Firstly, the attempt to maximise audiences by pepping up an old formula and providing 'women's interest' in a male genre, the crime series. Secondly because of the way in which the use of 'strong' central female protagonists can be interpreted as at least partly a response to feminist critique, if only to the extent of wishing to appeal to the independent woman' audience. Perhaps most interestingly, in terms of the discussion below, Widows could be interpreted as a programme which men and women could choose to watch tegether.

The length difficulties that have developed while writing up a spoken paper have led me to completely omit the analysis of Widows (1).

I Family Television

Two recent pieces of research offer us a useful shift of emphasis in television research. Both are research into domestic viewing, conducted mainly through long, open-ended semi-structured interviews/discussions with people, in their homes, about their viewing habits.

Ann Gray researching at York University, and David Morley, conducting research for the Independent Broadcasting Authority, both, in different ways, show that there are a great many negotiations necessary before people - especially women - get to watch what they want to watch on television (2). Feminist research, particularly into soap opera, has to an extent taken on some of these questions, in its invocation of the embattled housewife, desperately trying to find out what will happen next while doing the ironing and giving the children their tea (3). Similarly, standard scheduling practice appears to recognise that different members of the family are likely to have control of the set at different times (4). However the full implications of these different knowledges and insights about women's rather limited powers as viewers within a familial context have not perhaps been properly assimilated. It is this which Gray's and Morley's work refocuses.

Dr. Morley's work consisted of a number of extended, loosely focused interviews with white working class families living in Battersea in London. All the families had children and a video recorder. The reliance on extended interview, a method also used by Gray, obviously raises a range of methodological issues, which focus mainly on the status of data obtained in this way. Gray and Morley make their own theoretical arguments in their research reports - here I would merely point to the

interest of the behaviour and feeling reported, even if we can find no methodological guarantee of the correlation between truths told in terview, and extra interview, sans interviewer, family and individual practices.

For our purposes, the most interesting findings of Morley's research is the remarkably consistent gender patterning in programme choice and in relation to power and control over the viewing process. Summarized, his findings conform so tightly to what might be guessed to be stereotypical masculine and feminine behaviour as to be almost unbelievable. It was a small sample, and we have as yet no comparable data for viewing by groups with different demographic profiles - particularly those living outside the heterosexual family unit.

To summarize - husbands in the sample overwhelmingly speak to themselves as preferring 'factual' programmes - documentary, current affairs, sport. They usually watch more television than their wives, but often regard tv watching as inferior to 'real' leisure activity. They frequently plan the whole evening's viewing in advance, invariably take charge of the remote control device, and prefer to watch in concentrated silence. The wives in the sample rarely watch television without doing something else at the same time. They prefer fiction, old films and serial drama. They rarely plan their evenings viewing, although many had established their right to watch 'their' programme - a soap. If the family had a second set, this was frequently used by the children, where gender breakdown was also visible. Male children tended to get the set, while girls tended to watch with their parents. The video tape recorder was generally used to avoid conflict about programme choice, and in ways which varied with employment patterns. The most obvious point to emerge from this research is that the women in the sample do not generally (and there are exceptions, which Morley argues are systematic) determine what is watched in the home when other family members are present. As one woman puts it,

> "He likes horror films, and I have to watch whatever's going on". (Family 5)

To extrapolate from Morley's research, the social relations between men and women appear to work in such a way that although the men feel ok about imposing their choice of viewing on the whole of the family, the women do not. The women have developed all sorts of strategies to cope with television viewing that they don't particularly like. The men in most cases appear to feel it would be literally unmanning for them to sit quiet during the women's programmes. However, the women in general seem to find it almost impossible to switch into the silent communion with the television set that characterises so much male viewing. Revealingly, they often speak rather longingly of doing this, but it always turns out to require the physical absence of the rest of the family.

Ann Gray's research, which consists of interviews with women alone, was directly focussed on the use of the VCR. She is

partly concerned to investigate the way that the home, in Britain, in a period of recession and rising unemployment, is increasingly becoming the site for leisure, and the differential placing of women and men in relation to this.

Gray's findings complement Morley's, revealing the way in which new technology, as she argues, is understood and used within existing power relations in the home. The context in which people view is variable, and these variations affect the amount and nature of the attention which people give to what they are viewing. There is, for her interviewees, a clear sense of gendered genre, and of appropriate viewing contexts for particular material. Once again, we find women speaking defensively and self-deprecatingly about their choices and preferences.

Specifically, we find that men can watch 'men's films', while women are present, but that the reverse is not the case. The family has generally to be physically absent from the house for the woman to be able to exercise her choice of viewing.

Obviously, all television viewing that involves more than one person involves negotiation and decision making in which various modes of power may be bought into play. I do not wish to use gender as an inevitable and natural category in the way that ironically, some feminist research does. This would, mistakenly, allow us to differentiate a male - fixed, controlling, uninterruptible gaze - and a female - distracted, obscured, already busy - manner of watching television. There is som empirical truth in these characterizations, but to take this empirical truth for explanation leads to a theoretical short-circuit. Instead, it seems we must seek a much less clear cut understanding, holding in play a range of different factors. The most evident of these is that television is a domestic medium - and indeed the male/female differentiation above is very close to the way in which cinema and television have themselves been differentiated (5). Cinema, the audio-visual medium of the public sphere demanding the masculine gaze, while the domestic (feminine) medium is much less demanding, needing

only a intermittent glance. This, given the empirical evidence cited above, offers us an image of male viewers trying to masculinize the domestic sphere. This way of watching television, however, seems not so much a masculine mode, but a mode of power. Current arrangements between men and women make it likely that it is men who will occupy this overt position in the home. Furthermore, as Else Fabricius Jensen and Birgitte Tufte were arguing yesterday, there is a way in which social context always intervenes when we consider women's relation to the mass media (6). A proper inhabiting og feminine subjectivity appears to demand a priveleging of social harmony over textual pleasure.

This raises very specific issues for feminist television studies, which I wish to move on to consider.

II Feminist Television Studies

One history of (British) feminist television criticism would allow us to differentiate three stages, which though distinct, should not be understood as happening in chronological sequence. Initially, attention was focussed on what were seen as the needlessly stereotypical images of women shown on television, particularly in the advertising which was so often addressed to women as housewives.

Two main images of white women (black women hardly appeared in British television in the late 60s and early 70s, and certainly not in advertisements), were isolated as offering the often repeated option/destiny - the houseproud mum and the alluring car Accessory/recipient of gifts. These opposed types, which somehow you were meant to combine in yourself, although seen at their crudest in commercials (and the tabloid press), were repeated with variation, throughout much broadcast output (7). These images are part of the onslaught of definitions of femininity which work to endlessly prescribe it as a subjectivity and social position which is constructed in relation to men/heterosexual masculinity. The feminist critique of these images was a critique that was made on behalf of all women. Feminism took upon

itself a cadre role in relation to women's consciousness, and research was directed at the essential work of documenting the limited modes of women's appearance in the media (8). In the traditions of British cultural criticism, this gendered critique of the media has a good deal in common with some leftist critique of the mass media, in which the pleasures of 'mass culture' are seen as diverting the working class from its historical mission. This position, in turn, in terms of aesthetic evaluation is homologous with a classic high culture position. Both reject trash. These homologies are significant for feminist criticisms, because the trashiest trash has always been located within 'women's genres'. To describe television drama as being 'like soap opera' is to condemn it utterly. Feminist insistence on the difference of women's potential from her current situation often led, in early days to particularly vehement condemnations of the cultural artefacts associated with, and addressed to, traditional femininity. Thus make-up, fashion, women's magazines, romances and soaps were the subject of denunciation. For example, from the bulletin of the Women's Media Action Group:

> "Yes, Crossroads is still with us; patronising, sexist and class prejediced as ever. Just in case you've missed it for the last, say, 400 episodes (and who can blame you), here is a brief run-down on a run-down programme".
>
> Kathleen Marks, 'Soap Opera Episode 1 - English Style:'
> Womens Media Action Bulletin no 22 July Aug 1983 pp 3-4.

This, for tone, almost exactly matches the current British Radio Rentals ad for a videorecorder with an extended play facility:

> "It can take eight hours of Crossroads.
> (If you can)"
>
> Radio Rentals billboard ad. 1985-6.

The necessity to construct feminism as involving a quite different femininity, still crucial for many feminists, was, in some contexts accompanied or followed by a more tolerant attitude to traditional women's genres, and indeed, a perception of their centrality in developing and passing on gender specific knowledge.

It is in relation to the notion of gendered genre that we can understand the second moment of feminist television criticism. One of the ways in which feminist cultural criticism developed in the 70s was to focus attention on the previously neglected skills, materials, rhythms and genres designated as feminine. This is true of both critical and artistic/productive practices (9). In criticism, most relevantly, it meant the revaluation of the genres of family meleodrama and 'weepie' (Women's picture) in Film Studies (10). For literature there was attention to women's magazines and popular romances (11).

For television, soap opera and domestic serials become the focus of a different type of ciritcal attention. The research and criticism in these different fields come to a range of conclusions - my point here is that it is within the turn to this discernible domain of women's genres, whatever the medium, that we begin to find an opposing critical position to that which dominated the 'first' moment of feminist criticism. Trash reconsidered.

In relation to television there is the early (1977) Edinburgh Festival piece by Dyer, Lovell and McCrindle (a part precursor to the later British Film Institute Coronation Street (Monograph), Dorothy Hobson's work on Crossroads, Tania Modleski's work on soaps (and romances), Ellen Seiter's work on soaps (12). The tone of this feminist research, with its cautious defence of women's pleasures, is rather different to that of other, contemporary considerations of popular television, which frequently fail to mention the genre other than disparagingly.

Necessarily, this work on popular women's genres involves the attempt to explicate, or enter imaginatively into, the pleasure of the audience. It is this investigation of a gendered audience which I wish to characterise as a third moment in feminist cultural criticism, which has particular resonances for the study of television. The textual analysis of soap opera, using critical methods developed at least partly in Film Studies, can offer us readings of programmes, and arguments about the subject

positions constructed for the viewer, as well as the cultural and political significance of these positions. However it is only in relation to real historical viewers and audiences that we can discover the significance of these hypotheses. Dorothy Hobson's research has been followed by Ien Ang's analysis of Dallas viewers' letters and Janice Radway's exemplary work with romance readers (13).

This research points repeatedly to the extremely contradictory positions that female viewers seem to occupy in relation to their pleasures. It is important not to focus on gender to the exclusion of other determinants, although it is women viewers that I wish to concentrate on. However the apologetic, self-deprecating account many women give of their tastes, can it seems, be best understood as involving the articulation of very common ideas of what is 'good' and what is 'trash' in which there are quite complicated structuring national, class, ethnic and gender ideologies. Thus Ang's account of the ideology of 'popular culture', which has a quite strong element of anti-Americanism in it has obvious parallels with British attitudes North to American culture. North American formations will obviously be slightly different. Similarly, Radway's romance readers frequently invoke reading per se as a culturally valuable activity (not a gendered argument) to defend the gendered activity of reading romances. The double-bind for women is that 'women's genres' always come out bottom, whichever set of arguments are in play. There is no vocabulary, no eleaborated discourse with social legitimacy, to which a woman can have recourse when trying to explain her pleasure in one of these despised genres. Any of the more established arguments for the defence of popular culture, which anyway have a mainly academic currency, treacherously abandon the arguer when it comes to these texts. So running all through this work with 'real' audiences, up to and including Gray and Morley, we have the repeated voices of women devaluing their own preferences, undercutting their own pleasures.

These formations, and the accepted cultural hierarchy where a shoot-out is more significant than a kiss, have particular resonances in relation to television. Radway gives considerable attention to the animosity that husbands feel towards their wives reading romances. She also points to the significance, for the women concerned, of the withdrawal from the domestic sphere which is signalled by the act of taking up a book. Watching television is a very different sort of activity. In contrast to reading a book, to sit in front of a television in the living room, unless you have the power to control what happens in the room, is to render yourself, precisely, interruptible. The object of your gaze is available to others. There is here no privacy of pleasure - as Sean Cubitt has observed in relation to Top of the Pops, you are, when enjoying something on television, most vulnerable to adverse comment on your taste (14).

Everyone knows it is no fun to have to keep saying 'Ssshh'. It is often more pleasant to have no investment in what you are watching than to have to spend all that potential libidinal energy in constructing, and defending, the space to concentrate. The documented tastes of most women viewers lend another dimension to this. Women in general seem to prefer fictional drama that is mainly located within 'personal life'. In Ang's, Radway's and Morley's and Gray's work there is reference to the pleasure of a good cry. This pleasure is a solitary pleasure, or a pleasure that can only be experienced in the company of those who do not make you feel ashamed. Who do not, compulsively, culturally, have to reject the 'soft' the 'soppy', wet Women's stuff.

We thus have a series of factors working to overdetermine the position of women as viewers in the familial context. And these are of course, very culturally specific observations. Research done in North America, where it is more common for a family to have more than one set would produce different patterns. Similarly the behaviour of women in all-women households might illuminate our understandings of the relationship

between conventional femininities and power. However, given all these qualifications, it still seems possible, and of interest, to observe that women are at least doubly vulnerable to 'symbolic annihilation' as viewers. Even if they manage the first fence of programme choice, they are likely to fall at the second the pleasure of viewing, for what they are likely to want to watch will be something that masculinity is necessarily defined against.

We have, I think, two ironies for feminist television research. The first is that when we finally get around to real viewers in family contexts we find that woman is an extremely attenuated figure. The second is that at the same moment that feminist criticism discovers gendered genres, the programmes companies necessity to maximise audiences leads to their corruption, so that we have soaps, like Brookside and East Enders which make a clear bid for men and the youth audience, and crime series, like Cagney and Lacey, C.A.T.S. Eyes, Bulman and Widows which make a clear bid for a women's - even feminist audience.

FOOTNOTES

(1) Gillian Skirrow discusses Widows very interestingly in her essay in Made for Television (ed.) Manuel Alvarado and John Stewart, London, The British Film Institute: 1985, pp 174 - 184.

(2) Ann Gray, 'Women and Video: Subject - Text - Context', unpublished paper.
Ann Gray, 'Women's Work and Boys' Toys', paper presented to the 2nd International Television Studies Conference, London, July 1986. D.G. Morley, Family Television London: Comedia, 1986.

(3) Tania Modleski, Loving with a Vengeance Hamden, Connecticut: The Shoestring Press: 1982.
Dorothy Hobson Crossroads: The Drama of a Soap Opera London: Methuen, 1982.
Sandy Flitterman, 'The Real Soap Operas: TV Commercials', in E. Ann Kaplan (ed) Regarding Television Los Angeles, American Film Institute 1983, pp 81-96.

(4) Richard Paterson usefully discusses scheduling in 'Planning the Family', Screen Education 35 1980, pp 79-86.

(5) John Ellis compares modes of watching cinema and television in Visible Fictions London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982.

(6) See this volume.

(7) See Butcher, Coward et al., 'Images of Women in the Media', Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies Stencilled Occasional Paper, 1974.

(8) Ibid, and also, Josephine King and Mary Stott (eds) Is This Your Life? Images of Women in the Media London: Virago, 1977. An early North American account is Gaye Tuchman, A.K. Daniels, J. Benet (ed) Hearth and Home Images of Women in the Mass Media New York: Oxford University Press, 1978.

(9) See for example, Mary Kelly's work, best known through Post-Partum Document, Rozsika. Parker's history of embroidery, The Subversive Stitch London: The Women's Press, 1984 and The Dinner Party.

(10) Christine Gledhill (ed) Women and Melodrama London: British Film Institute, 1987, collects many of the significant contributions to this debate.

(11) Michele Mattelart, Women Media Crisis London: Comedia 1986.
Janice Winship, Inside Women's Magazines London: Pandora 1987.
Rachel Anderson, The Purple Heart Throbs: The Sub-Literature of Love London: Hodder and Stoughton 1974.
Rachel M Brownstein Becoming a Heroine New York: The Viking Press, 1982, and Modleski op.cit.
Angela McRobbie, Jackie: An Ideology of Adolescent Femininity' in Popular Culture: Past and Present (ed) B Waites, T Bennett and G Martin, London and Milton Keynes: Croom Helm and the Open University Press, 1982, pp 263 - 283.

(12) Dyer, Lovel and McCrindle, 'Soap opera and women', Edingburgh International Television Festival Programme, 1977.

Richard Dyer, Christine Geraghty et al, Coronation Street Television Monograph 13, London: British Film Institute, 1981.
Hobson, opcit. Modleski op cit. Ellen Seiter, 'Promise and Contradiction: The Daytime Serials' in Film Reader 5 Evanston Illinois: 1982, pp 150 - 163.

(13) Ien Ang Watching Dallas London: Methuen 1986. Janice A. Radway, Reading the Romance Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1984.

(14) Sean Cubitt, 'Top of the Pops - The Politics of the Living Room', in Television Mythologies (ed) Len Masterman, London: Comedia, 1984, pp 46 - 48.

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The Feminist Paradigm in Historical Perspective

By Gertrude Joch Robinson

Danish Summary: Robinson beskæftiger sig i sin artikel med den historiske betydning af det feministiske perspektiv på socialvidenskaberne og på kommunikationsforskningen i særdeleshed. Hendes artikel beskæftiger sig med de herskende intellektuelle paradigmer i den sociologiske videnskab og hvilke implikationer de har haft på studiet af kvinders forhold og hvorledes disse paradigmer hænger sammen med og understøtter herskende politiske og ideologiske forhold i samfundet.

I artiklen gennemgår hun de vigtigste traditioner eller paradigmer, som har præget sociologiske undersøgelser af kvinder de sidste 25 år: Konservatismen, feminismen, marxismen og hertil føjer hun en fjerde tradition, som hun kalder "Det symbolske perspektiv".

Den konservative eller funktionalistiske tradition er repræsenteret ved bl.a. Lazarsfeld, Berelson & Gaudet, som i fyrrerne undersøgte kvinders forbrugsadfærd og antog at kønnet var en irrelevant faktor i denne sammenhæng. Den funktionalistiske socialvidenskab anser kønsdifferentieringen i samfundet for at være den "naturlige" basis for forskellige typer af sociale relationer. Svagheden ved denne tilgang er, som Robinson påpeger mange