

Television Literacy: A Critique

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The term 'television literacy' has been increasingly widely used in recent years, both by researchers investigating the relationship between children and television and by educationalists arguing for the formal study of the medium in schools. This paper discusses some of the theoretical issues which are at stake in the basic analogy between television and written language, and argues the case for a social theory of television literacy.

I Television literacy: educational theory and practice

There are a number of parallels between the recurrent waves of concern which greet the advent of new communication technologies and those which focus on the alleged decline in standards of literacy. 'Moral panics' about the effects of television on children are at least partly motivated by a perceived sense of social crisis: television, like many other new cultural forms which preceded it, can function as a reassuringly simple explanation for a whole range of social ills. While the evidence of any causal connection between television and, for example, a growth in juvenile crime or the demise of the traditional nuclear family may be exceedingly flimsy, the medium can nevertheless serve as a convenient scapegoat onto which more complex anxieties can be displaced.

The so-called 'literacy crisis' which has been perceived in many countries over the past twenty years could also be seen as the vehicle for broader concerns about changing social values. Certainly, the evidence for such a crisis is far from persuasive. Historical research suggests that what has changed is not so much the level of literacy among the general population, but the standards which are used to measure it: criteria which were formerly applied to limited elites are now being extended to apply to whole populations, although educational methods to ensure this extension of literacy have yet to be fully developed (Resnick and Resnick, 1977). Despite the arguments of traditionalists, there are really no 'basics' to go back to.

Coe (1986) has argued that the 'back-to-basics' movement is primarily an attempt to adjust the educational subsystem to new economic realities, and in particular the increasingly hierarchical restructuring of white-collar work. In this respect, he suggests, a 'literacy crisis' can serve to tighten the constraints within which social power and status are distributed, and to reassert conformity to established values: while grammar drills may be less than effective in teaching students to read and write, they have a clear function in terms of socialisation (cf. Pattison, 1982).

The development of television literacy curricula in schools, particularly in the United States, could be seen as a parallel response to a perceived social and moral crisis. Most advocates

of these curricula begin by assuming that television is 'a serious social problem' (Abelman, 1983): it is 'an illness', and it must be treated (Lull, 1981). Television, it is argued, exerts an extremely powerful, and predominantly negative influence, particularly on children: it is held to be 'addictive', harmful to mental health and personal relationships, and a cause of social unrest and disintegration (e.g. Singer et al., 1980).

The role of educators in this context is essentially to defend those who are believed to be less capable of defending themselves. Embedded in their recommendations are prescriptions about styles of 'critical viewing' which are highly normative and often implicitly moralistic. The ultimate aim of most television literacy curricula is to encourage children to police their own viewing behaviour – if not by reducing the amount of television they watch, then at least by watching it in ways which are assumed to minimise its influence.

A representative illustration of this approach may be found in a book entitled *The New Literacy: The Language of Film and Television*, by Harold Foster (1979). Like most exponents of television literacy, Foster argues that the media are primarily instruments of propaganda and mass persuasion. According to Foster, the 'power of the viewing experience' derives from the fact that it 'bypasses the intellect', 'hypnotising' viewers and on occasion causing them to commit violent acts. The fundamental aim of teaching about the media is to enable children to exert rational control over this process, and thereby to help them 'protect themselves against this powerful, primary emotional response'. 'Visual literacy', in Foster's terms, involves an understanding of the 'structural devices' which film makers use to create a 'realistic facade' and thereby to mislead and manipulate audiences.

This example illustrates three central issues which are raised by much of the work I shall discuss in this section. The first of these concerns its model of the relationship between children and television. Ultimately, children are seen here as simply the passive victims of a process of emotional manipulation over which they have no logical control. Foster in fact collapses film and television together, although nearly all his detailed examples are taken from mainstream Hollywood films, and he fails to acknowledge the very different conditions of television viewing, or the differences between the 'languages' of the two media (cf. Ellis, 1982). Yet even if we confine the argument to film, the notion that viewing 'bypasses the intellect' and is primarily 'emotional' is certainly open to question (cf. Bordwell, 1985), as is the underlying opposition between 'emotional' and 'rational' responses.

The second issue which is raised by this account follows inexorably from the first, and concerns the role of education in intervening in this process. Foster's argument that a study of the devices used by film makers will help children 'to protect them-

selves' and 'to resist media influence and manipulation' begs many questions about the purpose and the effectiveness of such strategies. Can one necessarily assume that viewers are unaware of such 'manipulation', and thus in need of protection? To what extent is the 'rational' awareness of the protective teacher preferable to children's 'spontaneous' emotional responses, even assuming that such a distinction is possible? Does 'rational' control necessarily enable viewers to 'resist media influence'? Even if 'resistance' or 'protection' is one's primary aim, is it not possible to achieve this by acknowledging 'emotional' pleasures, rather than seeking merely to repress them?

The final issue I wish to raise here is that of the definition of television literacy itself. Foster consistently refers to television and film as forms of 'visual language', in which single images are seen as discrete units analogous to words. Television 'language' is defined in terms of an abstract grammatical model – an approach which implies that images can be lifted out of context, and assigned standard 'dictionary' meanings to which all would agree. It is assumed that this study of the elements of 'television language' and of the technical processes of television production will serve to 'debunk' the medium, and thereby lessen its negative impact.

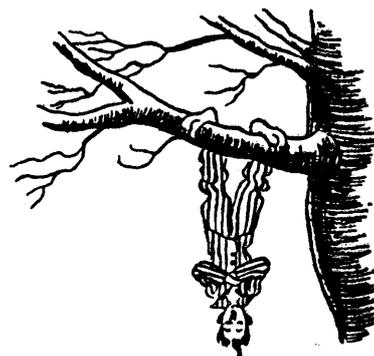
Foster's book is published by the US National Council of Teachers of English, and his recommendations for classroom strategies are specifically addressed to teachers of 'language arts'. Yet the difference between his definition of the aims of media literacy teaching and those of dominant approaches to teaching print literacy are clearly substantial, both in terms of the underlying assumptions about the relationship between readers and texts, and in terms of the way the intervention of teachers is presumed to alter this. How often does one read English teachers arguing for the importance of rational analysis as a means of protecting children against the powerful emotional manipulation exerted by literature? Ultimately, the outwardly neutral notion of 'literacy' which is being applied here is based on a series of fundamental value judgements about television and its role in children's lives.

The work of James Anderson, himself a major exponent of television literacy curricula, offers a valuable critical overview in the field in the United States, which provides further instances of the problems I have addressed above. Anderson (1980, 1983) identifies a range of different theoretical paradigms which inform such curricula, although in practice these tend to overlap. Predominant amongst them are what Anderson terms the 'impact mediation' and the 'goal attainment' approaches. The notion of 'impact mediation' derives from the tradition of experimental 'effects' research: it presumes that television exerts direct behavioural effects on viewers, and that intervention can reduce its impact. Curricula based on this approach typically focus on 'problem areas' such as violent content, advertising and 'television addiction', and are primarily designed to counteract television's 'negative' or 'anti-social' influence. The 'goal attainment' approach derives from the 'uses and gratifications' paradigm in mass communication research: the assumption here is that individuals use the media in purposeful ways in order to achieve specific goals or gratifications. According to Anderson, 'goal attainment' curricula work in three stages: firstly, helping students to analyse their motives for viewing; secondly, encouraging them to evaluate their use of television in terms of its ability to fulfil or gratify those motives; and finally, providing practice in the process of making decisions about media use.

While these two approaches might outwardly appear quite different, they share a number of basic assumptions about the relationship between children and television, which ultimately derive more from the 'effects' paradigm than from 'uses and gratifications' research. Both presume that television exerts a

direct influence which is primarily negative or anti-social, and that children need to be protected from it. The difference is essentially one of strategy, rather than overall aims: while the 'impact mediation' approach seeks to protect children, for example by encouraging them to reduce the amount of television they watch, the 'goal attainment' approach is designed to enable children to protect themselves, by becoming their own 'critical censors' (Ashton, 1981).

As Marsha Jones (1984) has argued, both approaches start from the basic assumption that 'too much' television is 'bad' for children. Children are deemed to be 'unsophisticated' viewers who typically fail to understand or evaluate what they watch, and who are therefore in need of 'adult assistance' (Corder-Bolz, 1980). They are 'passive' viewers who need to be made 'active' (Finn, 1980). They have to be taught to discriminate, to be 'critical' and selective, since they are incapable of doing this for themselves. The idea that children may be as 'active' and selective as adults, or that they may have their own critical criteria which they apply to the medium, is clearly rejected. The fundamental aim of most television literacy curricula is thus to disengage students from their unhealthy preoccupation with the medium, and to encourage a sceptical and suspicious approach to the false pleasures which it affords. The basic strategy is one of inducing guilt, and thereby seeking to 'save children from television'.



As Anderson (1983) argues, the underlying assumption here is that 'it is better to reason as an adult than as a child': rather than using the meanings and pleasures which children derive from the medium as a guide to teaching, it is particular adult definitions of 'content' and adult concepts of productivity and gratification which are accepted as the norm. 'Rational', empiricist approaches are used to identify the literal meanings which reside in the message, and to distinguish 'false' representations or arguments from 'realistic' or correct ones. Despite the apparent neutrality of the 'uses and gratifications' approach – in which 'gratifications' are to be objectively matched against 'uses' – there are implicit moral standards which are used to identify 'acceptable' gratifications from television viewing, and to discourage 'unacceptable' ones.

Similar criticisms could be made of the 'receivership skills' approach which informs television literacy curricula. The characteristics of the kind of 'critical viewing' which is the aim of the curricula are typically stated in terms of a taxonomy of 'skills', which are then operationalised in the form of behavioural objectives (e.g. Dorr et al., 1980; Lloyd-Kolkin et al., 1980). Yet on closer examination, many of the 'skills' which are specified are far from being as neutral as this term would imply. As Corder-Bolz (1982) argues, many of the 'critical evaluation skills' which are identified are more accurately seen as personal dispositions

or attitudes: to choose a couple of examples he cites, it is certainly difficult to regard the 'tendency to find television content fabricated and inaccurate' or to make 'less positive evaluations of television content' as 'skills' in any meaningful sense of the word. Again, what is clearly being offered here, under the neutral guise of 'skills', is a normative, value-laden definition of what constitutes 'literate' viewing behaviour.

Nevertheless, this emphasis on skills typically leads to highly mechanistic forms of 'instruction' which are very similar to those advocated by the 'back-to-basics' approach to teaching reading and writing. Literacy is regarded here as 'the sum of a set of precisely specifiable subskills' which can be broken down into sequential hierarchies (de Castell, Luke and MacLennan, 1986). The standardised instructional systems which proceed from this definition focus on the transmission of skills which can be readily and 'objectively' measured: simple, quantitative indices of 'effectiveness' then become an essential part of educational self-justification. This technocratic approach inevitably tends to ignore 'higher-order' or metalinguistic competencies, and the social and pragmatic contexts within which literacy is acquired and used: literacy is defined as 'a context-neutral, content-free, skill-specific competence that can be imparted to children with almost scientific precision' (de Castell and Luke, 1986).

These mechanistic approaches would also appear to pervade the instructional manuals which are used in television literacy curricula. Anderson (1983) points to the predominance of what he calls 'categorical description': 'the largest share of classroom activities is involved with the development and explication of classification schemes and the identification of content to fit those schemes.' It is assumed that symbols or images 'contain' meanings which can be objectively specified, and that the process of recovering these meanings can be atomised into its 'logical' components, which are then taught in sequence. As Richard Eke (1986) has argued, this approach presumes that children will build up understandings in the same way as teachers break them down. Furthermore, it clearly ignores the ways in which meanings are constructed by viewers, and the diverse social knowledge they employ in doing so.

One of the major problems Anderson identifies here is the failure of television literacy curricula to acknowledge the 'pragmatics' of children's television viewing behaviour – that is, of the everyday social contexts in which 'critical viewing' is to occur. Thus, most of the curricula which adopt the 'goal attainment' approach seek to encourage students to make 'rational' choices about their viewing behaviour, and to devise 'personal management strategies' to regulate their selection of viewing. In certain instances (e.g. Ploghoft and Anderson, 1982), elaborate monitoring schemes are provided in order to enable students to categorise their motivations for viewing, the reasons for their viewing preferences, and the changes in 'energy level' or 'emotional state' which occur as a result.

As with the 'uses and gratifications' research on which it is based, this approach presumes that television viewing is 'normally' a purposive activity, which is essentially a matter of



individual choice. Yet as Elliott (1974) has argued, this crucially ignores the social context of media use: the reasons why people watch particular programmes may be as much to do with a lack of functional alternatives as with active, conscious choice – particularly for children, whose lack of power and economic resources means that their choices are significantly more constrained than adults. At the very least, this implies that children's stated motivations and preferences will not always act as an adequate guide to their viewing behaviour.

Perhaps as a result of this, evaluations of television literacy curricula have signally failed to demonstrate their effectiveness in promoting 'literate' or 'critical' viewing *outside* the classroom context. Evaluations typically follow a standardised input-output model, using multiple-choice tests to assess whether children have retained specific pieces of information contained within the instructional units themselves (e.g. Singer et al., 1980): while such an approach can certainly provide a good measure of children's ability to regurgitate the content teachers have fed them, it can hardly be said to measure more general learning of skills or concepts.

Ultimately, the fundamental problem which underlies such work is the definition of literacy which it employs. Many advocates of television literacy offer general definitions which appear at first sight to be impossibly broad: Anderson (1981a), for example, defines media literacy as 'the skillful collection, interpretation, testing and application of information regardless of medium or presentation for some purposeful action'. In other cases, such definitions are merely tautologous: 'more literate individuals possess more sophisticated strategies for interpreting stimuli while the reverse is true of those who are not so skilled' (Baron, 1985, p. 49). Yet on closer inspection even these definitions embody norms and theoretical assumptions which are at least contentious. Television, and the media more broadly, are seen as sources of 'stimuli' or 'information', which somehow exists independently of those who perceive it. Viewers are seen as individual 'consumers of information', with predetermined motives and purposes (Anderson, 1981a). Making sense of television is regarded as a form of 'data processing', which involves a regulated sequence of cognitive strategies. Individual viewers can be judged more or less 'skillful' or 'sophisticated' in performing these activities, according to agreed 'objective' criteria; and the 'effects' of communication can be controlled by 'modifying the assimilation and analytical skills of the receiver' (ibid.).

In several respects, then, literacy is implicitly regarded here as a set of competencies which can be objectively defined. Each medium is seen to have its own specific grammar or syntax – that is, a set of objective rules which enable it to generate meaning. The extent to which individuals are seen to 'possess' these competencies can thus be measured by their grasp of these rules and meanings. The definition of literacy which obtains here is fundamentally blind to the diverse social contexts in which these competencies are acquired and used, and the diverse forms of social and cultural knowledge which are involved in producing meaning. In short, it is a definition which fails to acknowledge that literacy is inevitably a form of social practice.

Before proceeding to a more extended discussion of these broader theoretical issues, it is worth noting some significant differences and similarities between the work I have so far described and that which is characteristic of media education in Britain. Perhaps what is most immediately striking to a British reader about this work is its apparent lack of explicit *political* motivation. If the theoretical orientation of these curricula derives primarily from the 'effects' and 'uses and gratifications' paradigms, that of media education in this country is mainly informed by 'critical' research on the ideological role of the media. From a 'critical' perspective, the 'uses and gratifications'

approach appears fundamentally individualistic: it is more concerned with enabling students to adapt to their environment, rather than encouraging them to change it – and in this sense, it clearly does have a ‘hidden’ political agenda.

It is for this reason that James Lull (1981) attacks the notion of ‘receivership skills’ which is a central aspect of US television literacy curricula. Lull shares the view of television as a ‘social problem’ which characterises much of this work, but argues that it must be treated ‘organically’ – that is, as a problem which is essentially caused by capitalism. The notion of ‘receivership skills’, he suggests, sound too much like that of ‘good citizenship’: it presumes that it is up to the ‘good little citizen’ to deal with the problems of television, rather than seeking to upset the status quo which is responsible for them.



Whether or not one shares his view of television as a ‘social problem’, Lull’s argument points to a number of important limitations in the broad aims of television literacy curricula. As he indicates, many such curricula fail to address central questions about the economic structure of broadcasting, and the political factors which determine the kinds of programmes which are made. Indeed, it could be argued that in many respects, educators are seeking to treat the symptoms rather than the causes of the problems which concern them: attempting to disabuse students of their ‘consumerism’ by teaching them about the misleading claims of television advertising would seem to be attacking the ‘problem’ from the wrong direction, and according television a degree of power which it almost certainly does not possess.

Despite these criticisms, the notion of television literacy is one which has become increasingly popular in Britain, at least partly for the kind of pragmatic reasons which apply in the North American context. Moves to develop media education in the primary sector and ‘across the curriculum’ in secondary schools have particularly relied on the notion of literacy as a means of arguing for recognition.

Nevertheless, the crucial question here concerns the definition of language and literacy which is being invoked. Certainly, insofar as media educators in Britain have used such terms, they have tended to define them in much more explicitly ideological and political terms. Language is seen here, not as a neutral vehicle for communicating pre-existing meanings, but on the contrary as a social, historical phenomenon which crucially determines the meanings it is possible to produce. Language, it is

argued, cannot be seen independently of the power-relationships which it embodies and sustains: to teach about the ‘language’ of television without teaching about the institutions which produce it is inevitably to treat that language as ‘natural’ and unchangeable (Buckingham, 1989).

Nevertheless, a good deal of classroom practice in media education is based on a form of ideological analysis derived from elementary semiotics – an approach which can easily lapse into a view of language as a set of abstract codes and conventions which can be taught and learnt in a structured sequence (e.g. Bethell, 1981). As I have argued elsewhere (Buckingham, 1986), the dominant approach to media teaching in Britain implicitly presumes that children are passive ‘uncritical’ viewers in need of ideological inoculation or ‘demystification’ (Masterman, 1985). It seeks to disabuse children of the ‘false’ beliefs they acquire from the media by providing them with a kit of analytical skills and critical concepts handed down from academic work. Such an approach is dangerously theoreticist, and in practice often adopts a schematic, mechanistic pedagogy which has much in common with that of technocratic ‘literacy instruction’.

II Is television a language?

The notion of television literacy clearly rests on a prior assumption that television can be regarded as a language – one which is, at least in some significant respects, analogous to written language. Yet while such analogies may appear superficially attractive, they may also lead one to ignore essential differences and distinctions. In this instance, the value of the analogy crucially depends upon what we regard as the ‘essential’ features of language – and ultimately upon how we define language itself.

One might begin by suggesting a number of broad similarities between the two media. Both television and written language are forms of communication: they are both methods of conveying or signifying meaning, which are used in different ways by different social agents in different social and cultural contexts. Both depend upon a degree of shared understanding between their users, which is learned rather than innate. Both are in a constant state of historical change and evolution.

In a sense, these statements are too general to be of much use: and yet they are already contentious. There are no ‘facts’ about language which are not already derived from theories – despite the recent arguments of Kenneth Baker! Certainly when one seeks to extend the analogy beyond the kind of generalities I have offered here, these difficulties become even more acute.

There have been a number of attempts to develop analogies between verbal language and the ‘symbolic systems’ of the visual arts, and to use these as a basis for teaching. Advocates of ‘iconics’, for example, have argued that visual language can be regarded as a kind of ‘alphabet’, from which basic minimal units (‘graphemes’) combine to form larger meaningful ones (‘iconemes’), which in turn lead on to visual ‘syntagms’, or statements (Cossette, 1982).

Similarly, the approach to ‘visual literacy’ pioneered by Dondis (1973) presumes that visual language can be reduced to its constituent parts, which may then be taught in sequence. While Dondis acknowledges that the symbolic system of the visual arts is not a ‘logical whole’ like that of verbal language, he does assert that it has a syntax, a set of ‘guidelines for constructing compositions’, which can be explicitly taught, and can thereby lead to ‘clearer comprehension of visual messages’. Dondis’ symptomatically-titled *Primer of Visual Literacy* reduces this ‘basic perceptual system’ to its smallest elements, or what it terms the ‘tool box’ of visual communication (dot, line,

colour, texture, and so on): these elements may then be combined according to a series of polar opposites, which derive from the fundamental ones of contrast and harmony (balance/instability, repose/stress, roundness/angularity, and so on). This method effectively seeks to provide an analytical 'phonics' approach to teaching the visual arts which has much in common with the technocratic approach to literacy instruction I have already described.

Work on cognition in the visual arts has also explored this analogy, although from a less mechanistic perspective. Thus, it is argued that, while pictorial systems may not possess a formal syntax (Goodman, 1968), the perceptual processes which are involved in 'reading' images and written texts are more similar than conventional wisdom tends to suggest (Luke, 1985). The idea that reading print is a sequential process of 'decoding' word by word, or even letter by letter, whereas the perception of images is holistic and instantaneous, is not borne out by research (Kolers, 1977). The 'skilled' reading of print need not preserve the syntax of the words on the page: on the contrary, as one gains experience of written texts, reading is guided more by 'top down' processes of inference and prediction, by the information and experience which the reader brings to the text rather than by the sequential processing of signs (Smith, 1973). Likewise, the processes by which viewers 'read' images are guided by the search for meaning, by attention to their semantic dimension, rather than simply by the mechanical 'decoding' of their constituent parts.

Nevertheless, theories of 'visual language' have also acknowledged basic distinctions between visual and linguistic systems, which are often seen in terms of the differences between 'analogic' and 'digital' codes. Pierce (1940), for example, distinguishes between iconic, indexical and symbolic signs: while film, for example, employs primarily iconic and indexical signs, verbal language is more strictly symbolic (Wollen, 1971). Goodman (1968), however, rejects the notion of 'resemblance' or visual 'analogy' on which the theory of the 'iconic' sign is based: resemblance, he argues, is not an inherent property of the sign, but a judgement about the sign, a quality which the perceiver attributes to it.

In place of the analogic/digital distinction, Goodman proposes three different types of codes, which possess different syntactic structures: notations, languages and representational systems. The key distinction for our purpose here is between languages and representational systems. In the case of languages, Goodman argues, there are a finite number of basic syntactic elements (phonemes or morphemes) which can be distinguished from each other unambiguously: the same is not the case with representational systems, where the relationship between signs and referents is thus inevitably more ambiguous. As Salomon (1979) argues, this has significant implications in terms of cognition: different symbolic systems will require different forms of internal representation – a picture of a dog will 'make sense' in a very different way from the word 'dog'.

One of the most sustained and rigorous attempts to develop the analogy between audio-visual languages and verbal language is in the field of film theory, and in particular in the work of Christian Metz. What is particularly notable about Metz's work in terms of the concerns of this paper is the way in which his pursuit of the film language analogy leads to a series of major shifts in the basic theoretical model of language he employs.

Metz's early work (1974a) amply illustrates the difficulties which arise when the film language analogy is pursued in detail. Indeed, Metz begins by refuting the literal use of this analogy which he detects in early theories of 'film grammar', and in the Russian theorists of montage – the notion that films can be constructed and analysed according to strict correspondences be-

tween the shot and the word, the sequence and the sentence, and so on (e.g. Podovkin, 1960). Like Goodman, Metz argues that there are no basic, clearly distinguishable syntactic elements in film which are analogous to phonemes or morphemes in language, and that as a result it is impossible to distinguish between primary and secondary articulation in film. The language of cinema, Metz argues, is 'flexible, never predetermined': it is 'a rich message with a poor code, or a rich text with a poor system', which is closer to speech than written language.

Using the classic Saussurean distinction, Metz ultimately concludes that film is a language (langage), but one which does not possess an underlying language system (langue) – that is, a 'code' or 'grammar' (cf. Barthes, 1977). Film does not possess what Metz defines as the three central characteristics of language: it is a one-way form of communication, rather than a form of 'intercommunication'; it is only partly a system; and its images are mainly analogical, rather than 'arbitrary, conventional and codified' like 'true signs' (Metz, 1974a). As a result, he suggests, the attempt to base a semiotics of the cinema on its 'small' elements (its phonemes or morphemes) is doomed to failure: these specific units will only be displayed once one reaches the level of fairly 'large' elements – although the question of how one differentiates between 'small' and 'large' elements is not one Metz himself resolves.

Following this logic, Metz went on to pursue the film language analogy on a broader level, in his attempt to identify the codes which govern the syntactic combination or ordering of images (Metz, 1974a). Yet in several respects, Metz's 'grande syntagmatique' (large-scale syntagmatics) runs into the same difficulties as the attempts to identify film language on the level of single images. Again using a Saussurean approach, Metz constructs a taxonomy of eight different combinations, which is based on a series of binary oppositions. Yet as subsequent critics have argued, the distinctions between these different categories



are less fixed than Metz would lead us to believe, particularly when one seeks to apply the system to films which fall outside what he arbitrarily designates as 'classical narrative cinema' (Daniel, 1976). In certain instances, for example where there is a series of syntagms of the same type, there is no logical method of telling where each one ends and the next begins. Perhaps most crucially, however, many of the key distinctions on which the system is based are not purely 'formal', but derive from a prior sense of their *meaning*. As Metz himself acknowledges, one understands the syntax because one has understood the film, and

not vice-versa: on a historical level, 'it is not because the cinema is language that it has told such fine stories, but rather it has become language because it has told such fine stories' (1974a, p. 47).

Metz's use of the film language analogy is both careful and tentative: each of his major arguments would appear to have undergone major revisions as his work progressed – a fact which at least some critics of his early work tend to ignore. Nevertheless, critics such as Abramson (1976) and Nichols (1976) do usefully point to some of the limitations of his approach, and in particular to the tendency to ignore elements such as 'style' and *mise-en-scène* which are not easily accounted for in terms of digital or linguistic codes. Furthermore, they argue that the use of categories derived from structural linguistics is often misleading: film simply does not possess equivalents to many basic properties of language, such as tenses and negatives. Nichols asserts that there is no such thing as an 'ungrammatical' statement in film, or an abstract standard which can be used to distinguish 'correct' from 'incorrect' utterances – thus effectively refuting the idea that film possesses a syntax, and by implication the notion of film language itself.

Certainly, one of the major problems with Metz's 'grande syntagmatique' was its failure to account for other aspects of signification within film: and in developing the film language analogy beyond this point, Metz (1974b) acknowledges the fact that cinema uses a diversity of codes, which together constitute the specificity of the medium. Thus, as well as 'iconic' codes, there are also auditory codes, and codes which govern the combination of images and sounds. Within this revised perspective, cinema comes to be seen as a meeting place of multiple codes (cf. Kjørup, 1977), which interact to produce the overall language system. Meaning can no longer be seen as immanent in the text, but rather as constantly displaced in the ongoing, dynamic conflict between codes. However, Metz does not fully specify the relationship between these different codes: it may be, as Kjørup (1977) argues, that some codes are more 'basic' than others, and thereby serve to 'elucidate' more complex codes, but this process is difficult to formalise.

However, it is at this point that the language analogy – or, more precisely, the application of Saussurean linguistics to film – begins to break down. Metz (1974b) implies that the Saussurean distinction between 'langue' and 'parole' may itself be artificial, even in the case of verbal language: by abstracting a language system from the diversity of individual utterances, the analyst risks reducing the dynamic complexity of language use to a fixed set of grammatical rules. The decision to include or exclude particular elements from consideration as valid components of 'langue' inevitably depends upon prior judgements as to what is or is not meaningful: to exclude aspects of 'parole' such as accent or intonation, for example, is to rule out major aspects of the social *pragmatics* of language.

Despite the potential advantages of the model of language which begins to emerge at this point in Metz's work (Metz, 1974b), his subsequent writing in my view largely evades the questions it arises. The shift away from Saussurean linguistics leads not towards a social theory of language, but towards a psychoanalytic model which, despite claims for its 'materialist' status (Coward and Ellis, 1977), appears in practice to be as idealist as the theory it replaces. As a result, many of the basic problems of the film language analogy remain.

One aspect of Metz's later theory which illustrates this is the distinction between 'story' (*histoire*) and 'discourse' which he derives from the work of Benveniste (Metz, 1982). Both story and discourse are forms of linguistic enunciation: but whereas discourse always contains markers of the source of its enunciation (for example, by the use of pronouns such as 'I' and 'you'),

the story form attempts to suppress these. In psychoanalytic terms, while both story and discourse are forms of 'voyeurism', story attempts to suppress the awareness of 'exhibitionism': the spectator is permitted to look, but is allowed to feel that (s)he is 'catching something unawares'. According to Metz and others, dominant or 'classical' realist cinema falls into the category of story: specific discourses (for example, those of characters within the film) are present, but they are framed within a narrative 'metalanguage' which offers itself as invisible or 'unspoken' (MacCabe, 1974).

Nevertheless, the application of this distinction to film is far from unproblematic. As Nowell-Smith (1976) argues, film cannot totally succeed in presenting itself as story: at the very least, it offers shifting patterns of secondary identifications which potentially disrupt the relationship of 'pure specularity' which is offered by the metalanguage of narrative. Furthermore, as Bordwell (1985) indicates, it is difficult to see how Benveniste's linguistic categories could ever be applied to film – for example, how we would distinguish between first-person and second-person discourse, or between the utterance (*énoncé*) and the act of enunciation (*énonciation*). In a sense, the problem Bordwell identifies is similar to Metz's earlier difficulty in identifying the 'small' syntactic units (the phonemes or morphemes) which make up film language. While it may have a certain metaphorical validity, the linguistic analogy simply does not hold when one attempts to apply it at the 'micro' level of specific textual features. Ultimately, Bordwell argues that film lacks equivalents for most basic aspects of verbal language, and that as a result, the 'enunciation account' (that is, the film language analogy) should be abandoned.

A further problem here arises from the fact that the psychoanalytic model of the spectator which Metz develops in relation to film is significantly less applicable to television: the basic 'apparatus' of television is different in several important respects. Thus, as Ellis (1982) has argued, the act of watching television is characterised by the 'glance' rather than the 'gaze' which is demanded by film. Far from being 'transfixed' in the darkened space of the cinema, the television viewer is typically located in the home: watching television is a social activity, which requires only partial attention and takes up much less of the viewer's visual field. Much of the basic visual rhetoric of film which is central to psychoanalytic theories – the shot/reverse shot, for example – does not function as consistently, or in the same way, in television (Flitterman-Lewis, 1987). In a sense, the 'implied spectator' of television is already a social subject, rather than the 'pre-Oedipal' subject Metz argues is addressed by film (Feuer, 1986). Nevertheless, there is a significant danger here of erecting monolithic definitions of the 'essential' qualities of film and television spectatorship – a danger particularly exemplified by Ellis's work.

Ultimately, what is lacking in both psychoanalytic and structuralist versions of the film language analogy is a means of accounting for the social and cultural diversity of language use. Both offer an historical, asocial account of language: language is seen either as an abstract system of codes and rules, or as a monolithic 'symbolic order' which is simply imposed on the subject. Both are essentially determinist theories, which have considerable difficulty in acknowledging contradiction or the potential for historical change. While Metz in his 'middle period' (Metz, 1974b) begins to show signs of evading these problems, his recourse to psychoanalytic theory simply compounds them.

It is for these reasons that the social theory of language developed by the Soviet theorists Volosinov and Bakhtin, and the related theories of language and consciousness developed by Vygotsky, appear to offer a potential alternative. Volosinov (1973) takes issue with Saussure's fundamental distinction be-

tween 'langue' (the language system) and 'parole' (speech): he argues that Saussure's approach is unable to account for the 'individual creative refraction and variation of language forms', and hence for the relationship between language and consciousness. Saussure's 'abstract objectivism' conceives of language as 'a stable, immutable system of normatively identical linguistic forms', and hence cannot acknowledge the historical processes by which languages change, or the social contexts in which they are used. By contrast, Volosinov regards language and consciousness as inevitably social: 'the individual consciousness', he argues, 'is a social-ideological fact.'

Bakhtin's central concept of 'dialogue' (Bakhtin, 1986) likewise emphasises the social, communicative functions of language, which he argues have effectively been bracketed off from consideration in structuralist linguistics. For both writers, the sign is a site on which different discourses intersect: and it is for this reason that it retains its dynamism and its capacity for change. At the same time, speech itself is not, as Saussure suggested, merely individual: Bakhtin's theory of 'speech genres' suggests that speech is inevitably subject to social conventions. Any utterance inevitably draws on, and responds to, previous utterances in a given sphere and is thus far from being self-sufficient.

The theory of language which I have briefly sketched here has considerable potential for a theory of television literacy. Firstly, it moves beyond the impasse Metz encountered in attempting to develop literal analogies between the 'basic elements' of verbal language and the 'basic elements' of film. Rather than seeking to break language down into its smallest constituent parts, or to define its syntactic system in abstract terms, its central focus is on the communicative context: from this perspective, the basic unit of speech communication is not the word or the sentence, but the utterance. The boundaries of the utterance are defined by a change in speaking subjects, since every utterance is always part of a dialogue, even if this fact itself may be repressed.

Secondly, the theory enables us to move beyond simplistic theories of 'passive viewing'. For Volosinov and for Bakhtin, 'understanding' is not a passive process, but on the contrary an act of dialogue, 'a response to a sign with signs'. Every utterance implies an addressee, and every response is an active participation in speech communication. The listener, according to Bakhtin (1981), is active because (s)he is always conscious of other 'alien' words, and interprets the text in a way which is 'pregnant with responses and objections'.

Thirdly, the theory offers a more satisfactory account of the contradictory nature of texts and the social diversity of reading practices than is provided, for example, by the encoding/decoding model in semiotics (Hall, 1980). Bakhtin (1981) argues that the novel is the site of social 'heteroglossia', or multiple languages: while the literary language of the novel seeks to 'organise' this heteroglossia in different ways, and thereby to suppress contradiction, this is constantly disrupted by the intrusion of 'alien words' deriving from the 'low genres' of popular literature. In several respects, this account can usefully be applied to television. Rather than regarding television as the bearer of a unitary, or even a 'preferred' meaning, this approach would lead to a view of the medium as a site of conflict or dialogue between different social and ideological languages (cf. Newcomb, 1984; Barker, 1987). While the medium might attempt to control this by imposing a unitary, institutional 'voice', the success of this attempt can never be guaranteed: as a result, television can always be interpreted and appropriated in widely divergent ways by different audiences.

Finally, by dispensing with Saussure's distinction between langue and parole, the theory implicitly dispenses with the re-

lated distinction between competence and performance. As Halliday (1978) has argued, the danger of abstracting competence from performance is that competence becomes idealised: many of the factors which pertain to linguistic interaction, to the use of language for the purposes of communication, are simply ruled out of court. 'Competence' thus becomes – as it is in certain theories of literacy – a property which individuals somehow 'possess', and which they retain at their disposal until it is used. A social theory of literacy, by contrast, acknowledges that the display of 'competence' will depend upon the social and discursive contexts in which it is required, and the specific purposes of the user: it thus implicitly rejects this idealised concept of 'competence', and the pedagogic practices which are based upon it.

III

Does understanding television require a form of literacy?

In terms of its etymology, the word 'literacy' refers explicitly to written language. To employ the term in relation to television therefore implies that the competencies which are involved in using the medium are in some sense analogous to those which are involved in using written language. Yet again, however, the crux of the matter is how we define those competencies in the first place – in other words, how we define literacy itself.

As I shall indicate in this section, there are a number of significant differences between the basic processes which are involved in verbal literacy and those which may be involved in television literacy. The validity of the analogy ultimately depends upon how significant, or indeed essential, we assume these differences to be.

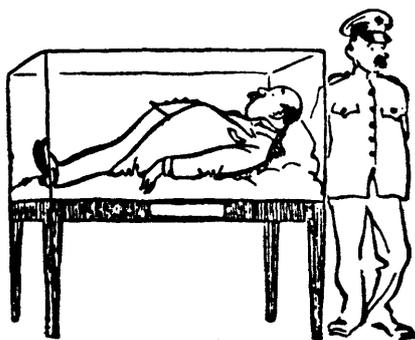
To begin with, television and written language require different kinds of technologies. While the technologies required for reading and writing (pens, paper, books etc.) and indeed for watching television, are fairly widely available, at least in Western countries, those required for producing television are much more scarce, and are largely confined to small elites. While most of us are able to read and write, and nearly all of us are able to watch television, few of us will ever get the opportunity to make programmes.

The significance of this difference, however, depends upon one's position. As we have seen, Metz (1974a) argues that one essential characteristic of a language is that it is used for 'intercommunication': film, as a one-way medium, does not meet this criterion and thus does not qualify as a language. Likewise, David Olson (1986) argues that television 'distorts the fundamental egalitarian relation between a speaker and a hearer, the relation that makes it possible to engage in genuine discussion': it puts 'an unbridgeable distance between speaker (broadcaster) and listener (viewer)', thus concentrating power in the hands of the former. In both cases, the basic difference between television (or film) and written language is seen in terms of the power-relationships which are inherent in the technology.

Yet there are dangers in posing this distinction in such absolute terms. There are clearly powerful institutions which control the dissemination of written language, just as there are limits on the access to television. Many of us may write, but comparatively few of us are published. Furthermore, to take up Olson's point, not all situations which involve speakers and listeners, let alone those which involve writers and readers, are necessarily 'egalitarian': there are always rules which limit what it is possible to say, and in certain cases who is allowed to speak. In the case of verbal literacy, there is a danger of assuming that reading and writing are symmetrically related. As Stubbs (1980) points out, many people read a lot but barely write at all: only a few people

write to any substantial degree. As Olson acknowledges elsewhere, the reading public in a literate society comprises perhaps half of its members, whereas the viewing public typically includes almost everybody (Olson, 1982-82).

Beyond this, there is the question of how meaning is created, and thus where the power lies. Writers or speakers clearly do not make language anew each time they come to write or speak: on the contrary, they use the forms of language that are available, and these inevitably constrain the meanings it is possible to produce. If one adopts the perspective briefly outlined at the end of the previous section, reading (or listening or watching television) cannot be seen simply as an act of passive consumption: on the contrary, the reader actively produces meaning from the indications provided by the text, and has a significant degree of power to determine it. From a 'culturalist' perspective, the central paradox of mass communication is that in order to ensure its popularity it must allow for a wide diversity of different readings, rather than seeking to impose a single, unitary meaning (Buckingham, 1987; Fiske, 1987). To apply Bakhtin's terms, television is never simply monologic: on the contrary, while on some occasions it may seek to repress the dialogic dimensions of



its language, on others it positively invites and depends upon dialogue with its audiences. In this sense, the opposition between writing and reading can no longer be seen in such absolute terms, as an opposition between 'active' and 'passive' modes of thought: 'producers' and 'consumers' cannot be divided so easily into the 'powerful' and the 'powerless'.

Such oppositions between the 'essential' properties of different media are typically overlaid with value-judgements – and in this instance, with the determination to prove that television is 'inherently' inferior or less egalitarian or less demanding than verbal language. While it would certainly be misguided to imply that these differences are merely illusory, it would also seem sensible to regard them as differences of degree rather than of kind, which take specific forms within specific social and historical contexts.

Nevertheless, these differences do have important implications for cognition and learning, and thus for any conception of television literacy: at the very least, they should caution us against simply transferring the reading/writing couplet to television. This relationship between media and cognition has been

systematically and rigorously explored in the work of Gavriel Salomon. The central question Salomon addresses is whether there are mental skills which are specific to understanding television – in other words, if there is such a thing as 'television literacy' which is distinct from more general cognitive competencies.

An inevitable prerequisite of this investigation, however, is the attempt to define what is specific to television as a medium. Salomon (1979) argues that the most essential attributes of a given medium are its 'symbol systems' – that is, the 'set of elements, such as words, numbers, shapes or musical scores, that are interrelated within each system by syntactic rules or conventions, and are used in specifiable ways in relation to fields of reference'. Television and film, he suggests, are 'derived' systems: they combine aspects of more 'elementary' systems (such as the linguistic, the musical and the iconic) with their own unique systems, to make a complex system which is specific to the medium (cf. Metz, 1974b; Kjørup, 1977).

Like Metz and Goodman, Salomon argues that the 'syntax' of film is less rule-governed than that of verbal language: as in other non-notational systems, there are no discrete, unambiguous elements (like phonemes or morphemes) which can be combined together according to fixed laws. As a result, there can be no straightforward relationships between symbols and referents: and there is a far greater degree of ambiguity. Following Goodman, he argues that iconic signs such as those of film or television cannot be defined by their 'realism' or 'resemblance' to an objective, external world, but that iconicity is a quality which the perceiver attributes to the sign: in this sense, iconic signs do not resemble the world, but the perceiver's internal representation of the world.

The focus of Salomon's work, then, is on the interaction between these unique or essential attributes of the medium and the skills or cognitive processes which are used in 'translating' them into internal mental representations. Clearly, as Salomon argues, 'language is not the *only* symbol system that participates in thinking': each symbol system requires a different mode of thought, and thus has a different cognitive potential.

The implications – and the problems – of Salomon's work in terms of a theory of television literacy are best illustrated by an article in which he specifically seeks to define the term (Salomon, 1982). The central question, Salomon suggests, is whether the skills which are required for understanding television are specific to the medium: is 'television literacy' a separate set of abilities, or is it merely part of a more general literacy? As a complex symbol system, he argues, television is composed of elements which are less unique to the medium – both 'the literal visual and/or auditory portrayal of real-life information' and the symbols, such as verbal language, which are used by a variety of media – and those which are specific to it. It is these latter elements, which Salomon argues are primarily 'single, molar elements such as cuts, fades and zooms, as well as more complex molecular ones, that blend the molar ones into a whole plot' (p.8), which surely require a more specific form of literacy.

Salomon goes on to ask what weight these TV-specific skills have in the overall comprehension of programmes. The answer to this question, he suggests, depends on *how* the comprehension of television is measured, and *on whom*. Salomon proposes that the comprehension process has three sequential stages. The first involves the mental recording (or deciphering) of a coded message into a parallel mental representation; the second involves the chunking or integration of these elements into meaningful units; and the third involves elaborations made on that material – drawing inferences, yielding new attributions or questions, and so on. Salomon argues that the processes which take place in earlier stages are more medium-specific, while those which

occur in later stages are more general: thus, if there is a literacy which is specific to the medium, it is manifested only in the earlier phases of processing a message.

The relative weight of these three stages will therefore depend upon the viewer's relative competence. For less experienced (that is, less 'literate') viewers, the earlier stages will be more difficult, since the skills which they entail are less automatic: for more experienced viewers, who can carry out the earlier stages more easily, it is the later stages – that is, those which are less specific to the medium – which are more important. Salomon concludes by arguing that TV-specific literacy is acquired easily and early in life, and comes to be applied quite automatically: as such, he asserts, it carries little weight, except for younger children (p. 10).

In many respects, Salomon's arguments here would appear to coincide with common sense. If we look at what a 'competent' viewer does, and attempt to break it down into its constituent parts, certain operations do appear to be easier than others, and it would seem logical to infer that they are both the first things we learn, and also the first things we do in actually making sense of specific programmes. A 'commonsense' account of reading – and thus a methodology for teaching reading – has been developed in the same way: first of all we learn to decipher letters, then syllables, words, sentences and so on. Salomon would also seem to be correct in arguing that these 'basic' skills are more media-specific: just as learning to read involves understanding quite specific principles such as the fact that print goes from left to right, so learning to make sense of television involves understanding the basic principle of editing, for example. Once we have grasped these skills, basic 'decoding' appears to become automatic, and most of our mental effort is expended on activities which apply to a range of media.

If we look at the argument more closely, however, there are a number of questionable assumptions. Firstly, Salomon presumes, as he himself admits, 'that processing is an orderly activity that begins with the first phase, entailing medium-specific skills, and progresses towards the third phase' (p. 10). Research on reading print, however, would suggest that this is not in fact the case: even beginning readers are actively predicting and making inferences about texts (that is, engaging in 'third phase' activities), and use these as a basis for their 'decoding' of letters and words (that is, 'first phase' activities). Expectations and hypotheses about meaning guide our understanding of language, and 'mistakes' (or 'miscues') in reading are often the result of quite logical, if ultimately mistaken, predictions (Smith, 1973). The act of reading does not follow the sequence Salomon outlines, but on the contrary involves a coordination of these stages (or, in the jargon, of 'bottom-up' and 'top-down' processes) (Cole and Griffin, 1986).

Furthermore, the idea that only 'first phase' skills are medium-specific is also questionable. If one takes one of Salomon's 'third phase' skills, the ability to generate inferences, it is clear that this happens in a very different way in television as compared to print. In reading a novel, for example, at least some of the inferences we generate are visual; we use the writer's descriptions of people or places to construct mental images, which are often revised as we read. In watching television, this process of visual inference may be more redundant: television can show us things in a way that print cannot. On the other hand, television has much greater difficulty in representing characters' motivations or mental states: while novels can provide us with this kind of information fairly easily (although of course they may not always do so), television often leaves us to infer these, for example from facial expressions or gestures. Only by resorting to verbal language – to devices such as voice-over or dialogue, which may appear dangerously 'literal' – can it hope to remove

potential ambiguities.

Secondly, Salomon's definition of the 'essential' characteristics of television's symbolic system is rather limited, and is effectively confined to a list of techniques, such as camera movements and editing procedures. The problem here is two-fold. Firstly, there is a danger of defining this symbolic system as a kind of rigid 'grammar', in which discrete units are seen to possess a fixed, objective meaning. Yet a zoom, for example, may 'mean' very different things at different times; and may on certain occasions 'mean' effectively the same thing as a tracking shot or an 'irising' movement or a cut to close-up. For this reason, even such apparently 'basic' units of television language cannot be said to be 'processed' automatically: however subliminally or momentarily, choices have to be made about their meaning, even by experienced viewers.

The further problem here is that Salomon's definition effectively ignores the broader levels on which the language of television is organised: the level of narrative structure, of genre, of mode of address, and so on. These phenomena are also conventional, institutionalised forms of language which are equally specific to the medium. For example, while television genres draw upon genres in other media, they are also inflected in specific ways, and are in some cases unique to the medium. Likewise, television has its own unique forms of narrative struc-



ture and its own modes of address, which are in a constant state of evolution and which cannot simply be reduced to a few characteristic camera movements or conventions of editing. Yet again, it might be argued that, as in the case of reading, our understanding of specific small-scale 'units' is guided by our knowledge of these larger-scale phenomena: we make sense of the freeze frame at the end of *Dallas*, for example, because of what we know about the genre of soap opera, rather than vice-versa.

The third problem here centres on Salomon's concept of 'skills'. Firstly, it is clear that the skills which he regards as specific to the medium are relatively limited, and are acquired at a fairly early age. Yet if, as I have argued, the skill of 'decoding' even the most basic units of television language depends upon the context in which they are found – that is, upon the meanings which viewers attribute to them – this can hardly be regarded as something which is achieved once and for all: even experienced viewers will decode these units in different ways, and may even ignore or fail to register basic cues which are provided by the text, and thus 'misinterpret' what they watch. In this sense, the basic separation between 'skills' and 'knowledge' (or meaning) is highly problematic: 'skills' are not exercised in the abstract, but are always developed in the process of producing meaning.

Furthermore, is it necessarily the case that TV-specific skills are relatively finite and restricted in scope? As in the case of

reading, we might hypothesise that there are 'metalinguistic' skills which relate to an understanding of the forms and functions of television language, or an awareness of that language as an object in itself (Herriman, 1986): this might provide a means of understanding the changes which occur beyond the stage at which children appear to have grasped 'basic' skills, for example in their understanding of the rhetoric of television advertising (Young, 1986). Yet again, however, it may be wrong to assume that the process is simply cumulative, and that 'higher order' skills necessarily follow the acquisition of 'basic' skills.

The danger of conceiving of the process of understanding in terms of 'skills' is the implicit assumption that there are objective standards by which these may be measured. As Salomon himself implies, learning is not simply a function of an abstract set of skills being applied to an inert object: it depends upon the learner's motivations, the ways in which the learner perceives the task, and indeed his or her own abilities. In this sense, 'skills' are not simply a function of the demands of the medium: they are also a function of the social contexts in which meaning is produced. The relative importance of specific 'skills' does not only depend on whose comprehension is being measured, as Salomon suggests. It also depends upon the social context in which it is being measured, on who is doing the measuring, and on what they choose to define as valid comprehension.

In this respect, Salomon's definition of 'literate viewing' as viewing which involves 'deeper processing' is particularly problematic (see also Cohen and Salomon, 1979). To begin with, there is the question of how we define and measure 'deeper' processing – in practice, Salomon's approach is essentially that of a recognition or memory test, or a matter of counting the number of 'inferences' which children make, which is at least reductive. Perhaps more crucially, however, his definition is implicitly normative. The major problem with the way children watch television, as far as Salomon is concerned, is not to do with the content of the medium, or its allegedly anti-social effects: nor is it to do with a lack of the skills which are required to make sense of it. On the contrary, the trouble is that most children just don't make enough *effort*. Yet again, what is being offered, under cover of an apparently neutral rhetoric of 'skills' and 'literacy', is an implicit definition of the *attitudes* children should be encouraged to adopt. While this approach does get beyond evaluative notions about the 'inherent' superiority of one medium over another, it replaces these by similarly prescriptive ideas about the *use* of those media (cf. Shannon and Fernie, 1985).

In many respects, the limitations which I have indicated in Salomon's work are symptomatic of broader limitations in the conceptualisation of television literacy which has been developed within cognitive psychology. In terms of their definition of the 'language' or 'symbolic systems' which are specific to television, cognitive researchers have typically focussed on a very limited range of 'formal features', and sought to study these in isolation from questions of 'content' or meaning. Insofar as meanings are addressed, it is presumed that these can simply be extracted and defined objectively: meanings are seen to be delivered by texts, rather than constructed from them (Anderson, 1981b).

If television 'messages' have all too often been conceived as a set of 'stimuli' or 'salient features', without reference to the social and institutional contexts in which they are produced and circulated, 'the child' has similarly been studied as a solitary individual, in isolation from broader cultural and social forces. As a result, the social knowledge which children bring to television, and the social or interpersonal contexts in which it is viewed and discussed have often been excluded as irrelevant to the main field of inquiry. In terms of the development of children's understanding of television, researchers have predomi-

nantly adopted a normative, Piagetian approach: children's readings of television are typically judged as deficient by comparison with adults', and the progression towards adult viewing styles is conceived in teleological terms.

The theory of television literacy which emerges here is thus fundamentally asocial. Its basic premise is that television literacy is a matter of individual 'skills' or cognitive processes which may be identified without regard to the social contexts in which they are exercised, or the meanings which they are used to produce. To pose the question in such terms – as a question of the relationship between television and cognition – is to ignore the fact that making sense of the medium is inevitably a social practice, which takes place at least partly in verbal language. Once one accepts that descriptions of 'mental states' are *inevitably* linguistic or discursive, the question of their 'accuracy' or 'inaccuracy' ceases to be important: on the contrary, what is crucial is how that discourse is itself constructed, and its functions and consequences (Potter and Wetherell, 1987). This approach leads to a rejection of the cognitive view of literacy as a property which individuals 'possess', or which lives 'in their heads', and towards a view which situates it in the context of specific social activities. It is this social theory of literacy which will be discussed in the following section.

IV Towards a social theory of literacy

One significant danger in many discussions of television literacy is the underlying assumption that there is an agreed definition of verbal literacy with which it can be compared. Yet studies of the social and historical dimensions of verbal literacy clearly indicate that this is not the case. On the contrary, the definition of literacy itself has been subject to considerable variation.

Brian Street (1984) offers a useful distinction here between what he terms 'autonomous' and 'ideological' definitions of literacy. The autonomous model presumes that literacy develops in a single direction, and is associated with notions of social 'progress', 'civilisation', individual liberty and social mobility. Literacy is distinguished from the social and educational institutions in which it is typically acquired. It is seen as an independent variable, which has specific consequences both for societies and for individuals: it brings about economic prosperity, for example, and facilitates the development of logical thought.

Street identifies a number of problems with this model. He argues that the methodologies researchers have used to substantiate such claims for literacy often reveal forms of ethnocentric bias: in many respects, the 'essentialist' distinction between literate and pre-literate societies merely replicates the earlier distinction between 'primitive' and 'modern' societies – a distinction which anthropologists have increasingly acknowledged to be based on a misunderstanding of so-called 'primitive' cultures and thought-processes. The use of the term 'literacy' here provides an aura of the 'technical', and thereby gives legitimacy to statements which would otherwise be seen as culturally loaded. Following the work of Labov (1973), Street argues that notions of 'logic', 'abstraction' or 'objectivity' – which are presumed to be among the consequences of literacy – are in fact conventional and culture-bound. Claims for the 'inferiority' of oral cultures are based on an exaggerated polarisation between oral and literate modes of thought, and an underestimation of the capabilities of speech (cf. Ong, 1982). Ultimately, Street suggests, the function of the autonomous model is to justify and defend Western educational practices and academic traditions, and to present these as the norm from which all other cultures are to be judged – and found wanting.

Street's argument for an 'ideological' model of literacy is fundamentally opposed to the technological determinism of the autonomous model. According to the ideological model, literacy is not an independent variable whose consequences can be studied in isolation: on the contrary, it is inevitably embedded in specific social practices – reading and writing – which are in turn embedded in specific cultural and institutional contexts. The skills and competencies which accompany the acquisition of literacy do not simply follow from the 'inherent' qualities of the written word: they are socially constructed in the practice of that literacy, and hence cannot be seen as neutral or merely 'technical'. What literacy 'means' depends on the processes by which it is learnt, the purposes for which it is used, and the institutions in which this takes place.

Rather than exploring the cognitive processes which are presumed to constitute literacy, the ideological model focusses on the social and historical distribution of literacy practices, and their political and ideological functions. In this sense, it dispenses with the notion of a *single* literacy, and replaces it with the idea of plural *literacies*. Literacy is no longer seen here as a set of neutral cognitive skills, but as a set of social skills which cannot be separated from the social processes in which they are exercised.

Street's ideological model of literacy finds support from a number of different sources. Recent work in sociolinguistics fundamentally questions the idea that written language contains 'objective' meanings: meaning is produced pragmatically as well as semantically, within specific social contexts, by social actors occupying social roles (e.g. Halliday, 1978; Stubbs, 1980). Texts are, in this sense, always ambiguous: and the production of meaning is not merely a 'technical' matter of 'decoding' signs, but a social process which is inevitably variable.

Bourdieu (1977), for example, decisively rejects the Chomskyan notion of competence, and the 'abstract objectivism' of the linguistic theory on which it is based. Bourdieu's theory of language is rigorously sociological: there is no such



thing, he asserts, as 'the' language, only the *legitimate* language – what is conventionally defined as 'grammatical' is simply that which is socially acceptable. In this sense, questions about language and literacy are inevitably questions about the sociology of knowledge. Relations of communication, Bourdieu argues, are fundamentally relations of symbolic power, and linguistic competence is a form of symbolic capital whose value depends upon the 'market' in which it is 'traded' – that is, the social context in which it is used. The notion of competence should not be abstracted from the social relations of linguistic production: competence is learnt in concrete, practical situations, and involves a mastery, not simply of language, but also of the situations themselves. Bourdieu's 'expanded' sociological notion of communicative competence would appear to be shared by many sociolinguists (e.g. Hymes, 1972; Fowler and Kress, 1979).

Likewise, historical research questions many of the broad claims for literacy embodied in the autonomous model, which Graff (1979) refers to as 'the literacy myth'. Here again, the effects of specific 'technologies' of literacy, such as printing, cannot be separated from the social and institutional contexts in which they are used: in many cases, these effects are uneven or contradictory, and merely contribute to other changes, rather than directly causing them (Eisenstein, 1985).

Ethnographic research in contemporary societies also suggests that the 'literacies' of different social groups can only be interpreted in relation to broader institutional and socio-cultural forces. Heath (1983), for example, points to the different functions which literacy serves for different social classes and ethnic groups: the nature, and indeed the consequences, of literacy vary significantly according to the roles which reading and writing play in the family, the community and the workplace.

Given these variations in definitions of literacy, it is hardly surprising that attempts to define standards by which it may be assessed have been fraught with difficulty. Perhaps the clearest illustration of this problem is the debate over 'functional literacy'. The work of many adult literacy campaigns, and of UNESCO in the 'third world' context, has typically been informed by the notion of a minimum level of literacy which is necessary for the individual to 'survive' or to function adequately within a particular social sphere. However, such a definition inevitably depends upon what one means by 'survival' or 'adequate functioning': as Levene (1986) indicates, any notion of functional literacy is inevitably ideological, in that it depends upon prior assumptions about social welfare, rights and responsibilities. As such, it cannot be defined simply by impartial, factual investigation. Indeed, in the case of UNESCO, the debates over functional literacy have been inextricably involved with broader clashes over cultural values and with the struggle for economic resources.

In terms of the models of literacy outlined here, much of the work on television literacy I have discussed implicitly shares the assumptions of the autonomous model: it presumes that television literacy is a single set of cognitive abilities which individuals 'possess', that meaning is objective and inherent in texts, and that both can be defined irrespective of social or cultural forces. To adopt an ideological or social definition of television literacy would enable us to move beyond many of the limitations I have considered in this paper, and would connect with the broader theory of language I have identified in the work of Volosinov and Bakhtin. It would also suggest a rather different agenda for research and teaching.

In terms of research, work on television literacy would need to draw on the growing body of qualitative research into television audiences which has sought to identify the social distribution of viewing competencies. Significantly, research in this area is increasingly taking account of the nature of the viewing

context, and of the social pragmatics of viewing behaviour. The somewhat determinist emphasis of some earlier research (e.g. Morley, 1980) has given way to a more complex awareness of the diverse social and discursive practices in which television viewing is situated. As I have implied, this kind of research might profitably learn from parallel research on print literacy, in particular that which has adopted ethnographic methods, such as the work of Scribner and Cole (1981) and Heath (1983).

While the educational implications of this approach to television literacy are fairly clear in general terms, they are much less clear on the level of specific teaching strategies. As I have argued elsewhere (Buckingham, 1986), many apparently 'critical' approaches to media education presume that meanings are somehow contained within texts, and can be recovered by a process of 'analysis'. Yet in practice, 'analysis' all too often becomes an exercise in guessing what is in teacher's mind. Rather than seeking to arrive at a 'consensus' reading (Masterman, 1980), it is necessary to devise pedagogies which will explore and validate the differential readings which students produce. Here too, there is a need to move beyond normative definitions of 'critical' or 'literate' viewing, and to acknowledge that both television viewing and learning itself are inevitably embedded within social relations.

Conclusion: why literacy?

My aim in this paper has been to investigate some of the theoretical issues which are at stake in defining television literacy. I have sought to question many of the assumptions which underlie the different uses of the term, and in particular to indicate some of the dangers in the basic analogy between verbal language and television. In a sense, there is a fundamental paradox here. If television literacy means anything, it surely refers to the skills or competencies which are specific to the medium – yet to base a definition of these on an analogy with another medium, which in many respects is quite different, seems at least contradictory.

One response to this objection is to assert the pragmatic value of the term. The combination of 'television' and 'literacy' is partly a rhetorical device – a means whereby some of the status which is traditionally accorded to reading and writing might 'rub off' onto the study of television. Rather than seeing television as fundamentally hostile to the development of literacy, it is hoped that the two will be seen as educational partners. This is, it seems to me, a potentially risky strategy, particularly if television literacy is defined as imprecisely as it typically appears to be. Most teachers are likely to regard verbal literacy as infinitely more important than television literacy, and might well respond by arguing that children already know how to watch television, and certainly don't need to be taught to do so in schools. To explicitly invoke a comparison with verbal literacy may be to invite suspicion and disbelief: the analogy between television literacy and print literacy may well be perceived as mere empty rhetoric, and thus prove counter-productive.

On another level, however, what is implicit in the argument for television literacy is a broader attempt to redefine literacy itself. Pattison (1982), for example, suggests that the notion of literacy should not be tied to specific technologies or practices such as reading and writing: on the contrary, literacy as he defines it 'denotes consciousness of the questions posed by language coupled with mastery of those skills by which a culture at any given moment in its history manifests this consciousness'. People who are able to read and write, Pattison argues, may lack this critical sensitivity to language; while those who are unable to do so may in fact possess it. The ancient Greeks, for example, had

a 'critical and self-conscious' attitude towards language well before the invention of the alphabet: the advent of writing simply enhanced their 'existing predisposition ... to treat language with critical vigour and wit'.

Like others who have argued for this redefinition of literacy (e.g. Spencer, 1986; Bazalgette, 1988), Pattison regards the literacy of the electronic media as simply another addition to the diversity of literacies which are available. This emergent popular literacy, which is keyed more to spoken than written language, is a form of vernacular art which explicitly flouts atrophied standards of 'correct English'. Far from seeking to displace older forms of literacy, it blends with them, altering their practice in much the same way as the advent of print changed existing oral literacies at the time of the Renaissance.

At the very least, this argument would appear to underestimate the potential resistance to such changes – a resistance in which schools are likely to play a major role. Popular critics of television tend to regard schools as the last bastion of print culture, which should be in the vanguard of opposition to the evils of the electronic media (e.g. Postman, 1983; Winn, 1985). All the evidence would suggest that such views are shared by those currently responsible for shaping educational policy in Britain (e.g. Baker, 1986), and probably by the majority of teachers as well.

As I have indicated, the notion of television literacy can be used – as it has been in the United States – precisely in order to engineer this kind of resistance, to wean children off television and lead them on to more 'worthwhile' activities. As a slogan, 'television literacy' can serve to rally those with quite different motivations into a false unity, in which basic principles are simply assumed, rather than addressed and debated.

As I have argued, the crucial question here is what one means by literacy. If dominant definitions of literacy are simply translated to television, much of the radical potential of media education will simply be dissipated. Yet the educational implications of a social theory of literacy have yet to be realised. To talk about 'redefining literacy' is perhaps utopian: yet it remains urgent and necessary.

Note

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