Open Research Online

The Open University's repository of research publications
and other research outputs

Negotiated literacies: how children enact what counts as reading in different social settings

Thesis

oro.open.ac.uk
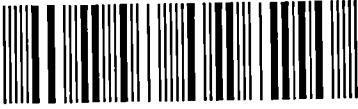
UNRESTRICTED

NEGOTIATED LITERACIES:

How children enact what counts as reading in different social

settings.

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of the Open

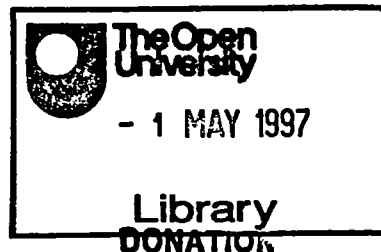University in the discipline of Education by Gemma Moss. March, 1996

Author number: M707 1224
Date of submission: 7 March 1996
Date of award: 22 August 1996

i

T 028·5344

C

ii

CONTENTS

Acknowledgements

I am indebted to Brian Street's supportive and attentive supervision of this thesis. He has helped focus and structure the final document. The thesis grew out of and alongside a series of research projects to which all of the following have contributed in different ways. I have benefitted enormously from their conversation: Basil Bernstein, Valerie Hey, Roger Hewitt, Janet Maybin, Neil Mercer, Margaret Spencer.

– ABSTRACT –

NEGOTIATED LITERACIES:

How children enact what counts as reading in different social settings

This thesis takes as the object of its enquiry children's talk about the range of different media texts which they circulate amongst themselves in informal settings. It uses this data to raise questions about how we can conceptualise literacy in a multimedia age; the role that talk about texts plays in establishing what it means to read and to be a reader; and the relationship between talk, text and context.

The thesis contributes to the development of a social theory of literacy by linking differences observed in ways of talking about texts to different aspects of the social contexts in which those texts circulate. It redefines the social contexts for reading which shape a given literacy event in terms of the social processes through which texts are made available to particular readers in particular settings. These social processes are described in terms of the social regulation of texts.

The methodological and theoretical issues the thesis tackles arise largely from the attempt to construct a new language of description (See Bernstein, 1996) for the range of talk about texts collected as part of the research data. The language used to describe the data has become the means for making visible aspects of literacy as a social practice which have been previously overlooked. In this respect, the act of description is therefore in itself theoretical: it helps formulate what it refers to.

- Introduction -

This thesis contributes to the development of a social theory of literacy. It extends the scope of theoretical work which recognises literacies as socially constructed and differentiated ways of making sense of texts by:

1) Taking as the object of enquiry children's talk about a range of different media texts. Work on literacy as a social practice seeks to understand reading and writing in relation to the social contexts in which they get done. Yet restricting such enquiry to print or writing seems increasingly arbitrary when print itself is in so many ways intimately connected to the use of other electronic media: TV programmes regularly combine image, print and sound in different ways; much of the speech on television is itself scripted (Meek 1992); television and books both borrow from the structure of computer games in different ways; beginning reading books can contain only pictures. In this sense it is hard to disentangle print from its specific place in a whole text, whether electronic or not. This project starts from texts not print, and focuses on talk about texts from a range of different media which young people circulate and consume outside the confines of formal schooling.

2) Redefining "context" in terms which are not coterminous with community membership, nor with the immediate setting for reading. Whilst work on literacy as a social practice stresses the importance of studying literacy in relation to social context, there is no consensus

within the field on how social contexts for literacy should be defined. Different definitions lead to different kinds of research. (See Chapter 2 below.) So far, in putting forward explanations of differences between ways of doing literacy in school and ways of doing literacy in other settings, much of the emphasis has fallen on the community membership of the readers involved, or the specificity of the immediate institutional context in which reading is observed (See Street, 1993; Bloome, 1989). Instead, this project, through focusing on talk about a range of media texts in informal settings, re-defines "context" in terms of the varied social processes which make such texts available to particular readers in particular settings.

3)   Evolving a new language of description (See Bernstein, 1996) which can bring into view the social processes through which talk, text and contexts are intimately intertwined. This project began with data which wouldn't fit my existing frames of reference (See Chapter 1). I had no way of adequately describing what was going on in the children's talk about texts which I had collected. At the heart of the thesis is the aim of building a new language of description which would be adequate to this task. This is a theoretical enterprise. In attempting that act of description I have also been theorising the social processes I have observed (See Chapter 1).

The thesis is structured in two parts. Part One focuses on the research process, Part Two on presentation of the main data. Chapter One begins with an outline of the research aims and links this to a grounded account of how the enquiry evolved into this specific investigation. Chapter Two places that

investigation in the context of social theories of reading and media consumption, drawing primarily on work on literacy as a social practice and in Audience Studies. Chapter Three examines the methodological issues which are germane to the enquiry. In Part Two, I present three case studies focusing on children's talk about horror videos (Chapter Four); girls talk about the teen romance (Chapter Five); and boys talk about WWF Wrestling (Chapter Six). In Chapter Seven I review the way in which my description of the data has led to a new theoretical formulation of the links between talk, text and context.

The source of the data

The data came from a series of small group interviews conducted in two different but interlinked research contexts (See Chapter One). Data collected between 1989 and 1990 comes from the ESRC-funded Television Literacy Research Project (TVLP) [1], upon which I was employed as a researcher. This project interviewed children who were originally aged between 7 and 11 when they were first recruited to the sample. The children came from four London schools, broadly chosen to give a balance of ethnic and social class backgrounds.

Data collected between 1991 and 1993 comes from the Informal Literacies and Negotiated Literacies Projects (INLP), funded by The Institute of Education, University of London and the ESRC respectively [2]. I secured funding for both these projects and was the researcher. On both these projects I continued to work with children from the oldest and youngest age groups recruited to the TVLP, and to visit the same four schools. Interview groups were composed from the classes from which the original sample were drawn. The schools are: School A, an inner city primary which was in the catchment

area for School B, an inner city secondary; School C, a suburban primary from which some of the children transferred to School D, a suburban and selective secondary school.

The Television Literacy Project, as its name suggests, concentrated on children's use of television, and to a lesser extent, video. The Informal and Negotiated Literacies Projects considered children's use of a broader range of media texts, including computer games, comics and magazines, and books as well as television and video.

PART 1

The Research Process

- Chapter One -

Talk, text and context

This thesis sets out to investigate the relationship between talk, text and context using as its main focus talk about a variety of texts from a range of different media which children share amongst themselves in informal settings. The thesis puts forward a new language of description which can illuminate the relationships between children's talk about text, the texts they refer to and the broader social contexts in which the texts circulate. In this chapter I begin by setting out the theoretical position the investigation has led to. I briefly consider some of the methodological issues involved in building a language of description. I then go on to consider in some detail the research history in which the investigation is embedded.

Talk, text and context: the theoretical position
Below I outline the theoretical position which will be put forward in the thesis as a whole. This position was arrived at in the process of re-describing the data which I had collected (See below on the research history). The methodological issues the thesis tackles arise largely from this process of re-description. These will be outlined in general terms in the next section of this chapter.

This thesis contributes to the development of a social theory of literacy (See Barton, 1994; Baynham, 1995; Street, 1995a). It helps reconceptualise literacy as a social practice by linking differences observed in ways of talking about

texts to the social contexts in which those texts circulate. As a direct result, it re-theorises how we might understand the social contexts for reading, and their relationship to a given literacy event.

This thesis theorises the social contexts for reading in terms of the social processes through which texts are made available in different settings to different participants: how they are distributed and how they are consumed. Such social processes are described in terms of the social regulation of text. The term "the social regulation of texts" is used as it makes clear that the question of which texts get into which settings, for which readers, is a matter of social design. At the same time, who has access to which texts is itself often contested (See below, Chapters Four and Five). The "social regulation of texts" simultaneously brings into focus the texts, the processes which make texts available and the processes by which they are consumed, and insists on the interrelationship between these different elements.

These regulatory processes help shape the way in which reading gets done in any one instance. Such social processes are conceived of as on-going. Any literacy event therefore provides an instantiation of these processes. A literacy event is not only shaped by the broader social contexts which help produce it. It has a productive role in establishing the processes of which it is part. The standpoint adopted here is broadly social constructivist (Mercer, 1994).

The main data presented for analysis in the thesis is a series of literacy events in which young people talk about the texts they share in informal contexts. In re-theorising the social contexts for reading, which generate

these occasions for talk about text, in terms of the social regulation of texts, this thesis will:

1. Treat the talk about texts as activity in the present, built around interaction with others, in which participants show the social basis for reading. Through such interaction, what it means to read and to be a reader is socially and culturally shaped in dialogue with others, before it becomes individual competence (Vygotsky, 1978). (See Chapter Four for detailed treatment of this theme.) Analysis focuses on how this happens in particular instances. This kind of social interaction in the present forms one aspect of the social regulation of texts.

2. Treat the talk about text as intimately intertwined with or embedded in the broader social history of which that talk is part. In this respect, analysis expands out from the occasions for talk about text (particular literacy events) to the social organisation of the contexts in which these texts circulate more widely. Analysis then teases out how these social contexts impact on and help generate occasions for talk about text.

    This analytic move is accomplished in two ways. (1) By paying attention to participants' explicit reflection on the social contexts for reading which they make as they talk about texts (See in particular Chapters Four and Five). (2) By linking the organisation of the talk in the present setting to knowledge of the broader social contexts in which the texts under discussion circulate. In this project such knowledge is gathered by inference, introspection and independent means (See Part Two, especially Chapter Seven for discussion on this

point). In both these respects, the institutional structures and procedures which sustain particular literacy events within the wider social context form further important aspects of the social regulation of texts.

The theoretical position I put forward ties what gets said about texts in specific instances to the social organisation of the contexts in which texts circulate and reading gets done. The analytic moves I outlined above have developed over the course of the investigation. Early analysis suggested the importance of linking talk about text to the social contexts for reading. In the first instance, these links were investigated primarily through my respondents' talk about texts (See (1) above. See also Bauman, 1992). References to the social contexts for reading collected in the small group talk began to suggest the categories which would ultimately lead to the formulation of the term "social regulation of texts". As the investigation proceeded I began to look for ways of conducting a more independent investigation of the social contexts for reading which could be fed back into my analysis of the talk. (For instance, Chapter Six shows me precisely re-reading the talk through the information I have gathered elsewhere about the social regulation of the texts under discussion.) As the principles upon which such an investigation could be conducted have evolved, they have then been checked back against the data collected as talk. This double move led directly to the formulation of the concept of the social regulation of texts. The concept of the social regulation of texts guides how I look at the social contexts for reading. It also guides the kinds of explanations I offer of a given literacy event and how I understand the activity which happens within it. The concept of the social regulation of text is therefore an attempt to link

research into talk about text with research into the social contexts for reading.

Talk, text and context: Developing a language of description

The thesis aims to develop a new language of description for the data I will present. At this point I want to consider what is involved in developing a language of description in general terms, and why this is in itself a theoretical aim.

In the opening pages of a paper on "Research and Languages of Description" (Bernstein, 1996), Bernstein comments:

> "Qualitative procedures usually generate complex, multi-layered and extensive texts, for which there are rarely ready made quick fix descriptors. ... Textbooks are replete with how one approaches either the field or informants, the responsibility of the researcher to the researched, but are .. vague about the problem of description." (Bernstein, 1996, p 135).

By contrast, Bernstein argues for the central part languages of description play in the research enterprise. He goes on to consider how a language of description emerges from the data and the principles which should guide its construction. For Bernstein:

> "A language of description constructs what is to count as an empirical referent, how such referents relate to each other to produce a specific text, and translates these referential relations into theoretical objects or potential theoretical objects" (Ibid)

7

The language of description produces the theoretical object it will study. For Bernstein, this is a dialogic process. The researcher must shuttle to and fro between the data and the evolving language. Fix the language of description too soon, prior to enough time spent with the data, and the data itself will be obscured by the theoretical framework. Delay pulling back from the data too long, and the researcher runs the risk of ending up submerged in the specifics, with no way of identifying the general principles which underpin the whole.

The dialogic process as researcher shuttles between the data and the theoretical framework, has been the subject of some reflection in anthropology. For instance, Todorov, in a paper published in 1988, comments on the relationship between distance and proximity in anthropological observation. He argues that there is an irony in the way in which anthropologists justify their discipline by claiming as its strength that anthropologists operate as outsiders, at a distance from the cultural practices they observe. Yet in arguing for the validity of their observations they also claim precisely the reverse: intimate knowledge of the field, derived from sharing the lives of those they encounter within it. These two aspects of the anthropological enterprise – distance and proximity – are in continual tension with each other. Todorov's point is that it is precisely the move between these two elements which is essential to the anthropological enterprise as a whole.

> The horizon of this dialogue between cultures, this interaction between others and oneself, is communication whose limit, in its turn, is universality: a universality obtained not by deduction, from a principle raised to a dogma, but from comparison and compromise, with

the help of successive trial and error; a universal which leaves the concrete as infrequently as possible (Todorov, 1988)

In other words it is not a case of either being in there and intimately knowing or out there, equipped with a language of theory and description, but of continually moving back and forth between these two positions. This is how the anthropological enterprise is best served.

Geertz makes a similar point in arguing for thick descriptions, not abstract regularities, as the appropriate outcome for anthropological studies:

> The major theoretical contributions not only lie in specific studies − that is true in almost any field − but they are very difficult to abstract from such studies and integrate into anything one might call "culture theory" as such. Theoretical formulations hover so low over the interpretations they govern that they don't make much sense or hold much interest apart from them. That is so, not because they are not general (if they are not general, they are not theoretical), but because, stated independently of their applications, they seem either commonplace or vacant. ... one cannot write a "General Theory of Cultural Interpretation." Or rather, one can, but there appears to be little profit in it, because the essential task of theory building here is not to codify abstract regularities but to make thick description possible, not to generalize across cases but to generalize within them. (Geertz, 1973, p25−26)

Two points emerge from these readings which relate to the way in which I have conducted my enquiry. In many ways this thesis documents my attempt

to build a language of description for data which my existing frames of reference could not tug into view (See the research history below.) The language I use to describe the data has become the means for making visible aspects of literacy as a social practice which have previously been overlooked. In this sense, my description of the data is part of a theoretical enterprise. It helps formulate what it refers to, in the terms Bernstein sets out above.

Attempting to build a new language of description which can do justice to the data, rather than starting with an existing analytic framework and applying it to new material, has its own attendant difficulties, as Bernstein, Todorov and Geertz in their different ways point out. All of them agree that the language of description must both pull back from the data, and yet remain sufficiently anchored within it to allow the data to speak. Using Geertz' terms, theoretical formulations should hover low over the data. In a similar vein Todorov speaks of "a universal which leaves the concrete as infrequently as possible". Bernstein argues that in order to manoeuvre in this way, between data and language, the researcher must be prepared to live with the muddle which is the unordered data, and enjoy the pleasure of its potential in order to be able to generate the theoretical apparatus which is specific to it (Bernstein, personal communication). For Bernstein, the tension is in neither getting overwhelmed by the data nor getting in there too soon with overly precise devices which will obscure what the data is.

My methodological difficulties in developing a language of description have been precisely of this order. On the one hand, in any attempt to theorise there is a move towards abstraction, on the other the goal I have set myself is to find a theoretical formulation which can "hover low" over the data. To

deal with these difficulties I have set myself the task of tackling three different cases, each of which have raised different questions for my developing language of description (See Mitchell, 1983). I have dealt with the problems they set me by generalising within rather than across cases in the first instance, in an attempt to ensure that the theoretical formulation that emerges is not detached from, but can interact with, the data. In writing up the thesis I deal with the individual cases in the order in which I tackled them to show how the language emerged as I moved between the data and the means to describe it, and tested out the terms I had developed in relation to the next set of data.

This thesis has been about re-theorising literacy by developing a language in which to talk about the relationship between talk, text and context. By the end of the thesis, my language of description has enabled me to generalize about the processes which became the object of my enquiry. The language of description has been angled to the purposes I brought to the research, above all my intention to set reading within its social context. In undertaking a review of the research history in the rest of this chapter I attempt to show why the issue of building a language of description came to dominate the thesis and how the language itself began to evolve in relation to the data I was examining.

The research history

Below, I set out the research history to the thesis. One of my aims is to show how my thinking about the data evolved over time and why I began to think about the theoretical processes involved in constructing this thesis in terms of developing a language of description. It is very much a grounded account, tied to the specifics of this investigation.

The data I shall present comes from three different but inter-related research projects: the Television Literacy Research Project (TVLP) 1989-91, the Informal Literacies Project 1991-92 and the Negotiated Literacies Project 1993-95. The two later projects, directed by myself and for which I received funding, were set up to address my own research questions. On the first project, which had a different research focus, I was employed as a research officer. In each instance the research programmes were based at the Institute of Education and used the same schools and the same pool of students. The bulk of the data comes in the form of small group interviews collected on these projects. In this introduction I explain the way in which my own thinking about this data has been shaped by the changing circumstances in which I came to do the research. Whilst my own enquiry began with a broad set of questions which have largely set the agenda for the subsequent research (See Moss 1991a), and indeed continue to shape its focus, the ways in which I have conceptualised the area have evolved in tandem with the increasing size of the data base.

This thesis began with questions about reading and the way in which reading is taught within both English and Media Studies. My experiences as a PGCE tutor for a combined English and Media PGCE had led to long stretches of observation in both Media and English lessons. As I looked at the very different practices which student teachers were struggling to implement in English and Media Studies classrooms, I found myself considering the way in which what gets said about texts in such classrooms – the commentary upon the text and its contents – becomes the main means of judging competence at reading, indeed defining what reading is (Heap, 1990).

Whilst some texts might be shared between English and Media, and indeed the teachers of these separate subjects might in some instances be the same individuals, the kinds of commentaries which are deemed appropriate in each area (delivered by teachers and in turn elicited from their students) seemed to vary considerably. Different kinds of commentaries seemed to have different kinds of pedagogic intent, and indeed to construct different relationships between students, texts and teachers (see Moss 1991a). This observation has in many respects provided the starting point for this enquiry and ultimately led to its main focus: on the relationship between talk, text and context.

Text and Commentary

I began my enquiry with two questions. One was about the productive nature of the commentary in use. Certainly in English, the subject area which I knew best, the assumption was that commentary upon the text follows the reading. The commentary articulates a (personal and individual) response to the text which has already taken place (Corcoran and Evans, 1987; Protherough, 1983). From this perspective, the commentary provides a neutral record of that response, and does no more than bring it into public view. But my sense of the way in which different pedagogic contexts (English or Media) were structured so as to validate certain kinds of commentary and dismiss others suggested a pedagogic role for the commentary itself. In their interactions with students the teachers set out the ground rules for the kinds of commentary required, and as a consequence produced a certain kind of attention to the text, and a certain kind of relationship between texts and readers (Moss, 1991a). This productive role for talk about text was one point I wanted to explore.

The second question was about how attention to texts varied according to different social contexts for reading. Within literary criticism the notion of the "polysemic potential of the text" (Fiske, 1987) is well established. The Academy legitimises the notion of diverse readings of any given text and no longer looks for homogeneity of response. (Long gone are the days when Leavis could confidently assert "It is so, isn't it" with the full expectation of agreement from his readers). To sum up current debate in broad terms, what controls the variety of response to particular texts is then variously assumed to be

1.   differences in personal experience and/or sensitivity to the language of the text, a position favoured in English and put forward by reader-response theorists (See for example Benton et al, 1988; Corcoran and Evans, 1987; Dias and Hayhoe, 1988; Rosenblatt, 1978),

or 2.   the social identity of the reader, a position favoured in Media Studies and which provides the starting point for work in audience studies (See Morley, 1980. See Moss 1991b for a more detailed exposition on this point).

Whilst both of these perspectives have come under some attack for their perceived limitations (See Gilbert, 1987 and Morley, 1981) comparatively little has been made of the way in which the social setting in which any commentary will be enunciated exerts its effect upon what can be said about texts and readers. But my observation of English and Media classrooms suggested that it was precisely the social and institutional contexts for talk about texts which wielded the maximum effect. Whilst readers and sometimes texts remained the same, different settings led to different readings being

produced. In the light of all this, how could the link between context, text and commentary be theorised? One way of answering this question methodologically was to collect examples of talk about text in specific settings and treat them as instantiations of the more general relationships I wanted to explore.

Texts and Settings: Commentary in the English classroom

The general question about the relationship between talk, text and context initially arose in relation to a specific set of observations: the contrasts in talk about text deemed appropriate in Media Studies and English. As I shall outline below, whilst the general question remains a central concern of this thesis, it is being explored in relation to rather different data.

The initial proposal for the thesis was to concentrate on the kinds of commentary used by English teachers and required of their students in different settings and at different levels of the secondary school. By "commentary" I meant comment on the contents of the text, its themes and language. This kind of talk, or written response, is routinely elicited by English teachers in the ordinary course of lessons, and is often used as the main means of assessing students' competence within the subject whether in spoken or written form. The word "commentary" seemed appropriate here precisely because of its association with scholarly criticism and indeed the creation of a second text through which the first will be read. I proposed to pay particular attention to the commentaries which are elicited in English classrooms as part of the routine exchanges between students and teachers because it seemed to me that it was precisely in and through these verbal

interactions that what it meant to be a reader in these settings was being decided. The commentary upon the text helped shape the way of reading and determine how it would get done in this particular place.

Such an approach was supported by the work of Vygotsky, and particularly in his insistence that "every function of the child's cultural development appears twice: first on the social level and later on the individual level.... all the higher functions originate as actual relations between human individuals" (Vygotsky, 1978 p57). In this sense the social and cultural interactions in which reading is embedded, the talk which accompanies the sharing of texts between adults and children, will fundamentally shape the way in which reading will later be performed by a child alone (See Maybin and Moss, 1993).

In my initial observations I had linked differences in the kind of commentary in use to the different pedagogic settings in which texts are taught, contrasting the commentaries required in two distinct subject areas: English and Media Studies. But I also wondered if the kinds of commentary required would vary within a single subject area too. Would the commentary change along with the kinds of practices through which texts are introduced into the English classroom? There are clear distinctions to be made in relation to the use of the class reader in the first years of secondary school English, and in relation to the study of texts for public examination higher up. How would the kind of commentary required alter along with the practice? To find out, I decided to explore the link between commentary, texts and the institutional settings in which they occur, using secondary school English as a case study in the first instance.

Different texts, different settings, different kinds of talk.

However, before this project got fully under way I took up a post as a researcher on a research programme concerned with young people's conceptual understanding of television called the Television Literacy Research Project (TVLP). This was to re-direct my attention to the links between talk, texts and a rather different social context: the informal contexts in which children and young people share texts between themselves. In turn this would suggest a new way of theorising the links between talk, texts and the social contexts for reading.

Data for the TVLP project was collected in small group interviews using a sample of 90 children based in four different schools. The schools consisted of two London secondary schools with contrasting catchment areas (leafy suburbs and inner city), coupled with one of their respective primary feeder schools. The children were aged between 7 and 11. The children were encouraged to talk about their television viewing in a sequence of seven interviews, which the course team had planned in relation to key concepts in media studies such as: narrative; representation; industries; and genre. The aim of the project was to provide evidence of how such concepts developed during this phase in childhood, the assumption being that much of this conceptual development would be taking place outside of school, and so far undocumented.

From my point of view, however, the material the project team collected suggested another line of enquiry. The small group interviews were usually open-ended or structured to provoke a good deal of discussion between group members. As a consequence, this meant the research team were often

side-lined by the rest of the group, and found themselves, as it were, eaves-dropping on kinds of talk about texts which already formed part of the on-going social interactions of group members outside the interview context. Two points struck me about this data.

First, the talk often looked quite different from the kinds of talk about texts you would expect to find in either English or Media classrooms and which I labelled "commentary" above. Secondly, the talk varied in relation to itself. That is to say there was not a single speech style consistently employed by particular groups of children across all the interviews. On the contrary, different kinds of talk about text seemed to be elicited on different occasions, depending on combinations of such factors as: the texts, the media they stemmed from, the social contexts in which they were distributed and consumed and the relationship of the group to this social history (See also Camitta, 1993 on sub-rosa discourse).

Talk, text and informal settings

My original interest had been in linking talk, text and the institutional contexts for reading. I now decided to explore the kinds of talk about texts which occur as young people share texts amongst themselves in informal settings. In this new context, what might the relationship be between talk, text, and context? How might the talk vary from the kinds of talk about text most commonly elicited in classrooms? What implications might this data have for our understanding of reading as a social process overall?

With this kind of project in mind I began collecting data at the margins of the TVLP, using some of the same children but interviewing them about different kinds of print texts which they were reading in their own time: magazines; books; part-works. I then applied for and gained research funding, through an Institute of Education Research Fellowship and subsequently an ESRC award, to pursue this line of enquiry in its own right.

The texts this enquiry encompasses include those from electronic or print media which might well find their way into the media studies classroom, or in some instances the English classroom eg videos, tv programmes, computer games, comics and magazines, part-works and books. But because of the way in which the data has been collected, such texts are embedded in very different social contexts from those I originally set out to explore, ones which are rarely explicitly pedagogic. As I shall argue, the texts are consequently subject to very different kinds of "commentary" from that formally recognised in the school classroom (See Bernstein, 1990).

Broadly speaking the talk which forms the bulk of my data arises in two ways.

1) There is talk which happens when the relevant texts are in the process of being read. For instance, some of the talk was collected whilst the group being interviewed pored over texts together. In my data this mainly happens when they or I have brought along comics and magazines to the interview, or, more rarely, books. Under these circumstances groups sometimes settled down to read a single text together, or group members would choose something different from a pile of available materials. Either

way, a good deal of conversation would take place as the pages were turned. Children would read bits of text out loud to each other, and comment on the contents in various ways:

"Look at her hair, man, that's a victorian style/ Sequin dress, such an ugly style".

These kinds of comments would be interspersed with talk which, whilst not referring directly to the text itself, seemed intimately connected to the activity of shared reading and the ebb and flow of conversation as this proceeded. For instance, during a lull in the conversation whilst a group of four children were leafing through a couple of computer magazines together one of them turned to me and asked:

Khalid: "Do you have any children?"
Gemma: "I have a son."
Khalid: "Buy him a super famicom."

before the next interesting bit caught his eye and he returned to looking at the text.

2) Secondly there is talk which happens at a later time, when reading as it is conventionally understood is not going on (nobody is looking at a text), but interviewees refer to texts which they have read earlier, or know about, and pool their information in the current setting. In effect, they bring the text from one social context into another. In which case they may well comment about the circumstances of the earlier reading, or on what others said about the text as well as retell or even quote bits of text themselves and

share their own opinions about it. Most of my data was collected in this latter form.

Either way, the kinds of talk I have collected are far broader and more eclectic than the kinds of commentary so often sought in English and Media classrooms. In many respects this data does not look like what is conventionally thought of as "reading" (See Oakhill and Beard, 1995, for the more conventional view). The circumstances in which the data was collected mean that it encompasses very little of those kinds of activities which form the backbone of psychological research into reading: reading a text unaided or answering questions on it designed to focus attention on particular parts of the text (Alvermann, 1987; Neville, 1988). But this does no more than underline the difference in starting point between myself and mainstream psychologists who study literacy. Their exploration of the activity is predicated on the view that reading is an essentially internal mental and individual process which needs explication before it can be studied (Miller, G, 1988). My own view begins from the assumption that reading is an inherently social activity, intertwined with the cultural settings in which it takes place. This is broadly the perspective put forward in the literacy as social practice tradition (See Barton, 1994; Street, 1993 for an overview). The circumstances under which texts are shared, the way in which reading is part and parcel of other kinds of social activity, are germane to my enquiry, rather than "noise", which needs to be disregarded.

In setting the boundaries for my data collection and analysis, therefore, I have used the concept of the "literacy event" (For more on this point see Chapter Three). This allows me to include all the talk which arises whilst

texts are being shared as relevant to my enquiry. I do not start by looking only at talk about the contents of particular texts, or talk which is clearly linked to central themes (which I have already identified) in the texts themselves. Consequently, in looking at the talk which accompanies the circulation of texts amongst young people in informal settings I have found myself moving away from the term "commentary". This has seemed too narrowly conceived in the light of my new data, and indeed a term which in itself reflects discursive practices privileged within the subject area of English. (See p15 above)

Searching for a new vocabulary

The interview format I have used was designed to collect examples of the talk which accompanies the sharing of texts by young people in informal settings (More on this in Chapter Three). In my data the sharing of texts is taken to be both those occasions when the text can be shared as a material object, and those occasions when young people share what they know about a text, even when what they know is not based on what they themselves have already read (ie first hand knowledge) (See Chapter Four for more on this point). The aim is to link such talk to the construction of reading as a social process, differentiated according to the social contexts in which reading takes place.

Above I have tried to show how my own thinking about the relationship between talk, text and context had been changing as, partly by force of

circumstances, a new kind of data (children's informal talk about texts) came my way. Changes in my thinking are reflected in changes in the language I have used to describe the data. By this stage in the work, "commentary" had been replaced by "talk about text", a looser formulation, better able to encompass the variety of talk I was collecting. Meanwhile, "context" was becoming more problematic, as I found myself increasingly wanting to discriminate between different aspects of context, and seeing this process as fundamental to the enquiry as a whole. Following my methodological decision to treat the data as instantiations of the relationship between talk, text and context, "setting" had begun to take on a more precise meaning for this enquiry as the immediate social context in which the relationship between talk and text would be established. But other aspects of the social context for reading as yet awaited firmer differentiation. Building a language of description adequate to the theoretical task I was setting myself became an increasingly high priority (See Bernstein, 1996. For more on this point see below, Chapter Two).

Talk in informal contexts: "Did you see?" and "I like".

I had begun by thinking about the role commentary upon texts in different institutional contexts (eg English, media) had in producing different kinds of attention to text (different reading practices). As I began to reflect on the data collected on the TVLP in informal settings I found myself wondering

1)   How this kind of talk might be described, when the rules it seemed to follow deviated from those familiar within the academy?

2)   how reading was differentiated here in the absence of the formal institutional boundaries imposed by the regimentation of the academic subject area?

An indication of what I mean is given by the following instance. This extract comes from one of the earliest interviews I did during my work as a researcher on the Television Literacy Project and was collected on my first encounter with this particular group, consisting of three girls and two boys aged 12. My brief was to conduct an open-ended interview with them in which they were to be encouraged to talk about what they liked and disliked about watching television. As far as possible I was to allow the group to set their own agenda. In the event this proved disconcertingly easy to do. Grace, the main speaker in the extract below, soon wrested control of the interview from me, appointing herself as unofficial chairperson. She did so by interrupting group talk about the soap Home and Away with a direct question to me: "Don't you like any other programmes?", and immediately launched into the first of a series of questions to the rest of the group which largely kept discussion going from then on. The following extract is typical of the pattern overall and happens soon after her first intervention. In this instance I try unsuccessfully to get in on the conversation:

Grace: Did you watch Blind Date with that fat woman?

Claire: [Yeah

Grace: [Did you see her, man?

Interviewer: . Yeah, what is all that? I was reading about that in the paper this morning.

Claire: He picked her up, fl[ipping hell

24

Grace: [I know// and you see, when she,

when, I knew he was going to pick her, but I said to myself I bet

they're going to go swimming or something, and they went on the boat

trip.

Claire: No

Grace: They did [go on the boat trip

Claire: [yeah, boat trip in the Bahamas or something

Grace: Yeah

Claire: In a, in a, no rubber dinghy riding or something like that,

innit?

Grace: Yeah

Claire: It, [it was, it sounds so funny

Grace: [Yeah, that sounds good

Interviewer: So, so , have they come back, have they talked about

it yet?

Grace: [No

Claire   [They'll talk about it on Saturday

Interviewer: Oh my goodness

Natasha: I'll have to watch it tomorrow

Grace: Have to watch it. Did you watch Beadles About? Fat

people going into the tent?

And they are immediately on to the next topic. This rapid fire succession of

topics was to continue throughout much of the remaining interview, all forty

five minutes of it. At the time I found myself out of my depth and struggling

to work out what was going on. Some of that uncertainty is reflected above.

I try to pin the group down to exactly what they are talking about, elicit

precise details of who is doing what to whom, when. What is this incident

25

with the fat woman? They largely ignore my requests to expand and fill out
the contours. Instead they sketch out the minimum of details, evaluate and
pass on. When I studied the interview transcript later on I began to realise
that the talk as a whole was organised around two key phrases: "I like" and
"Did you see?" which would be followed respectively by either a rough list of
programme titles, or, as in the group exchange quoted above, a brief resume
of part(s) of a programme. The second move Grace initiates in this way is
completed like this:

Grace: Did you watch Beadles About? Fat people going into the
tent?

Sanjit?:   oh yeah

Natasha: Break-dancing (Laughing)

Claire: And she had to pull up her skirt, to get into the tent.

(Everybody laughs)

Grace: See them funny knickers, boy

And once again they move on. There is very little explicit commentary on
themes or incidents of the kind most commonly called for in English
classrooms.

What this led me to reflect on was the limitations of the vocabulary available
to me as an ex-English teacher in which to describe this kind of talk about
text on its own terms. On the one hand it didn't measure up to the kinds of
talk about texts which English teachers seek for and validate, yet it clearly
fulfilled the criteria of this particular group. At Grace's instigation they had
abandoned a more detailed kind of talk about Home and Away, which I had

recognised as familiar, in its favour. Yet I had found no immediate way of recognising this different style. In identifying young people's informal talk about texts as the object of my enquiry, therefore, I have also set myself the task of building a new language of description (Bernstein, 1996), capable of handling this range of talk from an ethnographic perspective (See Green and Bloome, forthcoming). That is to say I wanted to begin from a positive recognition of what the participants in the talk were up to, rather than judge it in terms which ultimately stem from and are tied to different social contexts, such as the practice of literary criticism or the study of media texts, where other priorities may be in play, and other judgements are to be made. (Similar constraints and problems for students and teachers have been identified in the interface between students and tutors in higher education where established disciplines often act to exclude what students want to say. See Ivanic and Moss, 1991; Street, 1995.)

Different ways of talking about text: registers or dialects?

When I began looking at the data collected on the TVLP two aspects of the talk had struck me: the extent to which the talk differed from the kinds of talk validated in English and media studies classrooms; the extent to which the talk varied in relation to itself. The first point had suggested the necessity of building a language of description from an ethnographic perspective (L2, in Bernstein's terms. See below, Chapter Two); the second raised questions about why and how ways of talking about text varied as they did (This would be tackled in terms of Bernstein's L1, the language of explanation. See Chapter Two below.).

The notion of difference in talk about text has consistently threaded its way through my enquiry so far. The enquiry began with the observation of different ways of talking about text employed in English and Media Studies. When I began to look at children's talk about text in informal settings, other differences emerged. That is to say there was not one consistent way of talking about texts which children drew on, regardless of the text or social context in which they were being asked to speak. The strategies which the group quoted above used to organise their talk – "Did you see?" and "I like" – were by no means universally employed in the data. Indeed, during the first interview round from which this transcript comes, they were the only group I encountered who did this.

This raised two problems. Firstly, what was the relationship between the children's ways of talking about texts and those of the adult interviewers in the interview? The example I quote from the data above is one instance where I as interviewer found myself baffled by the kind of talk I was collecting. My expectations of how the talk about text would be organised, what it would be like, were confounded. The data collected for the project as a whole is full of such moments, when interviewers struggle to keep up with the interviewees. Nowhere was this more pronounced than in the set of interviews devised to collect information on character and representation (For an extended discussion on this point see Chapter Three below). In most cases, the interviewer's ways of talking about texts did not prevail. The small group format for the interviews seemed to consistently hand more power to the interviewees to organise the talk as they wanted, and restrict the ability of the interviewer to dictate terms. But what would happen in other contexts? How would differences in ways of talking about text be negotiated there?

Secondly, how could one distinguish between the different ways in which the children talked about texts amongst themselves? In the absence of the explicit regulation of different ways of talking about texts to be found in formal settings, what led to one way of talking about text being invoked rather than another? Indeed, in these informal settings, how could one way of talking about texts be clearly identified from another? Deciding to start from the participant's perspective certainly gave me a way to begin to approach these questions, but it by no means guaranteed answers.

Registers and dialects of literacy

In examining the differences in ways of talking about texts employed by the interviewers and the children, and differences in ways of talking about texts employed by the children on different occasions, I began to think initially about registers or dialects of literacy. Could I usefully draw a parallel with work on language, and think of the data as consisting of registers or dialects of literacy? As with the relationship between standard english and other varieties mapped out by sociolinguistics, so there might, in the case of literacy, be a standard (dominant) literacy, a way of commenting upon and sharing knowledge about texts, which would be preferred in official contexts, and against which other ways of doing just this would be judged (and found wanting). (See Street, 1994; Street and Street, 1991 for work which pursues a similar line of thought.)

The evidence on these early tapes suggested that there clearly were other ways of talking about texts than those officially sanctioned in school settings. Indeed, the mismatch between the kinds of talk we were collecting and those credited in media studies was to cause a considerable problem for the fulfilment of the remit of the TVLP (See Buckingham, 1993). Thinking

about this as a distinction between dominant ways of doing things (here represented by the interviewers) and the marginalised (represented by the children) at once complicated the media education project, committed as it is to bringing what children know into school, as if this were a straightforward transaction. But it also suggested a powerful tool for re-examining the relationship between what children know to say about texts outside school and what they are invited to rehearse inside school (Buckingham, Fraser and Mayman, 1990 provides an interesting example of some of the confusion in this area.)

To look at the data for evidence of difference from, rather than reduplication of, what schools and classrooms already validated, might also clear up another conundrum for English teachers: the poor showing of some children on Open Study questions at GCSE. In the late eighties some of the GCSE exam boards, most notably NEA, had included as part of their course work requirements an invitation to students to write about a broader selection of texts than those normally studied in the classroom. Partly this was an attempt to get away from the canon and to democratise the English curriculum. So students could take a theme such as romance and write about Mills and Boon books as well as *Jane Eyre*. Or those who might effectively be considered non-readers in school terms, struggling with the set texts, could be invited to write about reading they might be doing out of school to support hobbies, using as texts newspapers, comics and magazines as well as books. Yet despite the good intentions here results were often disappointing as students struggled to put together a coherent narrative, let alone dwell on themes and style in the way in which English teachers preferred. Could it be that the kinds of texts students were sharing outside of school were too firmly embedded in another kind of literacy register? That in bringing in

the non-school texts, without allowing for the non-school register, issues were getting more difficult for students rather than easier? (There are some interesting parallels to be drawn here with the treatment of students' use of the romance genre in their creative writing for English. See Moss, 1989.)

That this might be a fruitful line of enquiry was suggested by existing work in anthropology and sociology already running along similar lines. The complex interface between home and school literacy practices and the potential for mismatch between them had already been identified as an important topic in relation to the early years of schooling by both Shirley Brice Heath and Sarah Michaels, amongst others (Heath, 1982; Michaels, 1986). For both writers the objective had been to describe community literacy practices in their own terms, highlighting their divergence from standard practices in school in an attempt to re-examine critically questions of educational success or failure. In the process what becomes clear is the way in which school literacy practices are more partial, less obviously the only way to do things than commonsense might suggest, and indeed, dependent on particular and highly selective language varieties or registers that have become entrenched as dominant and official.

The stress on the specificity of school literacy practices, and the ways in which they get privileged seemed helpful. Yet in the case of my own data, the notion that the differences observed might be generated by community literacies, at odds with the schools', seemed unlikely. The interviewees from whom I quoted above included one sikh boy, two black british girls of afro-caribbean descent and one working class white girl. It was hard to see how they could be treated as a homogenous group. From this point of view the notion of register (language defined by the context of use) rather than

dialect (language defined by the social identity of the speaker) seemed a more useful borrowing from linguistics. It would also leave open the possibility of "multi-literacies", in which children might invoke different ways of talking about texts in different social contexts. Again this suggested an explanation for the kind of fluid pattern I was finding in my data where children didn't show themselves to be versed in a single way of talking about texts so much as moving between different ways of talking about texts on different occasions.

Explaining variation by defining the social context for talk about text

I began my enquiry proper by looking for evidence of different ways of talking about texts. I wanted both to describe and to distinguish between them, linking that difference to the different social contexts in which texts are shared. Was it something about a particular setting which produced a particular way of talking about text? How did the social context shape the way in which reading got done? In examining the social context for talk about text I found myself increasingly drawn to distinguish between context in its past and present dimensions. On the one hand there was the present context (the setting) in which the talk was taking place, with all the variables inherent there; on the other hand there were the many other contexts for reading which readers drew on in shaping the present encounter, in effect the social history of texts and readers which would also inform what went on.

I had begun to think about the links between talk, text and context as inherently varied, rather than uniform. But the differences seemed not to be

linked to the social position of readers per se (their community membership) but to other aspects of the social context which brought text and reader together. How could one account for these? A measure of the problem is given by the following example. One of the clearest differences in ways of talking about texts which emerged early on in the data collected on the Television Literacy Project related to talk about television and video. Talk about video consistently varied from talk about television in so far as individual speakers got to hold the floor for far longer, and were far more likely to embark on a blow by blow plot summary, at least of individual incidents. Their re-tellings were far more explicit. The kind of fragmentary and collective marking out of the text seen in the extracts above, where the talk revolved about television, was absent. The following provides a typical example of talk about video, collected from the same school at the same stage in the interview cycle as the earlier material but with a different group of students.

Steven: [I like Kickboxer

Gemma: Kickboxer? What's that?

Steven: It's a video, it's about this um,/

?   Kickboxer [one?

Steven: [there's this, yeah, and there's this man, he's the champion of kickboxing, and this other, like, he's a much better person, kick breaks his spine, and he can only move his top half, and his brother swe, swears revenge on the other man, and um, the man's

like, men, um, kidnap his girlfriend and the man, so he won't beat the

other men, he said if you win I, um your sister and that will get,

girlfriend will get killed, and so his teacher goes off and saves them

but it's not like, all like that and then he comes, when they come back

he kills the person/

In this instance the most obvious variable in the social context is the

technology: video not tv. Yet the technology also stands for a particular

social history. That is to say, the technology is shaped by the cultural uses

to which it is put at any one moment in time (Williams, 1974). It does not

stand outside of that cultural context. To expand this point, Raymond

Williams, for instance, points out that the technological means of

broadcasting moving pictures was actually invented at about the same time

as the radio, but no one could think what to do with it. It was only following

the advent of cinema, itself modelled on the theatre, that people began to

have an idea of what the technology which makes up television might be used

for. At the same time there is no inherent logic in developing television as an

individual, family based technology designed for viewing in the domestic

environment. In other societies, notably India, it has developed differently,

with most rural villages having a single large receiver placed in a communal

meeting place.

In the case of the social context for television and video use within the UK at

the time the data was collected, broadcast television was still structured

primarily around four terrestrial channels broadcasting simultaneously to

domestically based sets. Whilst satellite and cable television were beginning

to make inroads into the domestic market, they had by no means reached the

kind of proliferation of choice already characteristic of, for instance,

broadcasting in America. What this means therefore is that in the UK at that time there was a limited amount of programming on offer to large numbers of people. Consequently the chances of individuals who watch in different places having seen the same things are high. When they subsequently come together identifying what they hold in common is relatively easy ("Did you see?"). In relation to video, however, the picture is very different. Whilst video stores may be promoting the same range of recent releases, what they have elsewhere in the store may be much less uniform, much more a matter of chance, whilst the circumstances in which individuals borrow or view may be much more idiosyncratic. Consequently fewer texts are likely to be held in common. This may account for at least some of the differences in talk observed above. There is a different social history here. What on the surface may appear to be a difference in technologies also represents different ways of sharing texts, different ways of socially organising reading. The argument I put forward in the thesis is that these latter aspects are the key to understanding different ways of talking about texts.

Talk, text and the social histories through which texts are shared.

I set out to describe and distinguish between different ways of talking about text. In exploring different ways of talking about text I turned to questions about the relationship between talk, text and the social contexts in which texts get shared, both at the present moment when the talk happens (the setting), and in the past, the social history which has brought texts and readers together. But a number of variables seemed to be at work here. In the examples quoted above the technology comes to stand for different ways

of sharing texts. Television programming, in this instance, represents common property, allowing participants to pool their knowledge; videos, by contrast, are treated as individual property, the speaker claiming exclusive rights over their contents. But this distinction doesn't always hold. Different groups come to hold different kinds of texts in common, whether the texts stem from video, television or print media. The technology alone, and its social organisation, doesn't fully determine this. A social network with an interest in a particular text will find ways to share it; or indeed individuals may seek out texts which are defined precisely against the common interests of others in their peer group.

Within traditional text-based media studies such relationships between readers and the texts they converge on are studied in terms of targeting. Some texts are presumed to speak more powerfully to the social experience of certain sections of the populace, who consequently seek them out. The romance and soap opera are the genres most commonly explored in this way in relation to their female audience. However, in my data, those texts which were shared in any one school, the ways in which the audience for that text was formed, seemed much more idiosyncratic, much more subject to local factors. For instance, Red Dwarf, scheduled on BBC2 after the nine o'clock watershed in the first years of data collection, had achieved massive popularity amongst the form group at the middle class secondary school in my sample during 1990, at least partly because the dominant boy in the class had made it a topic of conversation amongst his friends, from whence interest had spread. At the inner city secondary school only the middle class girls in the sample appeared to have heard of it, or found any time for it, and it had not become of general interest. At the inner city primary school on the other hand it was very popular amongst a group of girls, both

white and black, middle and working class. From data such as this I concluded that a good deal of the work which would establish the audience for a particular text, and the way in which it would be read, was taking place off-text, away from the site of the first reading, in the social contexts where texts are shared. And talk about text was here playing the primary role. Talk in my data becomes the place in which readers are invited into a particular practice or indeed later may jettison it in favour of something else. This is the basic position I will be putting forward in the thesis.

The literacy event as a social performance

Borrowing the notion of registers from sociolinguistics and applying it to literacy practices proved useful in the early stages of the research in so far as it emphasised the possibility of variation in practice: that there would be different ways of talking about texts in different social contexts. The associated notion of a standard, or dominant, variety, holding the privileged place in official settings (Grillo, 1989), also seemed helpful, not least because it highlighted the way in which non-standard varieties might be ignored or under-valued. Such a perspective suggested that, in seeking to document other ways of talking about texts, I would have to deal with my own more privileged forms of discourse, too.

However, there were drawbacks. First, borrowing key concepts from linguistics when the data consists of talk seemed to encourage placing all the attention on the surface features of the spoken text, as if it were in the language alone that differences could be defined. Yet, as the example of talk about tv versus talk about video given above demonstrates, other features

of the social context besides those stemming from the immediate setting for speech needed consideration. My interest was not so much in the language per se as in how talk about text could be linked to the social context(s) in which texts are consumed. For my purposes, the talk, the text and the social context(s) in which the text circulates cohere into a single unit which needs to be investigated as a whole. "Register" is unhelpful as a concept in so far as it prioritises the language used as evidence over and above other aspects of the event.

Secondly, "register" suggests that boundaries between different ways of talking about text would be firmly marked. There would be consistent varieties of language which could be identified, in and through the surface features of the spoken text, and which would be elicited in response to consistent aspects of the social context. But the relevant contexts for the literacy events I was observing were multiple. That is to say, the context for the speech itself, the immediate setting in which talk about text would take place, was not the defining moment. The complex and diverse social history which had brought texts and readers together in particular settings, and which could be differently invoked by participants (See Chapter Five), needed to be fully taken into account. The concept of "register" is not adequate to this task.

In my own thinking about the data I no longer refer to register. Nor have I replaced that concept with another synonym suggesting an equally tightly bounded phenomenon: genres, or even literacies. There is a great deal of work on literacy as a social practice which refers to "literacies". (See, for example, Baynham, 1995; Street, 1984) Whilst in sympathy with the general aim of this terminology, particularly the reminder that there is more than one

way of being literate, the idea that my data represents different "literacies" has proved no more helpful than thinking in terms of different registers. There are different ways of talking about texts to be found in my data. I am quite clear on that point. I am equally clear that they do represent different ways of doing reading and being a reader. But those differences are not sufficiently formalised and rule bound, on the one hand, or capable of being consistently invoked, on the other, to require the firmness of boundaries implied by "literacies". They lack sufficient continuity from one setting to another.

Instead I have come to think of my data as a sequence of literacy events in which the relationship of text to context is always played out or enacted in specific settings, with all their inherent variables. Readers invoke what they know about texts and about reading, about the social contexts in which texts circulate, in the current setting. Such knowledge is unstable in so far as it will always be responsive to the current setting, as well as shaped by other aspects of the social context which have brought text and readers together, and these can vary. In this sense I have found myself moving away from the kind of sociolinguistics which stresses the formal properties that make varieties of language distinct, and towards the kind of performance-centred perspective developed by Bauman amongst others in work on oral narrative (Bauman, 1986). This perspective stresses the way in which the performance of a particular tale is always geared to the current audience and the event in which the tale is re-presented (Bauman, 1986; Finnegan, 1992). Events themselves are:

> situated social accomplishments in which structures and conventions may provide precedents and guidelines for the range of alternatives

possible, but the possibilities of the alternatives, the competencies and goals of the participants, and the emergent unfolding of the event make for variability. (Bauman, 1986, p4)

This more fluid conception of the relationship between text and context is closer to the perspective I have adopted in respect of my own data (See, for instance, my analysis of Shazad, Steven and David's talk about horror in Chapter Four). In many respects my interviewees tell the texts they have read in the current setting, gearing their performance of the text accordingly, whilst drawing on the broader social history through which the texts have circulated.

Researching literacy in its social context: the social regulation of text

This enquiry began with questions about the relationship between talk, text and context. It has evolved into a more specific enquiry into the relationship between talk, text and the social contexts for reading. Elsewhere in the literature on literacy as a social practice, the social contexts for reading are defined in terms of the aims and purposes of the readers (Barton and Padmore, 1991), their membership of specific social networks (Saxena, 1994) or the routines of everyday life in which reading is embedded (Morley, 1986; Radway, 1984) (See Chapter Two for more on this point). By contrast, I define the social contexts for reading in terms of the social regulation of texts. By the social regulation of texts I mean those social processes which shape: the ways in which texts are distributed; how access to texts is controlled or accomplished; how texts are to be consumed, or knowledge of them displayed; the organisation of institutional settings and procedures

which impinge on these factors. The thesis as a whole records the way in which this formulation occurred.

The individual instances I explore in my data when readers talk about texts in specific settings represent instantiations of those social processes. The social regulation of texts shapes both the immediate event and the longer social history of which it is part. In teasing out the relationships between the broader social processes and the individual instance, in finding a language of description to adequately realise what I have been grasping for, I would argue that I have been constructing a new object of enquiry. The thesis achieves its aims if it is able to bring into public view and make amenable to analysis new aspects of the literacy process not previously open to scrutiny.

- Chapter Two -

In which I review the literature

In 1991 I published two articles in which I argued the case for considering reading as a socially differentiated practice (Moss 1991a; 1991b). These came out of a dissatisfaction with the available vocabularies deployed to describe the interaction between text and reader within both English and Media Studies, particularly at the secondary school level (See Moss, 1991a for a detailed account). At its most succinct the argument went like this:

> The old view that texts simply impose their meaning on readers has long since crumbled in the face of the evidence: audience studies show pretty conclusively that there is room for manoeuvre. Indeed attitudes have so changed that it is now uncontroversial to talk of texts as a "polysemic potential of meaning"(Fiske,1987,p67) rather than as carriers of a single message. By stressing that more than one meaning is available, that complete closure of the text is rarely achieved, a space opens up between text and audience. In the reader-response tradition this space is then filled differently according to individual sensitivity [(Gilbert, 1987)]. There is no room for social, political, historical questions, just an individual free for all in choosing which meanings to make. Within media studies the temptation is to see a pre-given social identity of race, class, gender, as controlling against the

possibilities of infinite variety. In this way readings are not so much "produced" in particular settings as assumed to be the product of a fixed exchange between the reader's social position and the text. I want to argue, however, that readers use their knowledge of reading as a socially differentiated practice to make sense of texts. What it means to be a reader varies according to how the text is circulated, what kinds of attention are paid to it, in what social setting. (Moss, 1991b)

In other words it is the social contexts in which reading takes place which constrain the meanings which are made.

From English and Media Studies to literacy as a social practice

In this thesis I have set out to explore and define more closely what I mean by "reading as a socially differentiated practice", and to consider how such practices might be both acquired and passed on. In doing so I have turned away from the dominant approaches in English and Media Studies per se to work on literacy as a social practice as it has evolved across a range of disciplines, but particularly within anthropology, social linguistics and sociology (See Barton, 1994; Luke and Baker, 1990; and Street 1993 for overviews of the field)

Print literacy/visual literacy: Anthropology, literacy and Media Studies.

Much of the most influential work on literacy as a social practice has been developed in anthropology, and primarily in relation to print literacy (see Besnier and Street, 1991; Gee, 1986 Street, 1993; for accounts of these developments). Anthropologists have also tackled the transmission of oral texts within a given culture (See Finnegan, 1992; Bauman, 1986; Goody, 1987; Ong, 1982). By contrast my own interest is in the full range of media texts which circulate in informal contexts. I don't discriminate in favour of print or against primarily visual media, but instead consider each media text as an ensemble of words and images, presented in different ways. In this context, turning to work on literacy as a social practice means also extending its scope by applying its insights to new areas.

The combination of texts which I work with may be relatively novel for work on literacy as a social practice, but both the texts and the context of use which I study (the informal domain) are familiar to Media Studies. Within the last decade, there has been an increasingly strong movement within Media Studies away from textual analysis to the study of the audience for actual media texts and their interactions with the technologies through which texts are distributed. The strength of interest has now spawned an independent area of research, Audience Studies, which makes extensive use of ethnographic methods to examine how readers make sense of texts in everyday settings. Much of the work in this area stems from David Morley's *The Nationwide Audience*, which showed how different social groups varied in the extent to which they negotiated, or resisted, as well as accommodated themselves to, the preferred readings offered in one edition of the regional TV news programme, Nationwide. In the original research, interviewees were grouped according to social background (eg bank-managers, black women, male apprentices). Each group was then shown the same episode of

44

Nationwide and invited to discuss their reactions (Morley, 1980). The diversity of response suggested new areas for exploration, in particular what people actually do with the media in their own homes, and how that might structure and explain different readings. This has continued to be a strong theme in Morley's own work (Morley, 1986; Morley and Silverstone 1990), whilst others in the area have undertaken similar kinds of investigation (Gray, 1987; Hobson, 1982; Radway, 1984).

Media Studies, ethnography and the social routines of everyday life

In using ethnographic procedures to examine media use in the home, this kind of research has concentrated on the social routines of everyday life in which texts are embedded. Morley's *Family Television* is a good example in this respect. He gathered evidence about who was watching television, how, at what time, in relation to what other domestic activities, and in conjunction with what other family members. The picture that emerges is of the men in the household enjoying uninterrupted access to the kinds of television they designate as important, in what they clearly consider to be their leisure time, whereas women watch in much more distracted fashion, accommodating themselves to the patterns of others' demands, both on their own time and labour. In contrast to the men they are seen to be still at work and consequently their viewing preferences take second place (Morley, 1986). Ann Gray's research on women's use of video in the home comes to very similar conclusions (Gray, 1987).

Concentrating on the social routines which structure media use provides some very useful insights, for instance into gender relations in the home and how these are played out in respect of media consumption. Such work clearly identifies the variety of kinds of attention which can be paid to the same text. Yet curiously this research rarely links such findings to what interviewees have to say about individual texts and their contents. The kind of detailed analysis of different readings of a single text which comprised the main body of work in the Nationwide study is wholly lacking. Turning to ethnography in this instance seems to have provided answers to a different set of questions.

Radway's *Reading the Romance* — a case in point

An interesting example of this split in the focus for research is to be found in the work of Janice Radway (Radway, 1984; 1987). Unusually for work now generally considered to be part of audience studies, her book, *Reading the Romance*, has its roots in English literary criticism, rather than Media Studies. Her investigation of women's romance reading falls into two distinct parts: on the one hand she surveyed and interviewed a group of romance readers about their reading habits; on the other hand she used textual analysis to analyze the meanings of the romances they preferred (ideal romances) and those they disliked (failed romances). The two sets of data don't always sit well with each other. Indeed, Radway herself argues for the necessity to "distinguish analytically between the significance of the event of reading and the meaning of the text constructed as its consequence". (Radway, 1987 p7) This distinction is crucial to her work because she can find no other way to reconcile how her readers manage to portray the act of

reading as both combative and compensatory: she describes the women's act of reading romances as in effect a "declaration of independence" (Ibid, p 7), an oppositional act (see ibid p210) within the context of the home, and yet observes that, in their comments on the text itself, they appear to adopt a far more conservative tone.

In making a clear distinction between the event or act of reading and the meaning readers produce from the text, Radway analyses her own data in two different ways. On the one hand in looking at the act of reading, Radway clearly sets her data in a social context by looking at how and when women read in the home; on the other hand, when her respondents comment on the structure of the texts they read, or the contents and the language, she puts the social processes which produce such readings on one side and instead relates what they have to say to theories of language, and attitudes and beliefs about action in the real world (Ibid, Chp 6). If the distinction between what people say about texts and what they do with them is a problem for Radway, others in the area simply avoid the potential for conflict by not collecting such a range of data.

Yet Radway's own data suggests another way of proceeding here, one which is implicit in her comments but never fully articulated or followed up. I want to follow up this point more fully by concentrating on one aspect of Radway's investigation: the relationship she discusses between the women's reading of romance and reading for facts.

Reading the romance: facts and fantasies

Radway herself comments about the initial set of interviews she undertook with her respondents:

> In embarking for Smithton, I was prepared to engage in detailed conversations about the connections between love and sex, the differences between romance and pornography, and the continued validity of traditional definitions of femininity. I was not however, prepared to spend as much time as I did conversing about the encyclopedic nature of romance fiction...I was surprised that immediately after extolling their benefits as an "escape" nearly every reader informed me that the novels teach them about faraway places and times and instruct them in the customs of other cultures. ...Indeed the tapes and transcripts of the interviews confirm that we spent more time discussing this aspect of romance reading than any other topic except its escape function and the nature of the romantic fantasy. (Ibid, p107)

Radway puts forward two rather different arguments to account for the women's view of romance reading as "reading for instruction". On the one hand she treats it as a good cover story to be deployed by her respondents against those who might otherwise dismiss their reading as a waste of time. In reality, this group is largely composed of the women's husbands, who, Radway's readers say, can be won over when the women "demonstrated that they learned from their books.. by recounting a concrete "fact" ...by explaining word derivations or by elaborating on the geographical features of a foreign country." Treating the romances as sources of information provides both books and readers with a status they would otherwise lack: "In effect they establish themselves as hard-working, achievement-

orientated individuals by claiming that romances are "factual" and therefore filled with information that can be extracted and used by the industrious reader." (Ibid, p107-118) By invoking this image of themselves and their books, the women try to protect an activity which gives them pleasure, with no more questions asked.

But Radway also treats such claims for the romance as indicative of a set of beliefs about the world in general and language in particular which, she argues, might have profound implications for these women's approach to the romance as a whole. This point forms the basis for a whole chapter towards the close of the book called "Language and Narrative Discourse: The Ideology of Female Identity" (Ibid chapter 6). In her earlier analysis of the same data, Radway had argued that the women were able simultaneously to hold the view that romances are fantasies and contain accurate information about the real world because her readers maintained a clear distinction between plot and setting (Ibid, p109). These are then treated differently. The women recognise that the plot is fantastic; but information about the setting is considered to be accurate, and known to be the subject of considerable research on the writer's part. When she returns to the subject again Radway puts forward a different argument:

> The group's ..insistent emphasis on the romance's capacity to instruct
> them about history and geography suggests that they also believe that
> the universe of the romantic fantasy is somehow congruent, if not
> continuous, with the one they inhabit. One has to wonder, then, how
> much of the romance's conservative ideology about the nature of
> womanhood is inadvertently "learned" during the reading process and

generalized as normal, natural female development in the real world. (Ibid p186)

Radway justifies this speculation through arguments about the nature of language. Literary critics, she says, understand that the language of literary texts connotes rather than denotes "things in some objectively given and immediately present world" (Ibid, p188). They hold to a post-Saussurean view of language that it creates what it seems to signify. By contrast her interviewees fail to comment on the language of the text no matter how hard she tries to elicit their view (Ibid, p190), because, she argues, they have not noticed it as a separate entity from the things which it purports to represent. Language for these readers is

"nothing more than a system of names for that which truly exists. ...They treat that language, therefore, as if it simply designated a world entirely congruent or continuous with their own. Because they are not aware that this simulacrum is itself constructed by the language, ... they freely assimilate the fictional world to their own, assuming in effect, that all imaginary worlds "naturally" resemble the world with which they are so familiar. (Ibid, p191)

What Radway is doing here is balancing one way of reading – her own – against another way of reading – her readers – and judging the latter against criteria derived from the former. One way of reading – her own – then simply has superior truth status: it reflects the way language really operates and consequently yields more profound insights into the nature of the texts. Her romance readers are less sophisticated critics.

In marshalling her argument at this point it is noticeable how little Radway refers to what her respondents themselves have to say about their reading and about the texts. The data she introduces to support her view is almost all drawn from her own textual analysis of the romance. Here what she highlights are the various literary techniques – the tricks in language – which give the genre its mimetic effect, in particular the blending of referential language with the literary and the redundancy and repetition in description. She goes on to comment that "readers themselves "frame" or type these descriptive passages as valuable "information" and "instructional" material that can be stored as "knowledge" for use at a later date." (Ibid, p195). The apparently easy transfer of material from one setting – the fictional world of the romance text – to another – discourse in the real world – makes Radway worry about what else may be being carried over in this way from text to real life.

Reading the romance: a socially differentiated practice

My primary purpose in scrutinising Radway's argument here is not so much to disagree with her assessment of the conservative or progressive impact of the romance on this group of women but to take issue with the view of reading which underlies her analysis. It seems to me that the seeds of an alternative approach lie buried within Radway's commentary on her own data. In her initial analysis of her readers' claims for the informative nature of the romance, Radway stresses what such claims allow the reader to do. They deflect criticism of romance reading and accord the activity a higher status than it otherwise would attract. In other words what readers say about texts and about their reading has a social function, tied to the social

contexts in which the texts circulate and in which they are commented on. (Radway herself makes the point that one reason the women may have been so keen to stress the knowledge-value of the romance in interview with her is precisely because of her own status (Ibid p107 and footnote 25 p252). She is, at least in the first instance (See ibid p 114-5), treated as part of the sceptical group of critics who treat the genre as trash, of whom these readers show themselves to be all too aware, and against whom they seek to defend themselves.)

The claims made for the romance in this instance - that it can act as a source of information - show these readers to be aware of the social value attached to a particular kind of reading practice, one which on occasions they themselves adopt through abstracting and then retelling nuggets of information from an otherwise clearly fictional text. That this is not the only way, let alone the prime way, of reading the genre is indeed made clear by the women's other comments on the texts.

Texts therefore can be subject to more than one kind of reading practice. Moreover, different reading practices will produce different kinds of texts, at different times. Such practices are grounded in the social contexts in which texts circulate and reading takes place. In other words, Radway's readers re-produce the romance differently, according to the context in which they comment on it. What readers say about texts, as well as about readers and about reading should, therefore, be analyzed in relation to the social context which spawns such comments and such practices, rather than treated as an abstract judgement on the contents which always holds, no matter what the context. (This point applies just as well to what critics say about text as it does to the ordinary reader.)

In looking again at Radway's data I am indicating the broad outlines of my own approach. My argument is that Radway's readers, in their comments on the romance as well as on the act of reading, show themselves to be aware of reading as a socially differentiated practice. Knowledge of reading as a differentiated practice structures both how they read and how they present themselves as readers. Such knowledge is diverse rather than uniform, and exercised in relation to specific, and changing, social contexts. In turning to the social context for reading we don't have to lose sight of what gets said about text. On the contrary there are ways of treating talk about text as evidence of the social processes through which reading itself is structured. This assertion gives my own enquiry its particular shape, for in exploring reading in its social context, I have started with the talk which accompanies and, I would argue, helps shape the consumption of texts.

Talk as evidence for reading as a social practice

Within English, researchers collect talk about text in quite precise circumstances. Both researchers, and indeed teachers, structure occasions for talk so that, in their judgement, it can be used to make visible what otherwise would remain inaccessible: the earlier internal mental processes which take place as each individual reader works through the text. Much of the reader-response criticism (Rosenblatt, 1978) which has fuelled a great deal of classroom-based research into reading in the secondary school in recent years, organises data collection in this way (eg Protherough,1983; Purves and Beach, 1972). Data produced for analysis is generally in the form of group discussion about a particular text which will have been provided by

the teacher. Participants are encouraged to exchange their views so that they will verbalise their earlier responses to the text. The talk collected in this way is then treated as a record of the personal response of individuals within the group, and a potential measure of their sensitivity to language and themes (See Corcoran and Evans, 1987; Benton et al, 1988 for examples; Moss 1991a and Gilbert 1987 for a critique). Such group discussion is valued as a means of teaching texts because it is assumed that participants have the potential to learn from others whose response may be more sensitive; whilst in the process of returning to the text as evidence for their own views, they may gain further insights as they struggle to articulate what they have found there. The main emphasis of such research remains focused on the perceived relationship between individuals and the text and the extent to which this can be enhanced through talk.

By contrast, from my perspective, such opportunities for talk about texts in classrooms provide one of the key sites where pupils learn what it means to be a reader in a particular kind of institutional setting. In other words, the way the talk is structured in such settings, through the interaction between teacher and pupils, produces one way of reading. It is not a neutral record of what happens between texts and readers at all times and in all places (See Moss, 1991a). Instead the talk produces, and indeed legitimates, a particular kind of reading practice which is tied to the particular social context where it is enacted. (See also Baker, 1990, Bloome, 1994, and Heap, 1990 who examine the specific role of talk about text in the classroom in inducting children into culturally privileged ways of reading.) Such talk about text is a socially and culturally specific event in its own right. I would expect other social contexts to spawn other kinds of talk about text, and in the process, other ways of reading them too.

In contrast to work in English, Media studies has long sought to document talk about text which occurs in everyday settings (Fiske calls this kind of data tertiary texts, Fiske, 1987.). Such talk rarely depends on the kind of detailed scrutiny of the actual text, line by line, or frame by frame, which forms the bulk of the critical practice in educational settings. On the contrary, much of the talk happens off text, as it were, some time after the initial moment of consumption, in other contexts where groups come together for purposes which they would rarely recognise as deliberate study of a text. Most of the work here has been done on talk about soap operas, and given a predominantly female audience, who regale each other with the goings on of favourite or most loathed characters, has often been characterised as gossip (Brown, 1987; Hobson, 1982; Liebes and Katz, 1990). In other words the social character of the talk, the function it has for a group as a whole in their everyday lives, is brought to the fore.

For myself, evidence for the social currency of this kind of talk about text, happening away from the site of the original reading and situated in the ongoing exchanges between individuals, came early on in my interest in this whole area when I was working on the Television Literacy Research Project. Asked to talk about what they liked or disliked about television in an initial interview, very few of the sample of secondary age children I was interviewing had any difficulties in sustaining talk about a wide variety of different television and video texts, often ignoring my role as interviewer altogether as they argued amongst themselves and indeed seemed to set their own agenda. Indeed, the extent to which such talk was deeply

intertwined with the social relations of the interview group, and its social purposes became a significant problem for a research project which had set out to establish measures of children's conceptual understanding of television that could be matched with the theoretical concerns of Media Studies (See Buckingham, 1993a for an account of the research project and an attempt to resolve some of these issues). Faced with these kinds of difficulties in this research context it was tempting to abandon the original agenda and instead turn the question around, so that, for instance in the case of talk about television one might ask how does such talk serve the social purposes of this group? (See Buckingham, 1993a) This is certainly the kind of approach which Potter and Wetherell propose in *Discourse and Social Psychology* (Potter and Wetherell, 1987) but in foregrounding the social purposes of the group, such an approach risks obscuring the particular role of the object or activity around which talk revolves in any one instance.

Recognising that talk about text serves social purposes strengthens my interest in the wider role such talk might have in the circulation of the text and the construction of reading as a social practice. This is borne out by my analysis of Radway's readers' comments above. The fact that passing a particular judgement upon the romance text allows the readers to claim a status for themselves with the interviewer or their husbands doesn't lead me to dwell on the social relations between the interviewees and these others. Instead it has led me to consider how reading gets done differently in different contexts, and the role the social relations between participants may have in structuring that practice.

To restate my case, I am interested in the kinds of talk about text which occur during the ebb and flow of everyday conversation. My question is

what does this kind of talk do for texts, for readers and for how reading gets done? What role does it have in the distribution and consumption of texts in specific social and cultural settings? How does it link the meanings made to the social contexts for reading?

The role of talk about text

In stressing the importance of the role of talk about text in understanding reading as a social practice, I am drawing on different strands of work within the field of literacy as a social practice. Much of this work has been developed either in relation to the study of formal educational settings in which reading, or other kinds of literacy instruction, are taking place (Baker, 1990; Bloome, 1989; Collins, 1986; Cazden, 1988; Gregory, 1992; Heap, 1990; Michaels, 1986; Mills, 1988); or in relation to the study of other less formal contexts in which children are learning about reading from other members of the adult community (Heath, 1983; Dombey, 1992; Minns, 1990; Taylor, 1983). Whatever the setting, the data which is scrutinised is the talk which accompanies the distribution and use of print texts, or other activities which seem to have a close bearing on the acquisition of literacy. Such studies variously draw on perspectives derived from social linguistics, anthropology, sociology and social psychology. Common assumptions that hold this work together include that the language used in talk about texts in specific social contexts has a fundamental role in building the practice; that the language used will vary with the setting, and establish different kinds of practice; that the differences identified may have important implications for the way in which school literacy is distributed and acquired. Differences

are most frequently explored in terms of continuity or discontinuity between what happens in school or community settings.

Whilst there is considerable overlap and indeed borrowing within these traditions, different kinds of emphasis emerge. Depending on the initial disciplinary base, and the specific setting studied, such work tends to look for different kinds of factors which can explain the nature of the talk collected. Those working within anthropology, and to some extent social linguistics, are much more likely to treat the talk as evidence of the divergent community language practices of participants (Heath, 1983; Michaels, 1986; Schiefflin and Cochrane-Smith, 1984). Those working within sociology tend to treat the talk as symptomatic of the institutional relationships within which reading instruction is embedded (Baker, 1990; Cazden, 1988; Bloome, 1992). Those working within social psychology tend to look for a match between the structure of the talk and the structure of the text as read and understood by adult readers (Dombey, 1992; Gregory, 1990; Mills, 1988.)

Taken as a whole what such work points to is the diversity of reading practices and the extent to which they are both shaped and handed on differently through talk within specific contexts. These are important points in terms of my own interests. However, the range of media texts I am looking at are not subject to the same kind of explicit tuition between adults and children which is often associated with print literacy, particularly in institutional contexts (Teachers rarely assume that children need to be taught to watch/decode TV, for instance). Nor are there standardised norms of reading, officially sanctioned as is the case with print literacy, against

which children's performance can be measured (See Buckingham, 1993 for an attempt to construct such a measure, which ultimately ran into difficulties).

Instead, the peer group acts as the central network of social relationships through which the texts I am interested in circulate – a peer group which may be at least as divided in terms of social background and community membership as it will be united in terms of interest in particular texts. In other words the kinds of texts I am interested in cross the most obvious community boundaries and are held in common as joint reference points by children from divergent social backgrounds (Buckingham, 1989). The peer group both constructs and hands on the practices through which they read the texts outside of the confines of official educational processes, often with little active involvement of adults. In this respect my interests overlap most closely with the work of others such as Camitta, 1993, Maybin, 1994 and Shuman, 1986 who focus on the peer talk of young people as an important site in which what Camitta calls "vernacular literacies" can be both constructed and negotiated.

The outline above indicates that whilst the kinds of questions I might want to ask about the role of talk in understanding reading as a social practice to some extent overlap with existing work in the field, the specific context I am addressing also leads me to reformulate some of those concerns. The main differences between my data and the data collected in the studies outlined above are that:

1.   I am not contrasting single homogenous communities and the stable practices they have at their disposal. Audiences for the kinds of media texts I am looking at share interests which cut across lines of ethnicity, class and

gender as well as, in some contexts, reflect them. Where and how the boundaries to a practice are established is in itself an issue for research.

2.   I am looking at peer talk about texts where claims to expertise have to be established rather than taken for granted as they are when adult members of a community induct younger members into a specific literacy activity.   Who hands on what kind of practice in what context and the role of talk in this kind of process are central questions for this enquiry.

3.   The kinds of media texts I am dealing with are the focus for intense but sporadic interest amongst the subjects of this study.   That is to say, particular texts, genres, and technologies come in and out of fashion. Sometimes they preoccupy a particular group only for brief periods before they are outgrown or replaced by something else. The extent to which the associated practices endure or, by contrast, are situation specific responses to a particular configuration of text, context and reader is again a central issue for this enquiry.

Overall this means that the situation I am looking at is characterised by rapid change and fluidity, rather than stasis. In this context, understanding the role of talk in managing the construction of the practice and its subsequent relinquishing is particularly important.

Theorising change in the field of literacy as a social practice.

Much of the research into literacy as a social practice undertaken within anthropology has concentrated on describing the practices in use within a

particular community or institutional setting at any one moment in time (Anderson and Stokes, 1984; Barton and Padmore, 1991; Camitta, 1993; Fishman, 1991; Schiefflin and Cochrane-Smith, 1984; Shuman, 1986; Street, 1984). Anthropological research focused on the processes of change either tackles the historical record (cf Graff, 1987; Clanchy, 1979) or concentrates on what happens to the communicative strategies of a community as a whole when, for instance, literacy, or some form of literacy not previously encountered, is introduced to an otherwise primarily oral culture (Besnier, 1993; Kulick and Stroud, 1993).

Educational research into literacy as a social practice is more inclined to focus in on the experience of the individual learner or group of learners. The focus is on the handover of competencies from more experienced to less experienced in classrooms or the home (Dombey, 1988, 1992; Mills, 1988; Minns, 1990). In much of this research, even though the target group – children – are represented as still in the business of acquiring the new practice, nevertheless it is assumed that a point can finally be reached when the handover of the new practice will be complete. Then the children will have been fully inducted into the existing literacy practices of adult members of the community (Baker, 1990; Dombey, 1992; Heath, 1983). These are seen as relatively fixed and stable. Problems in the smooth transfer of adult literacy practices to children, interruptions in the journey, as it were, are often seen as resulting from the unequal distribution of literacy practices in society as a whole and the ways in which these inequalities are embedded in the institutions which dispense the most highly valued practices (See Baker, 1990; Heath, 1983; Luke, 1988; Michaels, 1986; Rockhill, K, 1987; Street and Street, 1991).

An alternative view, sometimes put forward, is that difficulties arise when teachers fail to successfully model the practice which is to be handed on (Dombey, 1988; Gregory, 1992). The second hypothesis is more closely associated with those using a Vygotskian perspective to examine the dialogue which takes place between teachers and learners as they read together. The Vygotskian notions of "zone of proximal development"; "scaffolding" and "handover" inform this kind of exploration of the ways in which input from the more experienced other is structured to maximise the learning opportunities for the less experienced. From this perspective, growth and change for the child are largely represented as increasing mastery over those processes which already typify good reading practice (Dombey, 1992; Mills, 1988).

Yet there is another strand within Vygotsky's work which has been highlighted elsewhere in discussions on literacy by those less concerned to examine the quality of the input than to consider what the child does with the materials to hand. Much of this discussion has centred on the processes involved in writing rather than reading (Steedman, 1982; Moss, 1989; Hardcastle,1992; Burgess, 1985; Miller, 1990; Rosen, 1992). This work stresses the way in which development involves the appropriation and re-configuration of the given by the learner, who re-interprets what they inherit in using it for their own purposes. Development is thus at once socially-governed and individually creative. It is the notion of the dynamic potential for transformation as well as reproduction in this reading of Vygotsky which I am most interested in using in relation to my own data, bearing in mind the much more fluid situation I am setting out to describe than that associated with the formal instruction of print literacy.

Researching the literacy event

Work on literacy as a social practice holds that it is the social context for reading which structures how that reading will get done. The social context for reading is then variously defined within the literature in terms of the routines, purposes, social networks and communicative strategies in which the text is embedded (See Barton, 1994; Baynham, 1995). The relationship between these aspects of the social context and the reading which gets done is researched via the "literacy event", the basic unit of analysis in much of the field.

Shirley Brice Heath glosses the "literacy event" as "occasions in which written language is integral to the nature of participants' interaction and their interpretive processes and strategies" (Heath, 1982). (See also Anderson, Teale and Estrada, 1980; Barton, 1991, Baynham, 1995 p 54; Street, 1993b for other definitions). Researchers document and analyze what happens in the event. This redirects attention from the lone reader individually processing the contents of a text to the social setting in which that reading is taking place and through which the reading will be structured. In this respect the term "literacy event" is closely modelled on the notion of "speech event" which is employed in sociolinguistics to study language in relation to the social context in which it is used (See Hymes, 1974). The term "literacy event" contextualises reading and writing as social processes which always happen somewhere, at a particular time, in a particular place, with particular people involved. Literacy can't therefore be decontextualised and reduced to an abstract set of skills or internal mental properties (See Street 1984, 1995). For these same reasons, the literacy event will be used as the basic unit of analysis in this enquiry.

Researching the "literacy event", rather than the outcomes of the reading process, the meanings made, emphasises that reading and writing are socially situated activities, transactions which have to be accomplished, and that those transactions always have a social basis. However, despite the widespread usage of the term, the actual object under investigation doesn't always remain the same across the field as a whole. On the contrary, quite how a literacy event is defined gains its colour from the research context in which it is being applied more generally. So, for instance, Anderson and Stokes (1984), in a study of pre-school children and their families, used the term to identify "any action sequence involving one or more persons in which the production or comprehension of print plays a significant role". They documented those actions linked to the social setting in which they occurred. By contrast, Heath, in *Ways with Words*, was more concerned to explore the role of talk in the interactions which surrounded the use of texts in her data. In this context, she defines a literacy event as "those occasions in which the talk revolves around a piece of writing" (Heath, 1983).

Events involving literacy can thus be defined in different kinds of terms which will structure rather different kinds of enquiry, though in each case the aim is to study literacy in relation to its setting. In my own case, I want to consider talk about text as literacy events by extending Heath's definition to include talk which revolves around texts from a range of different media, rather than concentrating on writing or the printed word alone. My aims are to look at how the participants in any one literacy event establish "what counts as reading" (Heap, 1990) in and through talk about text, and to examine the relationship of such talk to the social contexts which produce it.

The literacy event in social context: working from the inside out.

The concept of the **literacy event** has proved a useful starting point for the thesis, in terms of both data collection and data analysis (See Chapter Three for more on this point). My expanded definition of a literacy event to include "occasions upon which talk revolves around texts from a range of different media" extends work already undertaken in the field of literacy as a social practice to encompass new technologies. It also raises some new questions about the relationship between talk about texts and social context, and how this can be described. This is less to do with the incorporation of other media besides print than with the circumstances in which the data was collected.

In the bulk of the literature which uses the concept of the literacy event, events themselves are observed and documented as they happen largely using participant observation, supplemented by tape-recordings (See for example, Anderson and Stokes, 1984; Baynham, 1995; Heath, 1983). Often this kind of data collection is part of a long term ethnographic study – what Green and Bloome call "doing ethnography" (Green and Bloome, forthcoming). Analysis then grounds and situates what gets said about texts, or the sequence of actions which take place during such events, in the overall context of participants' everyday activities. The literacy event becomes one sequence of activity out of the many which make up everyday life. In grounding the literacy event in this way attention turns to ways of conceptualising the immediate setting, the broader social structures which impinge on the activity and the roles of the immediate participants (Though see Street, 1993). For instance, Mike Baynham, in a chapter entitled

"Investigating literacy practices in context" in Baynham, 1995, documents the following literacy events: filling out a passport application form; replying to a letter from the DHSS; obtaining a receipt at a petrol garage; writing a constitution for two different community-based organisations. He analyses these events in terms of mediators of literacy; networks; and domains. Roughly speaking these categories are used to explore the roles and purposes of the individuals and institutions involved. In his accounts the setting makes visible the ways in which literacy is socially structured to achieve different ends.

However, the literacy events which form the bulk of my data were not collected in this way, through long term participant observation. Instead, the data was collected in the form of open-ended group interviews, constructed from an "ethnographic perspective", rather than as a result of "doing ethnography", to use the contrast made by Green and Bloome in their survey of ethnography in education (Green and Bloome, forthcoming). The immediate social setting - talk amongst peers in a relatively informal situation - does not vary, though the literacy events do. In this sense the literacy events I analyze can not be anchored to the immediate social context in which they are embedded in the same kind of way - it is the interview which calls forth the literacy event. But if the relationship of my data to the ongoing activity of social life is less immediately obvious, nevertheless from the outset I had a firm sense that there were more subtle connections to be found (See my review of the research history in Chapter One). Consequently I found myself turning in other directions to link talk about text with the context(s) which help generate it. Bauman's approach to understanding context in relation to the performance of oral narratives was to be particularly helpful (Bauman, 1992).

In his contribution to a collection of articles entitled *Rethinking Context*, Richard Bauman argues for a shift in the analysis of context in the study of folklore (Bauman, 1992). Instead of starting from the events which surround the object under examination, (an approach which he characterises as "from the outside in"), he argues that analysis should proceed from

> "the inside, as it were, using the text itself as a point of departure and allowing it to index dimensions of context.... The aim is not to dismiss the more collective, institutional, conventional dimensions of context, but ultimately to provide an analytical counterweight to them in the service of moving us closer to a balanced understanding of that most fundamental of all anthropological problems, the dynamic interplay of the social and the individual, the ready-made and the emergent in human life" (Bauman, 1992, p 142)

In other words his starting point for analysis is how context is itself invoked within his informants' talk, and in the process is structured as well as structuring. This was to suggest some important principles for my own enquiry, and my own analysis began in this way, from the inside, out.

Working from the inside, outwards, has taken me away from the existing vocabulary used to describe literacy events in their social context. Instead I have begun to evolve a language of description for the data which can relate talk, texts and context in new ways.

The social regulation of texts – a new language of description

In building a language of description for my data I have drawn on a paper by Basil Bernstein entitled "Research and Languages of Description" (Bernstein, 1996). As I outlined in Chapter One, for Bernstein, a language of description is inherently theoretical; it constructs what it enables us to see.

> it is misleading to confound content analysis with a language of description. Often content analysis is concerned with apparently self announcing contents. I would say that principles of description construct what is to count as empirical relations and translate those relations into conceptual relations. (Bernstein, 1996, p136)

For Bernstein, there are two levels of description. Or rather the researcher must evolve two languages. These he calls L1 and L2. For Bernstein, L1 and L2 have clearly different functions in the theory building exercise, yet they are also closely interdependent. In the published paper, he refers to L2 as the external language of description. "External" indicates that this language faces outwards to the data which is to be described. L2 works on that data to categorise and encode it. L1 is referred to as the internal language. "Internal" because this language is primarily orientated to the internal workings of the theoretical model which is being constructed. This language makes visible the principles which drive the overall theoretical design. Elsewhere Bernstein defines L2 as the language of enactment and L1 as the language of explanation (Bernstein, personal communication). This provides another way of thinking about the contrast in functions of the two languages of description: L2 deals with the emic, the situated performance; L1 is both

more general and more abstract, designed to tease out the underlying principles which inform and generate a particular performance. In this thesis I will use the terms "language of enactment" for L2 and "language of explanation" for L1. Part of the problem that Bernstein explores in the paper is how L1 and L2 can evolve in relation to each other and in relation to the data.

In the discussion on languages of description in Chapter One I brought Bernstein, Geertz and Todorov together to argue that in the act of description any theoretical formulation should "hover low" over the data, to quote Geertz's metaphor. At first glance, by designating two separate languages with two separate functions, Bernstein might seem to be arguing for a theoretical formulation which hovers high, as it were. Yet on the contrary, at various points in the paper he highlights the delicate interaction between the different elements involved in the principles of description as they are applied overall:

> the two processes of constructing description [L1 and L2] are not discrete in time. They are going on together, perhaps one more explicit than the other. (ibid, p138)

L1 and L2 need to evolve together. If L2 is constructed by pulling back from the data, and L1 by pulling back from L2, then the reverse process must also be happening. That is to say, L2 must also be constructed in relation to the theoretical principles which emerge to steer L1, and then re-checked against the data. There is both a bottom up and a top down movement going on. Once again, the researcher should be shuttling too and fro between levels of

description, language and data. In this process, L2 holds the pivotal role. Bernstein is quite clear on this point:

"From this point of view L2, the external description, irrespective of the translation demands of L1, the model, must as far as possible be permeable to the potential enactments of those being described. Otherwise their voice will be silenced. From this point of view, L2, the external description, becomes an interpretative interface, or the means of dialogue between the agency of enactments and the generating of the internal language of the model" (Ibid, p138)

It is precisely for this reason that Bernstein argues for the need to keep L2 distinct from L1. Without this distinction there can be no genuine dialogue between the theorised and the theory:

Description II (the external) is rarely free of description I (the internal), but I believe we must struggle to keep L2 as free as possible. This struggle is for pragmatic and ethical reasons. It is pragmatic, because unless there is some freedom, description I (the internal) will never change. It is ethical for without some freedom the researched can never re-describe the descriptions made of them. (Ibid, p138)

As I have evolved a language of description for my data I have found myself working on two levels. I began with a "language of enactment" focused on describing the activity I observed in the present as my interviewees talked about texts. Starting with Heap's question "what counts as reading in this context?" (See Chapter Three) I have tried to find a way of bringing that activity into view. The kind of vocabulary I have used includes terms such

as "reading as a social performance"; and "the literacy event as a form of social exchange" to characterise the activity overall, whilst in dealing with its constituent parts I have come up with terms such as "sorting out the text" and "sorting out their place in the audience". By contrast, my "language of explanation" revolves around the concept of "the social regulation of text". If the language of enactment emerged by looking within cases and scrutinising each individual event, the language of explanation has emerged by looking across the activity in the present and the wider social contexts in which it is embedded. The concept of the social regulation of text is intended to link the activity in the present to the broader social history, and show their interconnectedness. The thesis as a whole documents how this formulation arose as I worked on the specific data.

- Chapter Three -

Methods and Methodology

The data and its setting

For the purposes of this thesis the main data base is provided by "literacy events" in which: children talk about horror videos (Chapter Four) ; girls talk about teen romance books (Chapter Five); and boys talk about WWF Wrestling (Chapter Six). The data comes in the form of audio and video recordings taken from a much larger series of small group interviews conducted with young people in which they were encouraged in various ways to talk about the range of media texts which circulate informally amongst them. As outlined in the opening chapter, these interviews were conducted over a four year period (1989-93) in a variety of research contexts. For this thesis a selection has, therefore, been made from a very much larger data base (over 300 interviews). All the interviews were tape-recorded. Some were also videoed, amongst them one of the Wrestling interviews used for analysis here.

Initially aged between 7 and 11 when they were recruited to the research, the interviewees came from four different London schools: two secondary schools, each coupled with one of their respective primary feeder schools and chosen to reflect a different social class through their respective catchment areas: one pair of schools were suburban, the other inner city. By

the end of the research period the interviewees were aged between 11 and 15.

The talk about horror videos was originally collected for the Television Literacy Research Project (TVLP), based at the Institute of Education between 1989 and 1991, upon which I was employed as a researcher. As the name suggests, the TVLP was primarily concerned with television and video, though at the beginning of the project the sample were also asked to record any computer games they had used during a two week period, and any books or comics they had read as part of a TV Diary. The data in Chapter Four comes from across the full range of interviews conducted by the research team, and was assembled by conducting a thematic search of that data base for any references to the horror genre.

The rest of the data comes from my own research programmes funded first as the Informal Literacies Research Project (1991-92), and later as the Negotiated Literacies Project (1993-95) by the Institute of Education and the ESRC respectively. These two projects (subsequently referred to as the INLP) were designed to reflect my own broader interests in children's media use as a whole and have elicited data on tv, video, computers, magazines, comics and books. For both these projects I have continued to use the same schools and classes from which the original TVLP sample of children had been recruited, although I did not restrict myself to interviewing those who had already participated in that research programme.

The TVLP research team conducted an intensive programme of small group interviews over a period of eighteen months using a sample of 90 children based in four London schools, chosen to provide a contrast in age and social

class. The interviews were designed to collect information about what children knew and understood about television. At the start of the programme the children were grouped in three distinct age bands: 7, 9 and 11, with half the children in each age band based at one of the two secondary schools or its feeder primary. At the end of the project (1991) the middle age group dispersed to different secondary schools, so in following up the original sample for my own research purposes, I have worked with the oldest and youngest age groups from the original cohort, still at the same four schools. For my own research I treated each class in which the original sample were based as a potential pool of interviewees.

The talk about the teen romance genre comes from a single interview conducted with a group of four girls in their first year at the suburban secondary school. The talk about WWF Wrestling comes from two interviews involving the same group of boys from the suburban primary school interviewed on the same topic at the distance of one year.

The Methodological Issues

In this section of the thesis I want to consider three main issues:

1. Data Collection: how I came to collect the data in its current form ie the nature of the small group interview and its relevance to my research purposes;

2. Data Selection: how I came to select the examples presented here for the purposes of analysis.

3.   Forms of analysis: the links between these processes and the forms of analysis which have been employed.

By concentrating on these three points I hope to reflect on the research process as a whole, how it has fed into, shaped and in turn been shaped by, the final direction my argument has taken.

This research did not begin with a question formulated in the abstract, to which I then sought an answer and designed my methods accordingly. As outlined in the opening chapter, the history to this enquiry is more complicated, tied to a shifting set of contexts which began to suggest ways of focusing on a developing line of thought. In reflecting on the methods employed for data collection I am partly going over that history. Thus the key research instrument – the informal small group interview – stems from another enquiry (The TVLP) set up to fulfil other kinds of research purposes which was then adopted to fit my own aims. In going over that ground now what I want to show is the way in which the methods fed into the research questions as well as vice versa. The strengths and weaknesses of the methods I have used only become fully apparent in the light of the developing argument.

Data collection: The interview as a social context for reading

The programme of interviews used on the Television Literacy Research Project were planned to focus on different aspects of children's "knowledge and understanding" about TV. The interviews were mainly structured

around "key concepts" which media studies considers important and had already theorised: genre; narrative; representation; industry; modality. At the beginning of the research programme these topics were theorised as a kind of conceptual tool-kit, used by viewers for understanding television. The interviews would be used to collect evidence of the tool-kit in action. Children might be expected to have more or less of such a tool-kit, and indeed in his write-up of the project, its director speaks of those children who are more "television literate" than others, employing the term in the sense of competence – a metaphorical extension familiar from other work on literacy (Buckingham, 1993). The interviews which focused on these "key concepts" were structured around small group activities involving talk, of a kind likely to be familiar to interviewees from classroom group tasks. The genre and modality interviews involved children in collectively sorting programme titles. The representation and narrative interviews involved selecting from pictures of personalities or video titles. The industry interview was based on watching an advert sequence. These activity-based interviews were preceded by two much more open-ended interviews. In the first, interviewees were asked to talk about what they liked or disliked about television; in the second they were asked more directly about the circumstances in which they viewed television at home.

From the outset, two aspects of the interviews struck me. The first was the free flow of talk within the groups. The children had a great deal to say about television to each other, and often disregarded the interviewer and the direction in which they might be steering the talk in favour of their peers (See p 24). The ways in which they organised the talk amongst themselves was often at variance with the interviewer's contributions. Not surprisingly, this was particularly noticeable in the two more open-ended

interviews, but the other more structured interviews were also interspersed with more talk of the same kinds, orientated to the group and its own interests.

The second was how far the talk itself seemed shaped by the diverse social contexts in which particular texts circulate. This second point was not considered in the research design, with some unexpected consequences. As the most obvious example, I will take the interview headed "Representation" in the original proposal. This interview, designed to elicit what children knew about the concept of representation as it is defined in media education, involved the use of pictures of TV characters and personalities which were presented to the small groups as prompts for talk. For the research team, the pictures were not considered to be texts in their own right but memory joggers which would help particularly the younger age group to sustain talk on the relevant subject: characters they liked or disliked. However, in the event the pictures seemed to take on a different status for the interviewees which impacted on the nature of the data the research team collected.

Reading the text in context

How this happened can best be understood with reference to the data I collected as part of this interview round. In this instance I was working with the 7 and 9 year old children at the suburban primary school in the sample (School C). Each interview began with me asking a single sex group of girls or boys to choose their favourite character or person on TV and then tell me a bit about them. Next I would lay out on the table pictures of a variety of people and characters from TV, ranging from presenters like Cilla

Black or Philip Scofield, through soap characters such as Bobby from Home and Away or Todd from Neighbours to puppets such as Edd the Duck, then appearing alongside the presenter in Children's BBC. The children would be asked to choose someone they liked to talk about, and later to choose someone they disliked. This process would be repeated until we ran out of time, cards or interest in what we were doing. Two main points arose from this activity.

First, the data that was collected from this process did not immediately seem to match what the research team had been looking for, and indeed this was what made it initially interesting to me. The interview had been designed to focus on how children talked about character. The expectation had been that the children would be able to identify particular qualities associated with the particular character they were talking about, and that such knowledge would in turn be firmly related to particular programmes – television texts – .in which the characters appeared. In other words the children would be able to talk discursively about judgements they would have formed elsewhere. This kind of talk could then be used as a measure of their critical and cognitive skills. In the event, although this kind of talk sometimes did occur it was far more difficult to collect than had been anticipated. Where children did offer a judgement, this often consisted of no more than one word, and sustaining replies by getting children to add to what they had to say was difficult. Conversations tended to go like this:

"Leon, what do you like about Edd the Duck?"
"He's cool"
"What's the most cool thing about Edd the Duck?"
"His haircut";

"OK, Mireille, tell me something about Cilla Black"

"She's funny, she's pretty, I like the way she dresses, she's got a good personality and I like Cilla Black.";

"Katie, your turn. Tell us something about Mitch."

"He's a hunk..That's about all I've got to say" {She laughs}.

The brevity of the comments was in direct contrast to much of the other material the research team had already collected. This is partly what made it so puzzling.

But secondly,this does not mean to say that the interviews stuttered to a halt. On the contrary, there was no shortage of interest. But the children's engagement with the task was expressed differently. As important to the children as who they were being asked to talk about was the physical presence of the cards themselves. This alone had a significant impact on the sequence of activities. Often minor fights would break out as the cards went down and children snatched the ones they wanted. This process would be accompanied by squeals of delight or expressions of disgust. As I came to realise, in effect a game of bagsy was being played out. Actually having possession of a card was enough. Being asked to comment on it was superfluous to the ways in which the children were using them.

The actual pictures themselves caused a lot of interest. Where had they come from? (TV Times, Radio Times and magazines) How had they been made? (Colour photocopies, mainly enlarged, then laminated.) One of my interviews took place at the bottom of a staircase. As I talked to "my" group, other children who were passing by leant over the banisters to admire and gaze at the pictures, pointing at them, identifying who they were, wondering what

we were doing with them. Often ensuring the pictures' return at the end of the interview was difficult. One group tried to hide some of the pictures in the table drawers so that I would forget them, others asked if they could take them home.

I make these points to establish that the pictures themselves had a live currency for my interviewees. They were objects which brought to mind particular contexts of use: such pictures can be pored over in magazines, pinned up on walls, stuck to the outside of school books, above all possessed. Their ownership can be used as a way of asserting likes and dislikes. In these contexts, the social act of choosing itself is what is important. No wonder I was confused by the children's abrupt replies – doubtless they were as baffled by my persistence in asking them to explain their choices. What I am suggesting here is that the cards by their physical presence, triggered off a particular kind of "literacy event". Instead of acting as a neutral prompt to memory, they established a context for a very different kind of reading practice to take place, one which the course team had not anticipated. (See Moss 1991b for a more extended analysis of this data.)

This experience was to significantly shape my own thinking in relation to data already collected on the TVLP, as well as influence the direction my own research has subsequently taken. Partly as a consequence I began to think of the nature of the talk as shaped, not by a set of conceptual understandings, as envisaged in the TVLP project proposal, nor indeed by the nature of the text or technology per se, but by the nature of the diverse social contexts through which texts circulate. Teasing out what the relevant context might be, and how we can describe it, have become central preoccupations in this enquiry.

The interview as a literacy event

In developing my own research into the range of media texts children consume I have broadly speaking adopted the same open-ended interview format for a small group as that used on the TVLP. Part of what seemed significant about the relatively open-ended interview format used on the TVLP was the opportunity it provided to group members to interact with each other and indeed carry on the "long conversations" (Maybin, 1994, quoting Malinowski) that were clearly already happening elsewhere, outside the interview situation. By giving maximum encouragement to the group to interact and display what they knew to each other as much as to me I hoped to capitalise on the possibility of the group defining "what counts as reading" on their own terms. The TVLP data certainly contains many examples where precisely this happened and, as in the case quoted above, the children disregarded the intentions and assumptions of the interviewer. This is not to suggest that the interviews happened on neutral ground, as it were, where the interviewer exerted no influence on the proceedings. But the clash between ways of talking about texts, as the interviewer struggled to join in the prevailing conversation, often revealed precisely the differences between kinds of talk, and their respective boundaries.

In some respects the talk about texts which was collected can be regarded as unofficial discourse (Camitta uses the term vernacular, Camitta, 1993). In other words, it is talk which exists at the margins of the official, institutionalised practices that surround the distribution of texts in school, and which publicly measure and control what it might mean to be a good or bad reader. (See Michaels, 1986; Bloome, 1992, Bloome, 1993; and Baker, 1990

for descriptions of school-based talk about texts). Unofficial discourse is often organised quite differently and in this instance it also looked more varied. But it was hard to see what governed that variety.

To date much of the work on the variety of literacy practices to be found outside official institutions has looked to community membership to underwrite the differences observed. Groups of readers are chosen to represent homogenous social groups, their practices then contrasted with those officially endorsed. But the small groups interviewed on the TVLP were often divided in terms of ethnicity and gender (cf Heath and McLaughlin, 1993), and even social class, given that the inner city schools included some middle class children. Talk varied for individuals as well as for groups, so there were not consistent speech styles, embodying particular community practices, (cf Michaels, 1986; Heath, 1983) which seemed to travel with individuals from one interview to another. There were some obvious consistencies: for instance, when talking about videos, groups seemed to allow one individual to hold the floor for far longer, and speakers would exercise their rights by re-telling key moments from the story; meanwhile, girls tended to go in for much more joint recall of favourite texts in which speakers would duet (cf Falk, quoted in Coates, 1994, and Maybin, 1994), often quoting verbatim from the voices of particular characters. But as these two examples indicate, differences were not organised according to consistent principles. My developing hypothesis was that the talk was shaped by the social contexts in which particular texts circulate. But in each instance, different aspects of the social context for reading seemed to be fore-grounded. I wanted to research this issue further, both by returning to the TVLP data and re-analysing it, and in carrying on and collecting further data of my own.

The open-ended, small group interview provided a context for children to re-iterate literacy practices familiar from everyday exchanges elsewhere. Given the good empirical evidence collected in media studies for the existence of talk about television as part of everyday conversational exchanges, I also wanted to find out if the same kind of talk could be elicited in respect of other media. Did it play as important a role in the circulation of other media as it seemed to for TV? (Media Studies has concentrated almost exclusively on TV with little attempt to research talk about film, let alone other, more print-bound media.) Using the same sample and the same approach to interviewing, whilst widening the range of media, gave me some basis for comparison. At the same time, collecting data about other kinds of texts would provide further opportunities for examining the relationship between talk and the social contexts in which texts circulate.

In these respects the interview is already theorised within my data as a particular kind of "literacy event" (See Hill and Parry, 1994). The small group format is neither accidental nor of minor convenience (for instance by allowing more children to be interviewed, or as a way of preventing individuals from being intimidated by the interviewer. See Lewis, 1992). It is integral to my research project.

Extending the data base

In the account above I outline how I had begun to theorise data collected in informal small group interviews on the TVLP as a series of "literacy events". My reflections suggested that this particular interview format was a

powerful tool for collecting examples of unofficial discourse about texts. Those examples of unofficial discourse encompassed sufficient differences in ways of talking about texts to merit further investigation, whilst the interplay between interviewees as they negotiated "what would count as reading here" suggested a potential means of analysis. (For more on this point see below.)

Funding for the Informal and Negotiated Literacies Projects allowed me to extend the data base. My initial aim was to gather further examples of "literacy events" using the same small group interview format, but encompassing a wider range of texts and technologies. The original sample recruited to the Television Literacy Project and used in interview had comprised roughly half of a class in each target age group at the four designated schools. The sample was designed in general terms to include roughly equal numbers of boys and girls, and to reflect the ethnic mix of the class as a whole. Potential interviewees had also been screened for the amount of TV viewing they undertook using a list of popular television programmes. They were asked to tick any they watched. This acted as a fairly crude selection device in so far as the research programme picked up some enthusiastic box tickers, rather than those who were necessarily the most dedicated TV viewers in the class. However, the general assumption on the TVLP Project was that TV was by and large common currency amongst the target age group. To this end little attempt was made to refine the research team's knowledge of interviewee's viewing preferences, and these were not considered relevant to the formation of interview groups. Interview groups were mainly constructed on the basis of equal numbers of boys and girls, with little attempt to systematically group children according to other criteria. The culture of the research project implied that

continually varying groupings would guard against contamination by the research process itself. This was seen as an issue of research bias. As the measure of interest was the level of understanding held by the individual, rather than collectively shared by the group, varying the groups also prevented any shared history of interaction amongst a particular group, with a particular interviewer influencing the outcome. (As the three members of the research team circulated round the project schools for each set of interviews, there was no formal attempt to share information about groupings used. Occasionally single sex or all black groups were deliberately composed, most notably for the round of interviews on Representation, where issues of social identity were held to have a key bearing on the outcome. Even here they were meant to be matched by groups with more diverse membership, again to act as a control. Informally, researchers did share some information about configurations of interviewees which hadn't worked well. This became a particular issue in one of the primary classes, where the children had abandoned the researcher's own agenda in favour of their own.)

In the case of my own data collection, my take on the interview as a research tool was rather different. With respect to the data collected on the TVLP, it in fact swiftly became obvious to the research team that you couldn't keep the social relations between interviewees out of the picture. No matter how much you varied the group they were always going to interact with each other and tailor what they said to the company they were keeping. Rather than trying to control against it, it seemed to me more helpful to try and acknowledge and explicate what was going on. In other words build the social relations between the group members into the analysis. But I also felt this needn't deflect from or substitute for close attention to what they were

doing with texts, or as readers. On the contrary the social relations between the group as readers became the medium through which knowledge about texts and about reading would be shared. What would be said about texts, readers and reading would be geared to an assessment of the present company, their respective knowledge and expertise. Analysis should be able to show this process happening, rather than treat the embedding of texts and readers in the social relations between interviewees as interference, to be wiped away in order to get at the true individual perception or assessment which lay behind. Indeed, drawing on Vygotsky's work, it was possible to wonder if any such a-social, purely individual interaction between text and reader really did precede the current social encounter. On the contrary, Vygotsky argues quite clearly for the social preceding the individual (Vygotsky, 1962,1978). From a Vygotskian perspective, what happens in social interactions around texts is reading on its route inwards, as well as a reflection of what is already known. This observation helped frame the research design.

Readers in context

Data collected for the Television Literacy Research project had provided a series of literacy events in which talk revolved around television and video and the variety of social practices which surrounded their use. In extending that data base for my own research purposes during the Informal and Negotiated Literacies Projects I returned to the same four schools and the same classes which had been used for the TVLP. Whilst adopting the same interview format for the reasons outlined above, this time I wanted to gather

more information on the ways in which interviewees were sharing texts, and use this more precisely to shape the composition of interview groups.

Consequently I decided to survey the whole class in each of the four schools I was working with, using questionnaires. The questionnaires were designed to identify the range of media interests in each class, and the extent to which such interests were shared. Questionnaires were issued in the spring of 1992 and 1993 respectively and so allow comparison to be made in terms of the shifting interests of the group over that time, as well as between school sites. They are further contextualised by material gathered in a less systematic way during the TVLP between 1989 and 1991. The questionnaires are not presented for detailed analysis here. However, they provide the background against which interview groupings on the INLP (Informal and Negotiated Literacies projects) were originally composed and subsequently chosen as the focus for analysis. They have also been drawn on in analysing data from the later phases of the research (see Chapter Six).

The questionnaires asked respondents to provide information on: the titles of favourite programmes, videos, computer games, books, comics and magazines; to indicate their familiarity with such materials ie length of time they'd been interested; amount they'd watched or read; to comment on the social contexts in which such materials were consumed ie where they read or watched, but also which interests they talked about, with whom. The 1993 questionnaire also asked about the distribution of technologies in the home, the sources for material (newsagents, libraries, religious classes etc), and how respondents saw their own media use changing with age.

The most important function of the questionnaire in the early stages of the INLP was to inform the interview phases of the research. The information could be used in several ways: first, to form groups from those who shared the same interests; to provide materials for use in interview, relevant to the interests of the class as a whole, but reflecting both minority and majority interests; to provide as a focus for the interview, materials which reflected current or earlier interests. Where other criteria were used to form interview groups ie friendship groups, repeating groupings used in earlier phases of the research, the questionnaire provided useful information on the anticipated range of interests represented. The 1993 questionnaire also provided information on how interests had changed in the intervening time. This could feed into the structure of the interview.

Information from the questionnaires could also be used to add to the picture gained in earlier literacy events. For instance, Shazad, who had been a participant on the TVLP, and who features in Chapter Four as a participant in a discussion on horror videos, actually turned out to have very few media interests, and little access to the kind of material routinely consumed by other members of his class. In this instance the questionnaire confirmed what had already become apparent from analysis. What it added to that picture was the importance of the family's religious affiliations in regulating Shazad's access to media texts.

Data Selection

The data base of interviews collected for the INLP consists of 53 interviews. The data base for the TVLP consists of roughly 276 interviews. In this thesis

I draw on a small proportion of the total number. Three interviews, one on the teen romance, two on wrestling, are used to form the basis of two chapters. In the remaining chapter I selected talk relating to a single genre - horror - from the whole corpus of interviews collected for the TVLP. The principles of selection I have employed in so radically reducing the data presented for analysis will be discussed in detail below. They have been formulated in line with the principles used in case study research. That is to say, I have chosen to concentrate on the particular instance. I use the single instance not as an exemplar of a more general, "typical" category, but as one occasion in which the activity of reading is performed (Heap, 1990). My analysis of the particular event can then be used, as Mitchell suggests, to elucidate general principles and make theoretical links that might otherwise be obscured (Mitchell, 1983).

I began my work on the data by grouping together talk about the horror genre in order to explore the question of boundaries to ways of talking about texts (See Chapter One.). In the first instance I had wondered if ways of talking about text might be co-terminus with a particular kind of text (ie genre); or a particular kind of technology. But as the account given above and in Chapter One indicates, early on in the research process my attention began to shift to the social processes through which texts are distributed and consumed as being the decisive influence in shaping attention to text, and talk about it. My analysis has sought to illuminate what those social processes might be and how they are made relevant to the interaction between participants in the literacy events I have described.

In the thesis as it stands I concentrate on three different literacy events. In one sense they contrast across too large a range of different dimensions. The texts around which the talk revolves are different genres: horror, WWF wrestling, and the teen romance. They are distributed via different technologies, whether video or print, using different combinations of verbal text and image. These texts also attracted different audiences, and the participants in these literacy events reflect this (see below). If I were trying to isolate a single variable responsible for shaping the talk, this selection would not help me. Instead I treat these literacy events as the product of a particular social history. The ways in which texts are circulated and consumed produces the participants in these particular events. They are motivated, rather than random groupings. What participants have to say is governed by their previous histories as readers, histories which have been produced in particular social contexts. The unit for analysis is therefore not determined mechanistically in relation to the data as a whole, by either text-type or the category of participant.

In terms of readership, at its most basic in each literacy event we get a different cut from the sample as a whole: Those talking about horror in 1989/90 were pretty evenly spread throughout the sample schools, and represented a fair cross section in terms of age and gender. Those talking about the teen romance in 1990 were a group of girls in their first year at the suburban secondary school. Romance readers formed a distinct and gender specific minority in their class. Those talking about Wrestling in 1992 and 1993 were the same group of boys from the suburban primary school. In 1992 they formed part of a dominant single sex readership network within their class for whom WWF wrestling was the main passion. By 1993 this interest had largely been replaced by computer magazines and fantasy fiction.

Taken as a whole therefore, in choosing those three literacy events, grouped around horror videos, the teen romance and WWF wrestling respectively, in effect what we have in each case are different configurations of text and audience. That is to say, who gets to talk about what kind of text in each instance is a product of the different social processes through which these texts have already circulated, rather than random. The literacy events I have selected stand in relation to the social processes which construct the readership for a particular text at a particular moment in time. This is a rather different conceptualisation of the relationship between text and audience than that most commonly put forward in text-based media studies, where the audience is conceptualised as a target group whom the media speak to by virtue of their social position and experience alone.

The literacy event: one moment in an evolving history

In my analysis I concentrate on the "literacy event". I view each literacy event as a particular occasion on which reading gets done. How reading gets done here will depend on the particular configuration of texts, readers and setting which hold in this instance. But the specific configuration results from the social processes which sustain reading elsewhere. The "literacy events" I analyze are therefore framed by a longer social history. Readers bring to the particular literacy event, social, interactional and cultural resources which are in the process of evolving in relation to the range of texts which are made available and the settings in which they are shared elsewhere. These themselves are in flux.

To explain what I mean further, I will draw on the larger data base from which my "literacy events" are culled and show how an interest in horror videos evolved during the four year period in which I collected data (1989-93) in relation to both texts and contexts for viewing. The horror texts which were made available during that time were themselves changing. At the beginning of the period the Nightmare on Elm Street series, featuring Freddy Kruger, the dead child murderer who haunts young people's dreams, were still being made and released at first as films, and then on video. These have been characterised as slasher movies (Clover, 1989), a version of the horror genre particularly popular during the late 80's. There was a lot of publicity for the Nightmare films on London Underground during this time, presumably mainly aimed at attracting an adult audience for the films in the cinema. But this also had the effect of putting the films out into the public domain. By the end of the period of data collection this sub-genre was waning. The last of the Freddy films had been released, whilst more publicity was being generated for psychological horror films, pre-eminently Silence of the Lambs, or action thrillers such as the Robocop and Terminator sequels. Since then horror has been superseded as the big box office draw by other kinds of genres. Fewer horror films are now being made and released onto the market (See Walker, 1993 and Winnert, 1994).

This provides a brief over-view of the way in which the film industry was officially distributing horror and the changing patterns of the genre's availability during the period in which my data was collected. But of course, the official distribution patterns for film and video intersect with the viewing practices of the general audience in different ways.

For my sample, interest in horror varied over this same period, both over time and from school to school. Evidence collected for the TVLP show that horror was a significant topic of conversation in all the schools for a sizeable group during 89/90. However, interest in horror as a genre had dwindled right away in both the inner city secondary and primary schools by 1992, though in that year it peaked as an interest in the suburban secondary school. By 1993 there was no longer much interest in the suburban secondary school. Only children in the suburban primary were still talking about horror with any intensity. Whilst the general pattern is therefore moving from interest to lack of concern, this gets played out differently in different sites. This pattern of engagement and disengagement can best be understood in terms of the social processes through which texts circulate.

To support this point I want to examine the circumstances under which horror peaked as an interest with the oldest age group in the suburban secondary school (School D) in 1992. They were then aged 14. At this point for this class, sleepovers provided one of the main means of socialising outside of school. It was also one of the main social contexts where texts circulated amongst the peer group. At a sleepover a group of friends would spend the night at one person's house. Sometimes linked to birthday parties, the sleepover might either be single sex or mixed affairs. The main activity at sleepovers would be watching a selection of videos late into the night (sometimes right through until the morning) as the group camped out round the television in their sleeping bags. Horror formed a significant part of the menu.

Sleepovers were the focus for a good deal of excited group talk in this class during this year, at least partly because of the ways in which they were

regulated by parents and indeed, indirectly, by legislation, given that a number of the videos this age group were interested in (and most of the horror films) had an 18 rating. Some parents would allow mixed sleepovers, others only single sex, some wouldn't allow their children to attend sleepovers at all. Who had been at whose sleepover therefore became talking points, as did who had watched what video where. This kind of talk was shaped by questions about who had access to what kind of material, who could borrow what from which shop and whose parents would allow what to be shown. Horror films were most often the subject of dispute here.

However, when I resurveyed the group in 1993 the subject of both horror films and sleepovers had completely lost interest for them. Sleepovers had been replaced as the main social occasions for this age group by shared activities such as going out for meals together, or taking part in group sports or hobbies. These were characterised as more grown-up activities, and sleepovers seen as childish. Horror videos, if discussed at all, were often the subject of considerable distaste, with few now choosing to watch them on their own, whilst an interest in almost all media texts had considerably diminished. With the change in the social context for viewing had gone the texts.

By comparison, at the inner city secondary school, where sleepovers never formed a central pattern of leisure time activity (indeed the only record I have of this kind of event going on at all is for one of the middle class girls in the sample), horror seemed to have peaked even earlier as an interest to be replaced by action thrillers such as Batman, Robocop and Terminator Two. In 1992 this group as a whole were considerably less interested in video, and indeed all other media, than their suburban contemporaries. In the primary

schools, a similar pattern was repeated with the suburban primary children maintaining an interest in the genre for longer, though in this case its viewing was not linked to sleepovers, but mainly watching with older family members.

Both the texts, the social contexts and practices which sustain their circulation and the competencies which show one to be a reader of such texts are therefore in flux. Moments of real interest and involvement may easily be followed by a lack of concern. In this sense a literacy event for the children I documented was a temporary conjunction between text, reader and social context for reading, a brief moment of activity which bound them together rather than a static state of affairs.

It is in this context that I treat the "literacy event" as but one moment in which the text is read in a particular way. Its relationship to other occasions, the extent to which it can be said to represent continuity in practices, remains problematic for this enquiry.

So far I have stressed the way in which I see the literacy event as a single instance, framed by a longer history of which it is part. In describing the history of horror viewing at School D, I have drawn attention to changes in the way in which texts were distributed at the macro level, and the way in which social contexts for viewing changed over the same period for this particular group. These combine with the waxing and waning of reader interest. What I haven't commented on so far is the class' relationship to these changes. Whilst broadly speaking for this group horror might be said to have come in and gone out of fashion, yet within the class as a whole,

individuals stand in a different relationship to this general pattern. Some have deliberately set their face against any involvement with the genre, others have been forbidden from attending sleepovers and thus denied access to the texts, some have set out to collect as many examples of the genre as they could, others merely to have watched a few if they happened to be on. In other words, the class defines itself differently in relation to the texts and social processes through which they circulate. Even within a single site there is no reason to expect homogeneity of experience, every reason to look for differentiation. Within any one literacy event this variety may be represented.

The literacy event as a form of social exchange

Literacy events stand in relation to a longer history, shaped by the social processes through which texts are shared, and their readership established. This forms an important dimension for analysis in considering the literacy events which make up the main data base for this thesis. At the same time, literacy events encompass social activity in the present. This provides the second dimension for analysis.

I have described the activity which takes place during a literacy event in which talk revolves around text as "enacting" or "performing" reading. Participants show "what counts as reading" here as they talk about texts (Heap, 1990). But what counts as reading here may not so much be settled as in the process of negotiation in relation both to the history which produces such readings and the present contexts in which they are rehearsed. (This parallels the position Vygotsky puts forward in respect of language.) In

other words reading is not so much a fixed set of competencies as an ongoing process in which participants draw on what they already know about reading and about readers to position themselves in relation to the text in this particular context. In the process of negotiation they may learn from others how to re-read the text. (See Chapter Four)

Literacy events and the tools for analysis

Above I highlighted two dimensions to the literacy events I study: the activity which takes place within the present moment; and the longer history, of which the literacy event is part. The analytic procedures have been designed to take account of both aspects of each literacy event. Below they will be set out accordingly, under separate headings. However, whilst it is useful to maintain this distinction in order to reflect on my analytic approach, it is important to emphasise that in carrying out the analysis the main thrust has been on how past and present intersect in any one event. Individuals' social histories as readers help shape the way in which reading is enacted in the immediate setting. But the past does not fully determine what will happen in the present. The literacy event, shaped as it is by collaborative talk between participants, can reconfigure "what counts as reading" as well as confirm existing competencies, as participants appropriate from each other in the ebb and flow of group talk. A particular enactment is not just the expression of a given "literacy", therefore. It has the potential for future growth and change within it.

In staking out this position I am drawing on Vygotsky's account of the dynamic relationship between individual development and the social and cultural environment in which it takes place:

> (Vygotsky) puts forward a complex account of the dialectical relationship between children's development and their social and material environment as he describes the learning process. In Vygotsky's description children are born into a social world where language already exists, shaped by culture and history. When they come to take over its words they have to struggle to take over its meanings. Word meanings do not come complete. They evolve for children as they try them out within specific cultural contexts. The process of acquiring language is thus a process of active internalisation, which then continuously reacts back on the environment
>
> I am proposing that a similar process is at work with respect to reading and writing, that what holds good for language acquisition as a whole is also true for other language practices besides speech. (Moss, 1989, pp104-5).

In my data, interviewees try out what it might mean to be a reader in this specific event, drawing on what they know about how reading gets done elsewhere. In this way they bring the past into the present context. The past has as it were to be actively re-worked in the current setting.

The links I make between past and present aspects of literacy events will become more fully apparent in Part II of the thesis. This shows the tools for

analysis in action. For the moment I detail the analytic approaches I have adopted and how they have evolved in line with the data.

Tools for analysis - the present moment

Analysis of my data began with a simple question: "What counts as reading in this specific setting?". The question itself comes from the work of James Heap, a sociologist who has argued for what he calls " a situated perspective" on the study of reading in the classroom (Heap, 1990). Heap argues against essentialist conceptions of what reading is, as if it could be defined in the abstract. Instead he suggests that we can only study what reading is taken to be in specific settings. This can be determined by looking at how reading is evaluated as being done well or done poorly, at the point when it is performed. Crucial to that evaluation is the presence of others.

> In learning to read, one's experience is first of other persons reading. Consistent with work in Soviet psychology (Vygotsky 1978), it is in experiencing other persons reading, and in experiencing one's own reading efforts in certain supervised circumstances, that one learns what counts as reading, criterially and therefore, culturally. (Heap, 1990 p128)

Heap's own work, and that of others who have taken up his ideas, has focused on the school setting and those interactional events within the classroom which allow teachers to demonstrate to pupils what will count as reading here (Baker, 1990). This is partly what he means by "certain supervised circumstances". However, Heap's contention that

An interactant learns what reading is, how it is done, and what counts as reading, criterially, by paying attention to what counts as reading, procedurally, in particular situations (Heap, 1990 p128)

can just as well be applied to the kinds of data I have collected in relatively informal settings. There are differences. The informal settings for talk about text I study are organised differently from the institutional settings of the school. In schools, the kind of institutional authority vested in a single figure – the teacher – and the accompanying unequal distribution of power amongst the readers in a class makes the teacher's behaviour decisive in defining what counts as reading. In informal settings no one individual automatically wields that kind of authority. Schools provide explicit instruments for evaluating children's performance as readers. The conversational rights of the teacher in the classroom alone act in this way. In informal settings, the criteria by which reading is judged to have been done well or done poorly may be less immediately apparent. (Witness my confusion over the sequence of exchanges I've entitled "Did you see?" documented in Chapter One.) They may also be less strongly defined. The criteria employed may vary more widely as informal settings do not set out to explicitly teach reading or police its performance in the way that schools do (See my discussion on dialects and registers of literacy in Chapter One.).

But from my first look at the data it was equally apparent that I could begin to tease out "what counts as reading" in the literacy events I had documented by paying attention to the interactions between participants. Moreover, starting with this question had a positive function in so far as it allowed me to put to one side my own preconceptions about what "reading" in

this instance might look like, judgements which often only served to confuse. This point will be illustrated with reference to the interview below, where what counts as reading clearly varies for interviewer and interviewees.

What counts as reading? Casseroles.

The extract which follows comes from the first round of interviews on the TVLP in which groups were given maximum freedom to set their own agenda. This group is talking about Neighbours. There are also two boys present, though not speaking in this extract. The group are nine year olds from a suburban primary.

Hayley.   The whole of Ramsey Street, they all get together at one point and they all go out and they're all friends and they just pop in and pop out.(&)

Sarah.   And they're always making casseroles (HUGE LAUGHS)

Hayley.   (&) but yeah -`

Interviewer: {You're dead right!

Sarah.   (mimics) "I'm just going to take this casserole back to Mrs Mangel."

Interviewer: I wished I lived in a street {like that

Hayley.   {"a nice new casserole

(A?)   (......)

Interviewer: {Do you think

Hayley.   {and then Kylie goes – Charlene goes "Mum what's cooking and she goes {casserole" !

S/K   {casserole! (giggles)

Hayley.   And then, when Charlene's grandad was in the programme, they changed it. They made vegetable soup {instead of casserole (laughs)   {(......) {(S/K laughs)

Interviewer: {Oh that's right, cos he had a bad heart didn't he? or stomach. Bad stomach, that's right. He needed to be looked after.

K(?)   And he, he, he – couldn't eat casserole. (giggles)

Hayley.   And he goes "That smells nice Maggie. What is it? And she goes "Casserole" and he goes "Oh yeh, let's have some!". And she goes "No you're having vegetable soup" (giggles)

Interviewer: He didn't like that at all did he?

Hayley.   No.

Heap suggests that "what counts as reading" in the first instance can only be judged in contexts where it is being performed:

> For novices – persons who by definition, do not know what reading is because they cannot yet do it well – procedural definition furnishes grounds for two judgements: (1) this is adequate , or inadequate, reading (performance), and (2) this must be like other performances that can be called adequate, or inadequate reading. In being able to make these twin judgements the learner is able to move from a sense of a procedural definition in one particular time and place to other settings. (Heap, 1990 p129)

In the analysis that follows I will look at how procedural definitions of what counts as reading in this context are furnished differently by on the one hand the interviewees; on the other hand the interviewer.

The girls organise what they have to say around familiar aspects of the text, in this case the propensity of characters to be found cooking casseroles. (In *Neighbours* at this time (1989), the casserole was a familiar leitmotif, partly used to further plot development as groups of characters gathered in each other's kitchens to exchange gossip and talk. (See Geraghty, 1981, p24 on the role of gossip in soaps)) Sarah identifies this as the topic for talk in her opening contribution. The other girls then show their agreement with this assessment by jointly recalling bits of dialogue and plot in which casseroles feature. They amplify each others comments and at times complete each other's sentences. This pattern of turn-taking underlines the joint position they take up in relation to the text without the need for explicit evaluation (See Coates and Falk's comments on this conversational strategy which Falk

labels "duetting". Coates, 1994; Falk, 1980). The key scenario involving Charlene's grandad is in this instance defined and introduced by Hayley with the other girls acting as chorus. Elsewhere in the extract it is less clear whether the girls all recognise the particular episodes others quote from, but they have no difficulty in following each others' contributions by adding something else which hinges round casseroles.

The way the talk is organised has a particular function in relation to how reading gets done in this instance. The exaggerated repetition of the word "casserole" here adds to the general parodic effect. The girls are presenting the textual cliche to each other to laugh at and enjoy. This kind of presentation doesn't need accurate details, it doesn't demand explicit comment. Instead they are sharing an in-joke about the text, demonstrating their knowledge of its excess by reproducing it in their own talk. In the process they re-confirm their own status as knowing fans of the programme, a position which effectively excludes the boys from participating in the discussion. (The boys are noticeably silent during this part of the interview, though when interviewed on other occasions and in different groupings certainly have things to say about Neighbours.)

The interviewer's contributions are organised around a different set of concerns, firstly whether this is accurate information or not. Twice in the course of the extract she explicitly evaluates the accuracy of what the girls say, as for instance in her first comment:

Int: You're dead right

Unlike the interviewer, the girls don't explicitly evaluate the truth of the general proposition "they're always making casseroles". They simply show their agreement by laughing or adding to the pool of stories. This immediately suggests a shared attitude towards the text. They are both a knowing and indulgent audience who recognise and enjoy the cliche and can exploit the joke.

The girls' comments focus on the absurdity of the textual repetition. By contrast, the interviewer's initial reaction to the casserole motif is to compare what happens in the text to what happens in real life. This contributes a very different sense of irony in which the text is judged against a real world setting of isolated domestic arrangements, and certainly no chance of neighbours offering each other a free meal. The interviewer's comments on the grandad incident are entirely focused on a factual explanation of this particular sequence of events, a kind of talk more likely to be prized in educational settings in which accurate recall from the text is valued. By contrast, the girls comment on the humour of this new twist to the casserole motif: someone who can't eat one.

Perhaps not surprisingly in this informal context, the interviewer's comments are in every case completely overlooked by the girls. In this context the interviewer is cast by the group as the incompetent reader, her view of what counts as reading rejected in favour of the criteria the girls themselves employ.

The girls' account mocks Neighbours. But it mocks from a position of familiarity. Their account reproduces some moments from Neighbours and simultaneously asserts their own collective history as readers of the soap. It

is this dimension which is missing from the interviewer's contributions. It is not that the girls know the individual facts better than the interviewer (who after all clearly agrees that they are always cooking casseroles on Neighbours!) but that the facts take on a different significance according to the reading histories of the individuals involved and the way in which they are invoked in this context. In this case, to be a fan of Neighbours allows for a different kind of play with the text.

In establishing "what counts as reading here" I look to the interactions between participants, the ways in which what they say builds on or contradicts what has gone before and how similarities or differences in perspective are managed, both explicitly and implicitly. These provide the procedural definitions of reading well or reading poorly. But I also examine the function the talk has for the participants. What does it achieve? Not in general terms, but rather for the interviewees' view of themselves as readers, and the position they take up in relation to the texts concerned. In these respects I consider the function the talk has and what it achieves, not to be a matter of individual intent, but rather to be a consequence of how the talk plays out between group members in a specific setting.

In this instance, for example, the interviewer's contributions are almost certainly intended to converge with her interviewees, and offer them encouragement to carry on talking (See Buckingham's analysis of the same extract, Buckingham, 1993a p 93/4). Yet they encode an alternative view of what good reading is. In other (official) contexts the procedural definition she provides of what counts as reading – rewarding their accurate recall – might well function to switch the way reading gets done here, with attendant consequences for the positions the participants take up in relation to the

text. What counts as reading, and the function the talk will serve, is negotiable in respect to the context in which talk about text takes place.

Tools for analysis: the literacy event as part of a longer history

I had begun my analysis with the question "What counts as reading?" and had formed my answer on the basis of the criteria participants displayed in their interactions in the present literacy event. But in analysing what · happens in the present I found myself increasingly turning to the broader social contexts in which texts circulate to make sense of what I observed. For the judgements readers made were tied at least as much to this longer history as they were to the individual moment.

In the design of the interview phase of the TVLP, talk about the social contexts in which television and video were used in the home had been considered as a separate subject, distinct from talking about the contents of texts, and to be tackled in a separate interview. But looking at the talk about horror collected on the project as a whole I noticed that the children themselves often mixed their account of content with an account of the social context in which they came to view. (This was so even in the retelling interview, when children chose horror videos as their topic to talk about.) I began to realise that talk about the social contexts in which they had come to see particular texts had a social currency of its own for the sample. That is to say, children didn't just comment on the context of their horror viewing at the prompting of the interviewer, to enable the latter to gain an accurate

picture of what was going on. Stories about the social contexts for horror viewing were already circulating amongst themselves.

Perhaps the most dramatic example of this was collected by me towards the end of the project, when the youngest cohort were eleven. I had gathered from several of the sample in the middle class primary school that *Freddy's Dead*, the final Nightmare film, had been shown at one of the girl's eleventh birthday party. On first hearing this story I was struck by the apparent parental endorsement of under-age viewing of an 18-rated film. This seemed particularly surprising in the context of a birthday party, a comparatively public event. On asking, several of the girls who had been at the party agreed that they'd seen it, and so, on first enquiry, did the girl whose party it had been. However, when I got her to tell me the whole story, it turned out to be more complicated than that. The girls who were there had gone up to the local video store together to hire a video. They had chosen *Battling for Baby*, a film made for TV about a child in hospital, and, with the active encouragement of the girl serving behind the counter who happened to be a friend of somebody's sister, *Freddy's Dead*. However, when they got home to the party they decided *Freddy's Dead* would be too scary for some of them, so they hadn't watched it, only *Battling for Baby*. On the following morning, R, the girl whose party it had been, found her older sister watching *Freddy's Dead* in the living room and watched some bits herself as she wandered in and out of the room. She didn't say whether her wandering coincided with the scary moments. The story which was circulating in class, that everyone at R's party had watched *Freddy's Dead*, may not have been strictly true, but it stakes out a particular position for those who were there as insiders with a particular kind of privileged knowledge of a text others

might well be forbidden from seeing. In this way, context, as much as content, becomes the basis for narratives of horror.

In teasing out how the literacy event is shaped by the social processes through which texts circulate elsewhere, I began by looking at how participants reflect on and incorporate different aspects of the social context for reading into their own talk (See Bauman, 1992). In the first instance this approach led me to those moments in my data when participants explicitly refer to the social contexts in which texts circulate. (The fact that they do so at all is in itself significant. This is not commonly supposed to be part of what readers reflect on in psychological models of reading which strip away context and study only content and form. See Oakhill and Beard, 1995) Using the kinds of analytic tools outlined above which focus on the interactions between participants, I looked at the function such anecdotes had in the talk as a whole. What did they achieve for participants in that particular exchange? How did the anecdotes follow on from or counterpoint each other? What similarities or differences did they seem to encode between reading as it was represented in the anecdote itself, and reading as it was represented in the present literacy event (See Maybin's work on re-voicing/ ventriloquating, which draws on Bakhtin's dialogic perspective, Maybin, 1993; and Duranti and Goodwin, 1992. See also my analysis of the horror data in Chapter Four).

The emphasis here was on how the social past gets into the present context through the ways in which it is explicitly invoked by participants in specific settings. But I also began to use the anecdotes to identify the salient aspects of the social contexts for reading to which my interviewees referred. I then began to supplement the picture I built up from my interviewees

(emic) with information from other sources (etic). I tried out different ways of obtaining information about the social contexts for reading in the questionnaires I administered, by using questions about the social contexts in which the sample read or viewed texts; how their tastes had changed; their sources for materials and the social networks which seemed relevant to their reading. I began to use questions about the social contexts for reading in interviews, when other kinds of talk faltered. As I collected texts for use in interview I began to pay attention to differences in their availability and how these were governed by the institutional structures through which they were distributed. I took notice of media coverage about texts my sample were interested in, and paid attention to the legislation regulating horror videos, enacted during the lifetime of the project (in effect the amendments to the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act, 1994, which were tabled in order to restrict access to horror videos). In different ways this broader picture has informed the analysis I make of the literacy events I present below. However, it was not conducted systematically. One of the key findings of this project is that I am now, at the end of the enquiry, in a position to undertake such etic research systematically.

The methodological issues reconsidered

The general direction in which I wanted the thesis to go was clear from the outset: I was looking for a social theory of literacy which could link how reading gets done to the social contexts in which it is performed. To use Street's terms, this is an ideological, not an autonomous account of literacy (Street, 1984). But quite how those links should be made was not immediately

obvious. The job of the thesis has been precisely to find a language of description (Bernstein, 1996) for reading which would make its social character clear, and elucidate how the social is incorporated in the individual instance. The thesis has been written up in such a way as to make this process of theory building, the means by which I arrived at the language of description, visible and available for scrutiny.

In the account above I have tried to show how the research tools evolved in tandem with my thinking about the data. Questions about the social contexts in which texts circulated emerged from my first analysis of data on the TVLP. This led to the construction of a questionnaire to explicitly investigate such issues which then fed into the composition of interview groups for the INLP, and further strengthened the direction the analysis was going in.

This enquiry has now turned to the social regulation of texts as the decisive factor in shaping how talk about texts takes place. By the social regulation of texts I mean the social processes through which texts are made available in particular settings to particular readers. These social processes shape the talk about texts; the talk about texts provides an instantiation of these processes. As the research has developed I have begun to identify more precisely those different aspects of the social regulation of texts which seemed to have a bearing on the talk. These I gloss as the social processes through which: texts are distributed; access to them is controlled or accomplished; knowledge of texts is displayed; and the organisation of institutional settings and procedures which impinge on these.

But the social regulation of texts as I now define it was not an explicit and distinct focus for investigation at the outset of the period of data collection.

Consequently, in returning to the data at this stage in the enquiry with my theoretical framework now clearly in place, I don't always have the same depth and detail as I would now look for if I were starting the enquiry afresh.

The theoretical framework applied: some problems with hindsight

What I now know about the relationship between the children's talk and the social contexts in which texts circulate has been largely constructed after the main period of data collection, using the talk itself as prime evidence. Of course, this became less true as the enquiry progressed, and I began to directly address ways of independently investigating the social contexts for reading. For instance, in each of the questionnaires I used to form interview groups in 1992 and 1993, I tried to find out about children's use of texts in context. But the means used are theoretically underdeveloped. They represent stages in my thinking, rather than a theoretically fine-tuned end product. The same could be said about the rather haphazard way in which, if conversation flagged in the interviews I conducted in 1992 and 1993, I generally turned to questions about the ways in which texts circulated: who talked about what kinds of texts with whom; how they were acquired. Yet this was never systematised. Moreover, I overlooked sites which in retrospect could have yielded me valuable information about the social regulation of texts eg the documentation of the ways in which local video and book shops or libraries display and order their materials; the publicity surrounding the release of new videos or books in sources available to the children. Some of this could still be done by investigating the historical

record. But I am quite clear that the social regulation of texts changes over time. I have lost the opportunity to closely document what was happening in the particular locations relevant to this particular cohort at this particular time.

For the purposes of the thesis I compensate for this in two ways. First, this strengthens my resolve to use the data to show how the categories arose, rather than treating the data as evidence for a category already in place. In this enquiry the data generates the category and not vice versa. Secondly, in working backwards from the data to the relevant social contexts for reading, I make full use of all the available information I collected during the project, from whatever source, which can throw light on the social regulation of the relevant texts at that particular time. This has meant being quite eclectic and making best use of those resources I have to hand. Inevitably it leaves some gaps which a more systematic investigation would have filled. It also leaves some tantalising speculations which I cannot fully resolve without recourse to further investigation. These I have put to one side. In each case what I have tried to do is make clear the status of the information I bring to bear on the topic as it stands. This means testing the theoretical framework as far as I can in the current context. If it stands up this far, then the basis for further research will also be mapped out.

The theoretical framework applied: some benefits of working inside, out.

In dealing with my data procedurally I have worked outwards from the individual instance – the literacy event –to the social processes which help

sustain it. As outlined above, this was partly a pragmatic decision. My main form of data collection throughout the project was the informal interview. Inevitably, my analysis began with the transcripts of these events. However, such an analytic move – from literacy event to the social processes in which it is embedded rather than vice versa – can also be justified as a more positive research strategy in its own right, for the following reasons (See also Bauman, 1992).

Whilst I was soon confident that the talk could only be fully understood in relation to the broader social contexts in which texts circulate (See Moss, 1991b for an early example of my thinking on this point), my own early attempts to supplement the interview as a tool for data collection with questionnaire data were not particularly successful. As I have pointed out above, whilst I wanted further, independent information on the social contexts for reading I wasn't yet sufficiently sure what these contexts might be to be able to ask the right questions. My own attempts to elicit information in the questionnaires were often ad hoc, and certainly, in comparison to the position I now hold, under-theorised. In some respects this is to do no more than highlight the well-known limitations of the survey as a research tool: it is a good means of providing information on categories the researcher has already identified as salient. It is far less useful at getting beyond what is already known (Hammersley, 1993; Marshall and Rossman, 1995). Of course, I could have adopted other methods of research, including ,for instance, the kind of long term participant observation used when "doing ethnography" (Green and Bloome, forthcoming; Heath, 1983) However, once again I would still have been faced with choices over what to observe and where to start which I wouldn't have been in a position to make an informed decision about (See Miles and Huberman, 1984).

Instead I decided to use the interview material to guide me. The precise ways in which interviewees seemed to draw on a broader social history to make sense of texts and readers in these literacy events was sufficiently varied and diffuse to escape easy categorisation in the early stages of analysis. The existing work on literacy in a social context, does provide various ways of framing the social context (eg networks and domains, Baynham, 1995; language practices, Heath, 1983) but none of these seemed to adequately cover the key distinctions emerging in my data. Yet in a way this proves my point. I could not have arrived at my current definition of the social contexts for reading without starting from the interview data, and observing the frames of reference for reading which my interviewees themselves deploy. This became the focus for analysis in its own right. My theorising has been built on this basis. The theoretical framework I now have in place for identifying different aspects of the social context for reading, therefore, has been established in dialogue with the main data base, and through careful analysis of the literacy events presented below.

Analysis of the three different literacy events which follow in the chapters below, and reflection on the comparative merits of the sources of information I had used above, has enabled me to re-theorise much more fully what constitutes the social context for reading and how it impacts on reading in any one literacy event. This has led to the emergence of "the social regulation of text" as the central concept in my theoretical framework. This theoretical formulation can now become the basis for more integrated research in the future.

PART 2

The Research Data

- Introduction -

Horror, Romance and WWF Wrestling

In the opening chapter of the thesis I identified the shifts in my own thinking which had taken place as the research project progressed. In my earliest scrutiny of the data, I had looked for evidence of different ways of talking about texts, concentrating on the notion of "dialects" or "registers" of literacy. This vocabulary put the emphasis on formal features of the language used about particular texts on particular occasions which might make it distinct, or recognisable in its own right. As the analysis progressed, I began to consider more closely how different ways of talking about texts were intimately tied to the broader social contexts for reading through which texts circulate, as well as the immediate social setting in which that reading was performed. I switched my attention away from the formal features of the language and onto the "literacy event", treating each event as a specific occasion for talk about text, in which the conjunction of text, readers, and social setting for reading was part of an evolving social history. I began to see that in any literacy event, who gets to say what about what kind of text was itself a product of the social processes through which texts are distributed and consumed in various ways, even as the event itself was part of those on-going social processes.

The chapters which follow show me in the process of evolving a language of description to describe the data in terms which could capture this dynamic relationship between talk about text and the broader social contexts for reading which help generate and sustain it. Evolving a language of description adequate to the task has led me to redefine how we conceptualise the social contexts for reading and so to contribute to theorising literacy as a social practice. This section of the thesis documents how this happened in relation to the three case studies which make up the data base for analysis.

The three data chapters which follow are presented in the order in which they were written during the length of the enquiry. (The first chapter was originally written in 1992, the last was written up in its current form in 1995.) In Chapter Four *Children talk horror*, and Chapter Five *Girls tell the teen romance* I have reproduced my original analysis of the data exactly as published during the lifetime of the INLP. In each case the original article is framed by a commentary written especially for this context. I have incorporated these existing pieces of writing into the thesis in order to show how my own thinking was evolving over the course of the project as I struggled to re-describe the data. The commentary is divided into two parts. (1) The articles are preceded by commentary on the provenance of the data, its selection, and how it was analyzed. I also comment on the writing context, as the introduction to my analysis of the data is presented in relation to wider debates within the academic community, rather than the specific concerns of this thesis. (2) The articles are followed by commentary which links the substantial analysis of the data to the concerns of this thesis, and in particular the evolution of my language of description. The third chapter is rather different in so far as I wrote my analysis of the data specifically for inclusion in this thesis, though it was based on a workshop

presentation I had made in 1994. However, I have kept, in so far as it is possible, to the same format as above: initial commentary; presentation of my analysis of the data; final commentary, linking the analysis to the broader theoretical concerns of the thesis.

In many ways my analysis of the data, even in the early stages was focused at the level of L2, the language of enactment, to use Bernstein's terms (Bernstein, 1996). By applying Heap's question "What counts as reading here?" in each case, I set out to provide an emic description of the talk about text. Yet reflection across the three cases and the ways in which I had described them also led on to L1, the language of explanation. Putting the three pieces of analysis side by side, with accompanying commentary, is intended to re-capture something of the methodological process as I shuttled between data and the evolving languages of description (See Chapter Two above). The concluding chapter is then used to reflect on the way in which these pieces cumulatively fed into the theoretical process.

Different literacy events, the same analytic procedures

The three chapters that follow are entitled *Children talk horror; Girls tell the teen romance* and *Boys talk WWF wrestling*. These pieces have been produced at different times during the length of the enquiry. Two of them have already been published in other contexts, and for rather different audiences. *Children talk horror videos* was originally published in the Australian Journal of Education, in 1993, in a special issue on 'Media and popular cultural studies in the classroom'. *Girls tell the teen romance* was also first published in 1993 in *Reading Audiences: Young people and the*

media, a collection of articles drawing on qualitative research into the youth audience for a range of different media. *Boys talk WWF Wrestling* began life as a paper presented at the 10th Sociolinguistics Symposium in 1994. Because of their different provenance, in some respects the pieces follow different formats. For instance, the horror piece begins with references to current debates in audience studies, the romance piece with references to debates in feminism. In each case such introductions are geared to a general readership. The horror piece concludes with a look at the implications of the argument for classroom practice, as befits its place in an educational journal, read by practitioners as well as academics. By contrast, the WWF piece, designed originally as a twenty minute presentation, jumps straight into the data, and questions about how it can be contextualised. However, despite some differences in presentation, the three pieces are strongly linked by the fact that in each article I have applied the same kinds of analytic procedures to the data itself. (See Chapter Three.)

The analytic procedures are designed to illuminate the relationship between talk about text and the social contexts for reading. Each of the literacy events I treat is subject to the same kinds of procedures but, because these literacy events represent different configurations of texts, readers and setting, in each case the analysis has thrown up different kinds of problems and suggested different solutions. The job of the concluding chapter will be to make sense of these.

- Chapter Four -

Children talk horror

In presenting the article below for inclusion in the thesis, I am returning to the point where I began to build my analysis of the relationship between talk and the social contexts for reading. The data for the article consists of children's talk about horror videos collected on the TVLP between 1989 and 1990. It was the first sizeable amount of data I was to analyze and write up once I'd settled on children's talk about texts in informal settings as the object of my enquiry. Several ideas flowed from this: 1) the productive nature of talk about text. This is where I first began to see that Vygotsky's ideas about the social course of development, moving from social interaction to individual accomplishment, could be applied to the children's talk about text. Their talk about the genre was running ahead of their experience of the text, but also creating the place from which the text would be read. 2) the literacy event as a form of social exchange. In the context of small group talk, the literacy event becomes a dynamic site in which children draw on what they already know, but in pooling their knowledge, what they already know can be re-configured as others challenge, or re-contextualise what they have to say. 3) I began to grapple with the relationship between the social contexts for reading, and how that reading was carried out.

In these respects the analysis of the data I conducted here was to have a profound impact on the subsequent direction the thesis has taken. In many respects this piece provides the theoretical base from which the rest of my thinking has developed.

At this point in the chapter I begin by explaining the provenance of the data, how I came to focus on horror, and the theoretical context in which it was originally written up. I comment on how the analysis was conducted, and go over some of the ways in which my early thinking about it developed. I then present my first analysis of the data as published in 1993. I close the chapter by reflecting on the match between the theoretical framework I now have in place and the analysis of the data conducted in 1993. In this way I hope to contribute to both theory and method in understanding reading in its social context.

The data and its provenance

The main data for this chapter comes from across the full spectrum of interviews collected on the Television Literacy Research Project during 1989 and 1990, at a time when the sample were then aged between 7 and 12. The material comes from interviews which were open-ended; focused on the use of television and video in the home; or structured as group tasks designed to elicit information on children's understanding of a range of concepts central to media education. The talk collected in these interviews encompassed a wide range of genres distributed on television or on video, of which horror was one. It wasn't always possible to accurately identify the particular text children were talking about under the "horror" label (see below), but the *A*

Nightmare on Elm Street series, often identified by speakers as Freddy films, had emerged as a significant topic for talk in the early stages of data collection on the TVLP. Because of this, the research team included *Nightmare* as one of the possible video titles children could choose to talk about in an interview structured to elicit retellings of videos they had seen. Some, though by no means all, of the material I present comes from this interview round.

Selecting the data

I initially chose horror as a topic to focus on a) because interest in the genre seemed to be widespread, with some children in each school, even in the youngest age range, keen to talk about it b) I knew there were references in the talk to the social settings in which horror viewing had taken place. As the relationship between the social contexts for reading, talk and text were central to my enquiry this seemed a good place to begin the investigation. c) at that stage in the enquiry I wanted to see if isolating talk about a single genre would deliver talk of a particular kind which could be clearly differentiated from talk about other genres eg soaps. (See Chapter One for the discussion on literacy registers)

Consequently I searched the TVLP data base for any references to horror. I marked up those exchanges where horror was mentioned and assembled the material as a whole. In the initial stages this was the data base I was working with. I then chose a smaller number of extracts for more detailed study. The article below draws on all of this material.

The writing context

The data I was working with stemmed from another research context which was not under my control, and indeed had been devised to fit another agenda (See Chapter One). However, there were overlapping interests. The TVLP was looking for evidence of children's conceptual understanding of television at least partly as an answer to concerns voiced elsewhere about the effects TV might be having on children. The view of television as powerful and children as a largely passive audience seemed to underpin much commonsense talk about children and tv as well as a good deal of psychological research into the medium (See Buckingham, 1993a). In many respects my view of the audience coincided with that of the TVLP project. I considered children to be actively making sense of the media. Where I was to part company with the TVLP in this piece was in the notion of children as experts. The TVLP set out to establish what children knew about the media. What it found out was that even at the age of seven, they already know a good deal. However, there was much less emphasis on the project on how children had learnt what they knew, or indeed how collaborative talk might contribute to that process. By contrast, my own look at the horror data was to confront me, first with a sense of the paucity of first hand knowledge of horror texts which the children were drawing on in their talk; but secondly the key role the talk had in shaping children's understanding of what the genre was and how to make sense of it. In writing the article I therefore saw myself as contributing to debates which stress the activity of the audience, but breaking the link which is often made in audience studies between "active" and "expert" members of the audience. The lead in to the data itself concentrates on this issue.

As I have outlined above, in the first instance the data I had selected for analysis came from a large number of different interviews. In each case, in selecting the data for initial consideration, I focused on the immediate conversational exchange in which horror was mentioned. Few of the extracts lasted for very long. Interviewees would touch on the subject for a short stretch of time before moving on to another topic in the ebb and flow of a longer conversation. (The exceptions almost all came from a semi-structured interview in which interviewees were asked to retell videos. Even here, retellings of horror videos seldom lasted as long as retellings of other genres. The notable exceptions are one middle class boy talking about the Evil Dead, which he'd watched on his own; and two middle class girls talking about the Fly, which they'd watched together at a sleepover.)

In the first stages of analysis I looked at what the children's talk about horror consisted of. Here the fact that I had brought together episodes from a relatively large number of individual literacy events highlighted a basic pattern to contributions running through this thematic data base: talk about the social contexts in which texts were consumed formed at least as important an element in the talk as talk about the contents of the text. This seemed important not least because the former kinds of anecdotes seemed to suggest an explicit reflection on the social character of reading on the part of students. Such an accomplishment is rarely promoted as part of the reading curriculum in the English classroom, where the emphasis falls on the interaction between text and solitary reader (See Long, 1994 for some critical reflections on this point).

The frames of reference of the subject areas I come from – English and Media Studies – highlight judgements made on the contents of texts and expect these to be formed on the basis of detailed understanding. My initial reaction to the data was disappointment that so few details about the texts were supplied by speakers. This was, if you like, a negative assessment of the data, based on my own preconceptions of what talk about horror might show. However, by applying an ethnographic perspective to the data and beginning with the interactions between participants, how they judged the sufficiency of the contributions made in the talk, a different picture began to emerge. By concentrating on what my participants held to be sufficient, I was moving the emphasis of analysis from the adequacy of the version of the text considered in the abstract to the adequacy of its performance in a particular setting (See Bauman, where he makes a similar point in relation to folklore and the study of oral literature.) My analysis is situated in the specific literacy event.

Having identified the basic patterns of (a) talk about the social contexts for reading and (b) talk about content in the thematically grouped fragments of conversation I had brought together, my next step was to look at how these kinds of talk were managed in specific literacy events. "What seemed to count as reading here?", to use Heap's question. What function did the talk seem to have in the context of the event as a whole? Both of these questions led me to scrutinise the interaction between participants and how these framed the contents of the talk. It was out of this analysis of the particular instances that I began to identify some more general principles at work.

The article presented below was published in 1993 in a special issue of the Australian Journal of Education, focused on Media and Popular Cultural

Studies in the classroom. I present the article as published with only minor amendments where I made reference in the text to its place in the Journal. As befits the context in which it first appeared, the article concludes with a consideration of the practical implications for teaching media studies.

Children talk horror videos: reading as a social performance

The data I am referring to in this article was collected as part of the Television Literacy Research Project[1] and comes from a series of small group interviews conducted over the space of eighteen months with ninety children aged between 7 and 12. The project was based in four schools, two of which (one primary, one secondary) were in inner London, with a diverse sample in terms of class and ethnic background. The other two schools (again, one primary, one secondary) were in outer London, with a much more homogenous sample, predominantly middle class, predominantly white. The programme content referred to during the interviews was diverse, including children's television, mainstream tv, sport, soaps, music videos, and a wide variety of films watched on video, satellite or television. In this article I want to concentrate on talk about horror videos, and in the process raise a number of questions about how we might pay attention to children as a specific media audience.

The implicit agenda
To make reference to children as a specific media audience and to select talk about horror videos already suggests an implicit agenda, before I have even framed a more precise question about the data. In the mid eighties in the UK, concern about the number of children who might be watching violent or obscene material at home led to

---

actual parliamentary legislation designed to restrict the kinds of film which could be distributed as videos[2]. Horror films dominated the list of so-called "video nasties" which were the target of this campaign. "Children" and "Horror" suggests a powerful effects discourse. On the other hand, ... readers would hardly expect me to be reproducing a view of children as a vulnerable, defenceless audience in need of protection. The most likely expectation is that any data presented in this context would reclaim "horror" as a genre from the disparagement of morally outraged critics and reclaim children as a knowing and expert audience who have fun with "forbidden knowledge".

These are contrasting expectations about what data on children and horror videos might show. But they also stand in close relationship to each other. The second, more liberal expectation provides a rebuttal to the first. It is the next move in an on-going debate about audience effects, and the power of texts to corrupt.

Children: from passive to active audience

Media Studies as a discipline has increasingly shifted its attention from **what texts do to audiences** (an argument which has been inflected in a number of different ways from a variety of political perspectives), to **what audiences do to texts**. The second perspective increasingly dominates, well represented by the work of Ang, 1985; Dyer et al, 1981; Fiske, 1987; Hobson, 1982; Morley, 1980; Radway, 1984. Yet such a paradigm shift is not without difficulties. Even as this new orthodoxy breaks with the past, it also harks back to it. A sequence of oppositions between the old paradigm and the new has been established. In the old paradigm, readers were construed as passive, now they are active; then they lacked the knowledge to defend themselves, now they wield considerable expertise; then they were positioned by the text, now they appropriate it for their own purposes. In the old paradigm, popular texts carried a single message, now they offer a multiplicity of meanings; then they peddled dangerous lies, now they suggest a variety of complex pleasures. In this context, to claim that audiences do something, or indeed anything, becomes useful knowledge simply because such a claim can act as a way of underlining the break from the earlier paradigm.

---

[2] The Video Recordings Act 1984. This piece of legislation was enacted following a noisy campaign in the press and parliament. Those most closely involved in lobbying for changes in the law conducted their own research which by and large set the terms for the debate. See Barlow and Hill (1985) for the group's own account.

For myself, what is at issue here is not the question of whether audiences are active or not, but how we focus on that activity.[3] This is particularly problematic in relation to children as a specific media audience. For the new assumptions about what counts as audience activity do not do so well when applied to children. Or at any rate they only deal well with certain kinds of children (fans) enjoying certain kinds of texts (soap operas would be an obvious candidate here, or cartoons), ones which are well within their competence. For the new paradigm is locked into an insistence on audience expertise. A knowledgable audience can be expected to control the medium, and play with it. Children will do just fine so long as they look like mini-experts. In which case they can effectively be treated as just another audience category like any other adult group, targeted by the media in the same kinds of ways. But children don't always show expert knowledge. Faced with the lack of an adult competence, it is harder to avoid construing them as vulnerable to the text. This is particularly so in relation to horror, a genre which can and does frighten its viewers. And indeed, some of the children in the interview sample do talk about having nightmares after watching scary programmes. (Though, of course not all scary programmes are horror films!)

I want to avoid the seemingly inevitable choice between seeing children as either vulnerable, or already protected by a level of expertise. The latter position is unsatisfactory because it cannot explain how such expertise is developed, nor how an audience gets to play with particular texts. Instead I will suggest a different approach to children as a media audience, by concentrating on how they learn to pay attention to the horror genre. I will argue that children learn the genre not only through paying attention to the text, but more importantly in talk about it. Talk about the text actively constructs the object of their attention.

Children talk horror

The children whose talk about horror provides the data for this article were aged between 7 and 12 when they were interviewed. They are not the main target audience for horror films, the bulk of which get an 18 rating from the British Board of Film Classification[4]. Legislation bars them from watching such material in the cinema, so

---

[3] See Ang (1989) for an interesting discussion on this point. She is particularly concerned to attack the way in which those working within the uses and gratifications paradigm have consistently depoliticised the whole area of audience studies by the terms in which they discuss audience activity.

[4] Though, in an interesting piece on slasher movies, Carol Clover (1989) quotes the available research as suggesting that the actual audience for horror is predominantly male and aged between 12 and 20, significantly younger than the legislation allows for.

access has to be mainly via video in the domestic context, or films shown on TV. Yet this should not be taken to imply that these children's viewing is unregulated in the home. On the contrary, many of the stories told about horror texts were precisely about their regulation. (See below) This was so irrespective of class background.

Access for this group is difficult. Consequently, from the outset it is important to draw a distinction between the amount of talk about horror and the amount of actual viewing on which such talk is based. Whilst it quickly becomes obvious that the claim to have seen some horror carries a certain social prestige, it is equally obvious that the majority of those who talk about horror have seen comparatively little. Yes, some of the sample had seen whole films: a few of the younger boys spoke in detail about horror videos they'd watched at home alone, presumably when parents were out; a few of the older girls spoke of watching horror at sleepovers. But many others said that they had only watched bits, either from their own choosing or because parents wouldn't let them see any more. Some based quite authoritative judgements of particular films on what they subsequently referred to as clips or trailers. That speakers should be able to take the floor and hold forth about what amounts to fragments of whole films without fear of contradiction or ridicule in itself indicates the relative lack of experience of this age group.

The way they talk about the content of horror films is also revealing. In contrast to other genres, these children's accounts of horror films are often perfunctory. When they retell horror, they don't try and explain what gets said and done in terms of what went before or happens after. There is very little attention to cause and effect, very little mention of the plot. Often a retelling consists of describing one or more isolated moments when something gruesome is taking place. Here is Obinna's complete version of V:

> Obinna (9):   One thing I don't like in horror films is because, when they rip off their faces sometimes, they got horrible skin. Like my dad taped V
>
> Interviewer: V?
>
> Obinna: Yeah
>
> Interviewer: Oh, I've not seen that one.
>
> Obinna: My dad taped it, it was disgusting, these alien people dressed in red, they look like humans, but when they speak they've got double voice, and when they rip off their face, it's a lizard face. /
>
> Interviewer: mmm
>
> Obinna: I turn my face away and go 'ugh'

Lengthier versions of horror films generally mean a longer list of such gruesome moments.

These children are not "experts" in the sense in which we might attach such a label to an older, more experienced audience. In this respect it is hard to see how the data provided by their talk could deliver hard facts or new insights about the horror genre. But that would be looking for answers to the wrong kind of questions. What the data does show is the process by which the children themselves are beginning to establish what counts as horror (Heap, 1990).

Constructing horror: sorting out the audience.
Much of the talk about horror is not about the text per se, but about the act of watching. Instead of talking about the text in the abstract, children give a highly contextualised account of their viewing. Who the child was with, where they were, when they watched it, these all seem to require explanation.

>Interviewer: go on, tell us about Nigh
>
>Emily(9):   It's about this man and they're on Elm St and he's got long nails, horrible, and er, um, I don't know what happened but the first bit I saw because we were [in this] with my cousin, well, we were watching it and I came down and my mum was covering my eyes and I just took them off and all I saw was this, all this blood on the tele, and then I saw this lady flat on the floor, nothing in her, just all her blood was all over the place
>
>Paul: Lovely!

Such anecdotal data could be used to document patterns of viewing behaviour, and be treated as no more than a window onto a series of earlier events. But this highly contextualised discourse has a quite specific function in the small group discussion. Talk about the text in context focuses attention on the audience, and this audience is clearly divided into children and adults.

Access to horror is restricted both in the public domain, through legislation, and within the family, through the exercise of parental authority. These restrictions mark the genre out as being primarily for adults, not children. Children recognise and play with this distinction in their talk. Indeed, a key question for many of these children is whether they belong with the younger audience or not.

There are lots of anecdotes about parents stopping children watching, or children themselves looking away from the screen. The most frequently offered justification for adult censorship is the fact that children may get nightmares after seeing horror films. Again and again, children quote their parents to this effect. Even

when they think the injunction is wrong in their own case, they generally believe it should be applied to younger children. The contrast between younger viewers who will be frightened and older viewers who won't be underpins much of the discussion of the horror genre.

Children sort out their place in the audience through the stories they tell about themselves as viewers. Some side with the adults. Those who have watched horror are often keen to emphasise their ability to handle adult material:

> Su (12):   Yeah, we had a sleepover, and we watched about three 18s, we was just sitting there going "Ahhhh"

By identifying the films as 18s the speaker establishes the credentials of this (younger) audience. They are sophisticated enough to handle stuff which isn't designed for them. Talking about 18s as a distinct category is one way of staking out a claim to be treated as an adult viewer.

Others seem to accept the position of child viewer. Talk about horror films often spills on into talk about having nightmares or being frightened in the dark at bedtime. This contribution from Hayley (7) comes after she has been listing some scary moments from a horror film:

> Hayley: It's exciting but / when you're sitting in a dark room, when you're watching videos on your own, there's this settee my nan's got in her room, and there's this something behind it, but I don't know, there's carpets behind it, and I'm in my bed and I'm really scared when I'm watching films, cause I think something's gonna pop out behind it and take me away. [laughter]

There are lots of stories about contesting parental restrictions, some told with a good deal of humorous effect. Having identified horror films as things his parents don't like him watching, Dilesh (9) goes on to tell this story:

> Dilesh: Once, I think it was on Friday, there was this er film called First Born, half man half gorilla...I watched the first bit of it and she goes, when it comes to the bit she was pregnant, when she gets the baby out, right, she sends me and my brother out in the kitchen. I go 'that's not fair, you lot can watch it, but you don't let us two watch it!'
>
> Hussein: It's only a gorilla! [laughter]
>
> Dilesh: I know! She goes 'you can't watch it because after nine o'clock it's for men, not for children.' [laughter] So what? It's not fair! My dad was there, she closed the dining room door, right, and er, my dad says 'I'll tell you the story after', but I never ever, I never heard it.

Despite his protests, Dilesh has been placed firmly in the category of child not man by his mother and consequently denied a place in the audience. But as the telling of

this story itself suggests, you don't have to win the argument with your parents to maintain credibility with your friends.

If there is a perceived contrast between being young and frightened and old and not frightened, children don't always wish to be old enough and brave enough to watch all horror films. There are other possible responses. Indeed, Paul (9) in the following extract, puts forward a rather different case for not watching A Nightmare on Elm Street:

> Interviewer: Have you ever seen it?
>
> Paul: No, I've heard it, don't want to see it [laughs]
> :
> Paul: My friend said he's so, there's so much um horrible stuff in it, it makes him laugh, because it's, you, you can't really get someone who goes inside somebody, gets, he goes inside somebody, then, um, he gets his nails and makes a hole in them and then all this stuff starts coming out, all this blood/ [Emily: yeah, that's it, yuck] It's stupid, nothing can really happen like that

On the one hand he has heard enough about the film to know he doesn't want to watch it, and he describes a clearly gruesome moment. On the other hand, he portrays his friend's reaction as laughter rather than terror, and closes his remarks with a clear modality judgement. The film is both horrible enough for him not to want to see it, and yet sufficiently unlikely to happen for him not to be really scared. Paul evades the position of frightened child viewer by adopting the voice of rational contempt.

In the stories they tell about the social regulation of horror the children clearly identify a contrast between adult and child viewers. But they use this contrast in different ways to identify their own relationship to the text and their place in the audience.

Constructing horror: sorting out the text

In talking about the contents of horror films, children concentrate on the gruesome spectacle. But a lot of the talk about the horror text also seems to function as a way of sorting out what goes into the broader generic category. There is no real consensus on this point. Once the topic of horror has got under way, children justify reference to a particular text by introducing it with an appropriate label:

Ashley (7):   [Oh, I've got a bad one!

Terms used to place one text in relation to others include scary, creepy, really gory, and really gruesome. This sounds not unlike the kinds of distinctions the British Board of Film Classification might be using! But what counts under any of these headings is much more eclectic. One girl proposes Amadeus as her most scary film, because of the bit where Mozart is dying and "writing his own music for his own death". Comedies with horror trimmings like Gremlins and Little Shop of Horrors are nominated alongside slasher movies such as Friday the Thirteenth and the Nightmare series. One group switch from talking about horror films which are scary, to other things on television which are scary such as news reports of dog attacks, to talking about being terrified by dogs they pass on the street. Horror takes its place alongside a variety of other phenomena which children find frightening or which give them nightmares. This is very different from the way they talk about soaps. Even the seven year olds are in no doubt about what to talk about under that heading: Neighbours, Home and Away, Dallas, Dynasty, Eastenders, Coronation Street and so on. And they can talk about them at great length without deviating from the subject.

In the absence of any consensus, children establish what will count as horror as they go along. In the following interview a boy in the group had been talking about watching A Nightmare on Elm Street, though he never provided any details from it. He said he'd been hiding behind the sofa for much of the video. This led to derisory laughter from the girls in the group, one of whom suggested that he'd probably been screaming. A little later on, another of the girls took control of the conversation by making this comparison with Nightmare:

> Hilary (9): It's the same with Dr. Who it's exciting and you get so scary
> (giggles and general clamour)
> :
> especially when those, things ...came out of the water and they jus, killed the, erm priest you know/ and they're going, ..(makes noises, giggles) and they had this white face and they were going..
> :
> Sarah: Yeah, in one episode they had this, a lady and she had this face and it started to melt and it was all horrible and it went (panting sounds. Others giggle) squashed up like a (..) melted candle like all over the floor (laughs)
>
> Interviewer: Is that right?
>
> Katie: It's disgusting.

By treating A Nightmare on Elm Street and Dr Who as equivalents the girls are able to switch the conversation onto some gruesome moments they know. In this case the comparison goes unchallenged.

It would be perfectly possible to dismiss such talk as being of little value since these children clearly do not have expert knowledge of the horror genre. Indeed, talk about the text seems less precise than talk about the circumstances of viewing. But this is to overlook how the genre is being constructed through the talk itself. The uncertainty about exactly what constitutes a horror text leads children both to hypothesise about new kinds of texts they may not have seen, but also to re-organise what they know about other texts in the light of the new category. Importantly this process of building the genre happens as a joint endeavour, a social event.

What counts as the horror genre

The data shows the genre being built in talk about the text. Whether these children have accurate information about the horror genre or not is irrelevant. What matters is how children establish in their talk what they think it's meant to be. What I'm pointing to here is that horror as a genre doesn't exist as an abstract set of principles. The genre itself is a moveable feast. What it is depends on what people agree it will be. And this changes. Horror is not a fixed category for the adult audience anyway. When I was growing up Horror Films were Christopher Lee as a vampire and Vincent Price stalking haunted, crumbling castles. Currently Horror Films are predominantly "slasher" movies – the Nightmare, Friday the Thirteenth, Chainsaw Massacre series. Though there are other important sub-genres too. In other words, how we conceptualise a particular genre does not stand outside of time, but is dependent on particular instances, the range of texts available now, and how they stand in relation to each other. The children's talk makes this process clear.

Of course, some people stand in a more powerful defining relationship here. Those involved in producing The Texas Chainsaw Massacre had the means to make a new kind of text, one which has had a substantial impact on the way the genre has developed (see Clover, 1989). But both producers of films and their consumers are involved in the same exercise: establishing what will count as the genre. This does not mean only paying attention to formal textual features, it also means thinking more broadly about the way in which texts are circulated and consumed. For much of the work involved in establishing the genre happens away from the actual text itself, in the social contexts which surround it.

The children's talk shows them negotiating over the horror genre: what can be included under that category, what kinds of attention can be paid to that text, what their relationship with the text might be. And in many respects their understanding of the audience precedes and indeed shapes their understanding of the text. Take Marcus' retelling of A Nightmare on Elm Street:

136

Marcus (7):   There's a man called Freddy Kruger and he's basically he's a very horrible nightmare and in nightmares he like/ he scares people and so they really think it's really happening and he has knives coming out of his fingers doesn't he? [to Nicholas]

Nicholas: Yeah. [and kills people and scratch them on the neck.

Marcus: [(........)   yeah he goes [Crunch sounds] and he like he/ gets all these knives out/ out of his fingers and he/ when he attacks people he gets them and goes [Crunch/grind sound again].

Marcus knows only the barest details about the content of the film. What he can say about Freddy could as easily have been gleaned from seeing a poster, or listening to other children talk. But this is enough to allow him to perform a horrible bit. Rehearsing even a small fragment will do, provided you understand the impact the text is designed to have on other spectators. You don't need precise knowledge of the text to play.

What will count as bona fide knowledge depends on the group doing the talking. In Marcus' case, he checks what he has to say with Nicholas, verifying the details which make up his "frightening" performance. Shazad, Steven and David (12), whom I quote below, spent rather longer negotiating what counts as horror.

Negotiating the horror text
Interviewed as a threesome, Steven introduced the subject of horror films by claiming Warlock as the "most brilliant film" he'd seen recently. He immediately started recounting gruesome moments, mainly in an attempt to shock Shazad. He managed this quite easily. Shazad rose to the bait, and spent a great deal of time trying to get Steven to "stop talking about it".

Steven: And there's the part when, um, at the end, the witches can't take salt water and the, one of the people in it has to take injections and she fills up her needle with salt water and she [sticks it in her neck and it goes stee, and (&)

Shazad: [Stop talking about it man

Steven: (&) it goes Harrh [and all this skin (&)

Shazad: [Stop talking about it

Steven: (&)starts to go in and everything [pulls the skin on his own face out of shape] [and then, and then, (&)

Shazad: [Stop being so extra,

Steven: (&) he all crumbles up and sets on fire

In recounting the film, Steven adopts the pose of one who has witnessed gruesome sights and survived. He is in control of the material. He can represent it as gruesome here, and terrify Shazad, whilst at the same time maintain his own distance. Notice the timing of his laughter in the following extract, for instance, and compare it with the reaction of the interviewer and Shazad.

> Steven: and then, um, then when it's all over she goes like that and she's like, she's just knocked out like, and he lifts up her head and gets the crystal and [giggles] plucks out her eyes
>
> Interviewer: Oh my goodness
>
> Shazad: Er, that's not nice

If we are in any doubt about Steven's role as viewer, he explicitly contrasts his own cool retelling of gruesome sights with the likely reaction of Shazad.

> Steven: and there's a bit when, um you're not supposed to look into the witches eyes and the man does and all his eyes start to bleed and everything [Shazad makes a groaning sound] and if Shazad was there he'd have started to cry [laughs]

So far the main distinction Steven has drawn is between those who are frightened by horrible sights and those who are not. He places himself in the latter group, Shazad and (by implication) the interviewer in the former.

Shazad, by contrast, has made very little effort to appear cool about horror. For him, horror seems to be a genre for older viewers (his brother), or weirdos like Steven! When Steven completes his retelling of Warlock, Shazad has no difficulty in owning up to never having seen any horror videos, even if he is encouraged by the interviewer's own dislike of the genre. He does draw the line at being thought to cry, though.

> Steven: if Shazad was there he'd have started to cry [laughs]
>
> Shazad: No, I don't cry
>
> Steven: Yes you do
>
> Interviewer: Do, you ever watched any horror films?
>
> Shazad: No
>
> Interviewer: No, I, I don't like them myself
>
> Shazad: Innit? my brother does

At this point in the conversation, Shazad and the interviewer have characterised themselves as those who don't watch and don't like horror. Steven once again takes the floor. This time he recounts how he didn't use to like horror films either.

> Steven: I, I, I didn't like them until I watched a couple with my dad, because I though, because I used to get nightmares about them
> :
> And, um, so I watched a couple with my dad and he was, he was saying, oh nothing going's to happen off that, I knew nothing WAS going to happen, but I used to get nightmares and then, I watched a couple, it's OK if I'm with someone, I watched a couple and I went, oh it's not too bad, so I watch all others

The anecdote equates disliking horror with being scared and being young. It shows Steven striving to place himself on the side of the mature (and male) viewer, who can "watch all others", but not quite managing to eradicate the sense of fear. On the one hand, Steven is restating his basic position: that horror viewers can be divided into those who are frightened and those who aren't. At the same time his own relationship to these polar opposites is more ambivalent. Actually staking out a place on the grown ups' side is quite hard.

The interviewer turns to David. David swiftly establishes a difference between himself and Steven. The first film he mentions watching is A Nightmare on Elm Street, recognised by Steven as belonging to a different order of horror.

> Interviewer: Do you watch horror films, David?
>
> David: Yeah, I watch Nightmare on Elm Street, and
>
> Steven: Oh I don't watch really bad horror films

If Steven presents himself as a survivor, someone who has managed not to have nightmares after the film is over, David presents himself as a connoisseur. He is acquainted with a body of work:

> David: I've seen Nightmare on Elm Street, all of them a couple of times now, um, I've seen the Night of the Living Dead, Demons, seen quite a lot

Unlike Steven, he doesn't bother to produce gruesome moments to terrify the audience. Having identified specific texts and their place in a hierarchy of gruesomeness, he talks in general terms about watching horror videos. He treats the possibility of being frightened differently. Steven talks about fear in terms of how other people might react: Shazad with tears; himself when younger with nightmares. He displaces the possibility for being frightened onto others. David talks about himself, and how he is made frightened or not so frightened by the text.

> Interviewer: Are they better second time round?

> David: Yeah, you know what happens in the ending, don't get really scared about it, when it's the first time you don't really know what happens and then all of a sudden something jumps out and you go like that [jumps with pretend fright]

The emphasis is on the relationship between himself and the text. He draws a distinction between being really scared first time round and less so on subsequent viewings, but relates this to the structure of the text and the use of suspense. The contrast is not between his age then and his age now, but on his knowledge of the text.[5]

This is a more complex view of the place for being scared when horror viewing than Steven's stark contrast. It is also something which Steven doesn't understand. He rejoins the conversation when he overhears David talking about things which make him jump and makes the following comment:

> Steven: I thought, David, David, I thought you said you watched horror films

> David: I do... I like it on the horror films

Watching the horror films and being scared is a possibility which just won't compute, as far as Steven is concerned! It is tempting to treat the differences between David, Steven and Shazad as steps in the development of the genre. But this is to privilege "expert" knowledge as somehow more objective, a less partial account of the horror text. I would want to argue that being an expert is one among many readings. Like others, it offers its own version of the text and its own place to read it from.

Steven, David and Shazad are operating with different views of what it might mean to watch the horror genre. The stories they tell about the films and themselves as viewers become a form of exchange, a means of testing out and also revising their view of the genre. Children negotiate what the genre will mean in relation to what they know about it. But what they know about the genre is more than the contents of the text. Their understanding of the genre derives from their knowledge of the ways in which the text is circulated both materially and discursively, the

---

[5] David was the only member of the sample who made explicit reference to the generic conventions of the genre in the more structured interview where he retold Nightmare on Elm Street Part 3, pointing out that Freddy's victims do battle with him one by one. The way in which he uses his understanding of the generic conventions to read the text reminds me more of the "expert" reading strategies suggested by Neale (1980) and Clover (1989).

relationship between these texts and other ones they know, and their own potential place in the audience. This knowledge is not static, produced by the moment of viewing, but is in the process of being built as they talk about the text.

I have wanted to get beyond the contrast between expert and knowledgeable or inexperienced and vulnerable consumers which currently dominates so much debate, particularly about the child audience. Instead I have concentrated on the process by which children learn a new genre. Such a process is pre-eminently social. Readings are mediated by the discursive contexts in which texts circulate. In making the argument I have chosen to concentrate on boys' talk about horror. This is not because I imagine that boys can automatically stand for all children. Where they differ from the girls (in my data) is not in being a less regulated or more expert audience, but in the energy with which they pursue their claim to be treated as part of the adult audience, even when they are not sure what that might mean.

Implications for the classroom
I have given a socially-situated account of the reading process highlighting the way in which individuals' understanding of the horror genre is constructed through the social practices which surround the texts' consumption, including subsequent talk about the text. Such a view of reading can be extended to other genres besides horror, and to girls as well as boys (See, for instance, Davies, 1989; Lewis, 1990; Taylor, 1991.) What are the pedagogical implications for the media classroom?

To date, media studies courses are primarily text-centred. Work is organised around the study of specific texts, and key concepts such as media language, representation, genre and institutions are explored in relation to them. Media studies lessons generally begin with the presentation of the text to students. Subsequent work will flow from this. The same is true for work on audiences.

A text-centred approach to audiences identifies the target audience from the text. So the Northern Examining Association [NEA] GCSE Media Studies Syllabus, under the heading "Media Audiences - Newspapers" lists the following points to be covered by teachers:

> How an audience is positioned through news, features, etc. Mode of address
> of different newspaper types. How newspapers create audiences for
> advertisers. (NEA, 1988)

Much the same approach to audiences is advocated for the range of other media studied such as film, television, radio and comics and magazines. The assumption here is that the text positions its reader, and consequently any critical enquiry into

141

audiences must begin by deconstructing the way in which this happens. But the kind of data I have presented above shows the audience for the horror genre being constructed ahead of much contact with the text. Consequently I would argue that treating the audience solely as a function of the text is misleading. Paradoxically, it disguises the social origins of the audience, for it fails to take into account the way readers learn how to read from other readers, as well as from the text.

Instead, I would suggest taking a reader-centred approach to audiences, especially with younger children[6]. A reader-centred approach would start with what students know about reading as a social practice which takes place in particular social contexts, with particular participants. To make such knowledge the object of study implies resorting, not to texts, but to the kinds of methods used by ethnographers to make implicit knowledge explicit. For instance, in relation to the horror genre, the students' knowledge was largely speculative, and even within the same age range, highly differentiated (e.g. Steven, Shazad and David). A text-centred approach would probably seek to redress this state of affairs by showing students more horror films, and making these the subject of textual analysis. Uncertainties about the genre would be settled by recourse to the text. Given the age rating of most horror films, this might well prove controversial, if it isn't illegal! Maybe that is why horror has rarely been a mainstay of media studies courses despite its popularity with a teenage audience.

A reader-centred approach would work differently. The kind of ambivalence these children express about their place in the audience (whether they count as children or adults), and their speculation about the nature of the horror text would become the starting points for discussion. So the following kinds of questions would provide the focus in class. Who is prepared to own up to watching horror, to whom; who wouldn't tell whom; who has seen how much horror, under what circumstances; whether anyone has decided against watching, under what circumstances; what other sources besides the text have been used to glean information on horror (e.g. film posters; magazines; playground talk); whether they feel horror viewing should be regulated, by whom, for what age group; what kinds of texts count as horror texts, for whom (finding the most frightening text put out during children's TV might be an interesting one). Initial answers could then be scrutinised further by the class to see if any social patterns were emerging in terms of preference. Is it only boys who like to see surviving the horror challenge as proof of their maturity? Who wants to be scared and why? Framing the questions in this way provides a

---

[6] See Branston, 1992 for a useful discussion of these issues and some further practical suggestions for how such an approach could be developed.

social dimension to talk about children's media interests, and creates the means to examine differences of view amongst the audience.

As with other genres, the study of 'horror' ought to focus on the way the social context of consumption frames the text. ... In following a reader-centred approach, media teachers need to be aware that children's knowledge of any genre is flexible and liable to change in the social situation in which it is discussed. To ignore the social and political complexities of the audience's readings limits students' understanding of how media texts help structure social relations and pervade identity politics, both important aims for media studies.

~~~~~

How the analysis contributes to the developing theory.

Conventional views of reading within English and Media Studies start from the text. Individuals or groups are asked to speak about texts after they have read or watched them. What they have to say is then treated primarily as a response to that text. By contrast, this data shows talk about text already happening ahead of much contact with the texts themselves and in important ways orientating the audience to those texts. As evidence for the lack of first hand knowledge of the genre I cite the fluid definitions of the genre employed by the children; the ability of individuals to hold the floor when what they have to say is based on fragments they have seen or heard about; reliance on third party information – what others say about the texts; coupled with the high number of stories about the restrictions imposed on children's access to the genre.

However, I go on to argue that what children learn through this kind of talk about text becomes part of the resources which they can then bring to the text itself, when and if they encounter it. What it means to read and to be a reader is indeed being socially and culturally shaped in dialogue with others, not retrospectively, but prospectively.

143

Talk about horror texts shows this happening in two ways. First, the children reflect on what they already know about the social regulation of access to the texts as it has already taken place elsewhere. Regulation of the texts elsewhere underlines the division of the audience into children and adults. Secondly, in the current literacy event, they then try out these positions in relation to the text as they talk with their peers. By invoking incidents of regulation which had happened elsewhere, they are able to re-negotiate what such regulation might mean in the current context and use this to orientate themselves towards the future. (See for example, Philip's use of his friend's version of the Freddy films)

Dilesh's anecdote, also quoted in the paper above, provides another striking example of these processes of negotiation. In 1993 I was to re-analyze this anecdote for publication in the Journal of Research in Reading, in terms which brought these points out:

> By introducing the text under the horror movie label and identifying the plot as 'half man, half gorilla' Dilesh links the text to a genre where scary, repulsive and monstrous things will be shown. His mother's actions are understood in relation to this reading of the text and seem to confirm it: he has to leave the room to avoid horrible sights. However, also embedded in Dilesh's account is his mother's side of the story. She acts to exclude Dilesh at the point when the baby is being born. In her view what is being hidden from Dilesh's sight may well be related to women's business, rather than the horror genre. It is the birth itself she doesn't want Dilesh to see. Dilesh makes no explicit reference to such an interpretation, though he includes enough details for us to read the anecdote in this way. By contrast, Hussein, in his brief interjection here, seems to have missed this point. His comment, 'It was only a gorilla' reduplicates Dilesh's analysis of the programme. It

places the programme within the horror genre but establishes that it is not that frightening. A different reaction to this anecdote could have framed the text in relation to gender and sexuality, rather than horror.

Two contexts help determine how this particular text will be read: the original context in which the text was distributed and the subsequent context(s) in which discussion of the text takes place. Part of what is still being negotiated here is what kind of text this is and what the consequences of labelling it 'horror' might be for understanding its contents. This suggests that readings are never finished. They are continually made and remade in talk about text.

:

Part of what the talk does, both at the point when the text was originally distributed and now, is construct the text's legitimate audience and the speaker's place within it. These are not given by the text alone. Whilst his mother's actions have placed him firmly amongst the children and therefore outside the legitimate audience, Dilesh continues to argue that he could read the text. In this endeavour he is supported by his friends who by their laughter show that in this instance the division of the audience into children who will be frightened and appalled and adults who won't be, can't be justified. (Maybin and Moss, 1993b)

What this analysis brings out is the dynamic role for talk about text, and the extent to which interaction between participants has the potential to reconfigure how children read.

Both publications show me grappling to re-describe talk about text primarily in terms of social activity in the present. The terms I use are designed to focus in on the talk as part of an on-going social process. To underline the provisionality of the conclusions the children came to, and to emphasise the

145

extent to which what was going on in the talk had to be understood as process I developed the terms: "sorting out the text" and "sorting out (their place in) the audience". Likewise, I had begun to talk about the interaction between interviewees in the literacy event as a "form of social exchange", whilst the title to the 1993 article includes the phrase "reading as a social performance".

So far the language I was beginning to evolve was primarily a language of enactment (L2 in Bernstein's terms, Bernstein, forthcoming), focusing in on the activity in the present between interviewees. But the social past which helps shape the present moment was already writing itself into the enquiry. It was there, not because I went looking for it, but because the children themselves brought it into the talk and made it the object of explicit reflection. My first attempts to describe these broader social contexts for reading were therefore, in Bauman's terms, working from the inside, out (Bauman, 1992).

In describing the social contexts for reading horror I began to use the term "social regulation" to describe the way in which access to the material was controlled by others, not the children themselves. Here I concentrated on the local restrictions imposed by parents, rather than on the official practices – legislation, censorship and classification – which also clearly play a role. In this respect at this time the "social regulation of text" was not yet an overarching concept which could explain the interrelationship between the social organisation of the contexts for reading in all its forms and talk about text. "Social regulation of texts" in the 1993 piece remains at the level of L2 not L1.

- Chapter Five -

Girls tell the teen romance.

The data I consider in this chapter comes from the first interviews I

conducted independently with groups from the TVLP sample as part of my

own research programme. The data was collected in 1990 and written up and

published in 1993. Below I reflect on what led me to this data and how it came

to be written up as it was. I comment on how the analysis was conducted,

and go over some of the ways in which my early thinking about it developed.

I then present the original article as published in 1993. I close the chapter

by reflecting on the implications of this piece for my developing theoretical

framework.

The data and its provenance

At the point when I collected the data my research objectives were still quite

broad. In the first instance I wanted to see if the kinds of informal social

talk about television which the TVLP tapped into so readily were also to be

found in relation to other media, particularly print. If so, would such talk

differ from the kinds of talk about print texts which are commonly elicited in

English classrooms? In other words could I collect evidence of "informal

print literacies", existing alongside the official ways of talking about texts

endorsed in schools? To begin to explore this I interviewed four groups about a range of print media.

Broadly speaking, my intention was to concentrate on specialists. That is to say, I hoped to interview groups who were committed to particular materials and had made some kind of investment in acquiring them (though see below). This is common practice in Audience Studies. The groups were compiled using information about their interests in print media which I had gleaned either in interviews or from the viewing diaries the sample had filled in for the TVLP, which recorded their use of comics, magazines, books and computer games. I used this information to target one individual and asked them to collect a small group who would come and talk to me about a particular kind of text. In some respects this procedure made for an ad hoc list, rather than one chosen more systematically to be representative of the interests of the sample as a whole. As it turned out, I interviewed one group of boys from D school about computer magazines; one group of girls from D school about teen romances (the subject for this chapter); a pair of girls from B school about Madonna and Raw magazine; and a pair of girls from A school about the partwork, Quest. The groupings were thus loosely linked round issues of gender and reading.

Whilst gender was not the only division of note in the sample as a whole, it did underpin some of the key distinctions made by the sample in their use of texts, and seemed particularly salient in relation to print. There was a much sharper differentiation between the texts girls and boys liked to read, than there was in the case of their TV viewing, for instance. My data represents these gender distinctions. Thus, in the first two cases these materials were only in favour with single sex groups; Madonna was more popular with girls;

whilst in the last case, this pair provided a lone example of girls who were reading materials more commonly associated with boys.

Selecting the data: Gender and a social theory of reading

In writing up the material I decided to concentrate on the interview with the group of girls about the teen romance for various reasons. First, in contrast to the horror data, this gave me a single extended interview to consider as a literacy event. Second, questions about gender and literacy, and in particular about girls' relationship to the romance, formed part of my own earlier work (Moss, 1989). In concentrating on the interview with the "romance" readers at this point in my enquiry I was able to return to this topic, but from a new perspective.

I had already written an article using data from the TVLP interviews on representation, suggesting that commentators all too often overlooked the social contexts which shaped girls' reading. In this case I had suggested that a group of girls' comments on a picture of Mitch, from Baywatch, (whom they labelled a hunk) should be understood less as a comment on abstract qualities of masculinity, than as an invocation of a particular kind of social practice: that of girls leafing through teen magazines together (Moss, 1991b). I went on to argue for the importance of analysing what respondents say about texts in the light of the social contexts in which texts circulate. The strength of the argument from my point of view lay in its ability to rescue girl readers from the position of hapless victim dominated by powerful texts, into which they are often cast in anti-sexist discourse (Moss, 1989b). In returning to the topic of girls as readers at this time I wanted to see how the

kind of theory I was engaged in building could contribute to these specifically feminist debates.

The writing context

There is a long history to the denigration of girl/women readers, their tastes and reading habits, in contrast to the treatment of male readers who are rarely singled out for such attention. (In an obvious early example, Jane Austen in *Northanger Abbey* simultaneously invokes and sends up the kinds of concerns about women readers commonplace in her day, notably their propensity to take as true the wilder fantasies served up in popular novels.) Terry Lovell documents some of this history in her analysis of the novel's changing social role and its relationship to its predominantly female readership (Lovell, 1987).

In the seventies and eighties, a good deal of feminist writing had been preoccupied with analysis of the part texts play in the ideological subordination of women (Stones, 1983; McRobbie, 1982). Yet until the mid-eighties and the growth in audience studies, very little attention had been paid to the way in which such feminist arguments overlapped with, and to some extent drew on these much older assumptions about women/girls' vulnerability and susceptibility to the texts they read. Indeed, models of the reading process used in such feminist debates went largely unexamined. My own theorising was intended to precisely fill this gap. In writing the article which follows in 1993 I wanted to put forward a more explicitly social view of reading, and argue the case for a new kind of enquiry into girl readers, one which would go beyond asking them about their reading, their attitudes and

their beliefs as if these were interchangeable categories (See Davies, 1989; Willinsky and Hunniford, 1986). The lead in to the data itself pursues these arguments at some length through examination of a debate between Liz Frazer and Martin Barker about *Jackie* readers.

Researching the teen romance

At the time when I collected this data one of my main concerns was to be able to make comparisons between talk about television and talk about print media. Consequently in this sequence of interviews I deliberately chose to use the interview format from the first, open-ended TVLP interview. My questions were similarly broad. For instance, in the romance interview my main questions were: "What do you like about reading?" and "What do you like about the books you read?". I also asked them to nominate a book they'd read recently and tell me about it. Other questions followed on from their talk: which books they didn't like; whether they liked similar kinds of books; how they decided what they were going to read; whether they talked about what they were reading with each other. I didn't set out explicitly to investigate the social contexts in which the group came to read. At this time I still thought that would need a separate kind of enquiry, modelled on an old-fashioned sociology of reading in which the facts of the matter would be sought from respondents (See my comments on the horror data in Chapter Four above). Instead, by providing the group with some very broad questions, modelled on those we had used in the first TVLP interview, my intention was to let them set the agenda, and see how they would talk about

the books amongst themselves. This had worked as a strategy in respect of television, would it work as a strategy in relation to print media?

However, talk about the social contexts for reading continually threaded its way through the conversation, as the girls told a series of anecdotes about themselves as readers during the course of the interview. So for instance, talk about the kinds of books they liked quickly turned into talk about how they negotiated access to these kinds of texts:

Sally: No, what I do is, I try and change my subject like not gore, so I pick some out and I read the front and it's really boring so I like put it away and then I get another gory book cos that's what's interesting.

Doing the analysis

In conducting the analysis I began by focusing on the full range of talk in the literacy event as a whole. The most immediately striking aspect of the data was the differences between the girls as they negotiated over the status of the teen romance during the course of the interview. Rather than a homogenous group, taking a similar view of the romance, I had four very different and distinct voices. As a way of drawing those distinctions out I began tracking through the contributions which particular individuals made during the course of the interview to see how they hung together. The distinctions between the girls came across most forcibly in the ways in which they alluded to the social processes in which their reading was embedded. To bring out these contrasts the analysis was written up in relation to the

patterns which emerged from the contributions made by individual speakers.

Analysis was conducted in two ways. On the one hand, keeping the focus on the activity in the present, I began to consider the function the telling of these anecdotes had for my interviewees in this particular literacy event. How did such anecdotes act to position themselves and others as readers? On the other hand, turning to the broader social past the girls themselves referred to, what did these anecdotes show about the girls' view of reading as a social process? How was reading differentiated in the social contexts they referred to? How might the processes they alluded to constrain or enable the sense they made of the particular texts?

In analysing the talk about the social contexts for reading I was very much moving from the inside, out (Bauman, 1992), relying on emic definitions of the relevant social context(s). At the same time I was interested in the ways in which the girls mobilised their knowledge of the broader social context for use in this current literacy event. This brought me back to the present moment. In paying attention to the ways in which the stories followed on from one another I began to see how they contributed to some larger themes. What are "adult" books? Who are they for? What kinds of values are attached to reading which kinds of books? What kinds of futures as readers did the girls see for themselves? These questions were being sorted out in relation to the social processes which made texts available, rather than in terms of content, or pre-existing attitudes and beliefs.

A good deal of what the girls were dealing with was the gendering of reading. Part of the sharp focus on this issue was undoubtedly due to the

presence of Sally at the interview, a non-romance reader who made no secret of her contempt for the genre, which she dubbed "soppy books" on her way over to the interview. Her hostile stance in a way set the scene against which the rest of us manoeuvred. However, she provoked very different kinds of responses from the other interviewees. The very differences which emerged between the girls in terms of their current allegiances to particular texts, the ways in which they staked out the territory of girls' reading and the divergent histories which seemed to produce these different positions, became a major theme in the analysis.

The article presented below was published in 1993 in the book *Reading* : *Audiences: Young People and the Media*. This is a collection of pieces drawing on qualitative research into young people's use of a range of media texts. It is in this context that I begin the piece by presenting a review of debates about girl readers, debates which I hoped the piece itself would contribute to. The piece is as originally published.

Girls tell the Teen Romance: Four reading histories

Much of the discussion about the teenage romance is locked into debates about the ideological effects of texts upon their readers. So, for instance, John Willinsky and Mark Hunniford (1986) characterize the teen romance as a 'preparatory literature' for girls. They warn that it plays on the fears of a particularly vulnerable audience by offering girls a vision of a narrow future at a time when they may have few other ideas of what could be in store for them. The teen romance is conceived of as a particularly powerful text because it is seen to speak directly to a highly specific audience. Worries about its effects continue to dominate the agenda, despite the fact that critics do not agree on exactly what the romance might speak about: patriarchal relations between women and men/boys and girls; desire and

heterosexuality; or women's place (See Moss, 1989; Gilbert and Taylor, 1991; McRobbie, 1982; Batsleer, 1981; Light, 1984).

In an attempt to resolve some of the contradictions to be found in the critics' accounts, attention has turned away from textual analysis and to the audience for the romance. Girls are increasingly asked to speak about their reading(See, for instance, Gilbert and Taylor, 1991; Christian Smith, 1993). What they have to say is then used to probe the question of ideological effect. I want to raise some difficulties with this kind of enquiry, and particularly with the way the female adolescent audience is constructed within it. I begin by examining how, unusually, Elizabeth Frazer in 'Teenage girls reading Jackie' (Frazer,1987) uses some interview data to oppose the notion of the romance's ideological effect. I then turn to Martin Barker's reply to this in Comics: Ideology, Power and the Critics, (Barker, 1989) before presenting the case for a different kind of enquiry into girls' romance reading.

The romance – Who is at risk?

In 'Teenage girls reading Jackie' Frazer disputes the usefulness of the concept of ideology, particularly as it is applied to the relationship between text and reader:

> All too often theorists commit the fallacy of reading 'the' meaning of a text and
> · inferring the ideological effect the text 'must' have on the readers (other
> than the theorists themselves, of course!) We may oppose this strategy at two
> points. First we may dispute that there is one valid and unitary meaning of a
> text. Second we may care to check whether..it does have.. an ideological
> effect on the reader. (p411)

Frazer takes up the question of ideological effects by looking at how seven different groups of girls reacted to a Jackie story she gave them to read. In each case the girls show themselves to be well able to dismiss the story as rubbish. They evaluate it as fiction, and find it lacking; they compare it to their own lives and find it unrealistic; they identify its purposes, the hidden messages it contains, and reject them; and they comment explicitly on its role in creating fantasies. Frazer concludes that:

> My preliminary analysis of the transcripts of these discussions..strongly
> suggests that a self-conscious and reflexive approach to texts is a natural
> understanding, not only of fiction, but of.the genre of publications for girls
> of which Jackie is an example....Ideology is undercut, that is, by these
> readers' reflexivity and reflectiveness. (p419)

She argues persuasively for considering girls as knowing and critical, far from the image of a passive and vulnerable audience more commonly associated with examination of this age group reading this kind of material. However, Frazer does not suggest that girls are entirely free to imagine life in their own image. On the contrary, for the remainder of the paper she moves on to explore the idea of discourse registers as important factors which limit what can be said in specific contexts. She argues that girls have access to a variety of discourse registers which produce and validate different kinds of knowledge. In this instance they read the Jackie text through a variety of different discourse registers which undercut its message. This leads her to look for the constraints which produce girls as gendered individuals, not in the texts they consume, but primarily in the social settings for speech.

In his response to this piece, Barker raises a number of queries about the status of the data Frazer presents. But the main thrust of his argument is to discount the criticisms these girls make by claiming they have no relevance to an enquiry into what Jackie means to its readers. He does this first by querying the assumption that to be critical of a text is to be uninfluenced. Secondly, and at greater length, he suggests that Frazer is looking at the wrong group of readers. He argues that the girls she interviewed are not Jackie's "spontaneous' or 'natural' readership':

> This tells us where Frazer goes wrong. Her misunderstanding (along with so many other people) is to suppose that anyone who reads Jackie is its 'reader'. Just because certain girls in very widely dispersed social locations will pick up the comic and read it – perhaps even regularly – does not mean that they are the ones we need to be studying. (p256)

For Barker those whom we ought to be studying are the readers who take up a 'contract' with the text:

> A 'contract' involves an agreement that a text will talk to us in ways we recognise. It will enter into a dialogue with us. And that dialogue, with its dependable elements and form, will relate to some aspect of our lives in society. (p261)

He goes on to argue:

> (1) that the media are only capable of exerting power over audiences to the extent that there is a 'contract' between texts and audience, which relates to some specifiable aspect(s) of the audience's social lives; and (2) the breadth and direction of the influence is a function of those socially constituted

features of the audience's lives, and comes out of the fulfilment of the
contract (p261)

'Natural Readers' – some problems

In relation to more general arguments about media audiences these points about
the kind of contract 'natural readers' enter into with a text sound innocuous
enough. Indeed, in relation to a more general debate about ideology they represent
a considerable improvement upon the kind of conspiracy theories which see the
media industries in some Svengali-like role, keeping the rest of us from true
knowledge of the way things are. However, these contentions do not work so well
when applied to an adolescent and female readership for Jackie. This is partly
because no other genre besides the romance is seen to work so comprehensively
against the interests of its main readership. In this respect, the relationship of
girls to the romance is not interchangeable with that of children to comics such as
The Beano or Whoopee! (which Barker analyses at some length); or of boys to comics
such as Battle or Action (again a focus for Barker's analysis). It is highly
problematic to assert that somewhere there is a group of girls to whom Jackie speaks
without locking such a group into the position of hapless victims unable to act in
their own best interests, before one has even heard what they might have to say[1].

There are other more fundamental objections. For a start, how do we know who the
'natural' readers are? Barker argues that this cannot be judged by the regularity
of reading, nor by the presence or absence of critical comment. He points out that in
the latter case, criticism may be motivated as much by the failure of the magazine to
live up to its side of the contract, as any rejection of its influence. Instead, Barker
defines a text's 'natural' readers in terms of the kind of relationship they have with
its contents. They are the ones who are spoken to. But he also presupposes that
the critic will be able to recognise the form that address will take – the nature of the
contract – in advance. For s/he must already know what that relationship will be in
order to discount what it is not. This seems to me to be a highly questionable
research procedure. All too easily it will lead to the dismissal of any data which

---

[1] To be fair to Barker, he does try to suggest that there might be
more to Jackie than a simplistic set of negative effects. And he is able
to defend the magazine against the charges brought against it by Angela
McRobbie in her early analysis of Jackie (1982. op cit). His own analysis
of Jackie shows that the magazine in several ways supports female
friendship, whilst the stories are much more ambivalent about the place for
boys in girls' lives than McRobbie allowed for. Nonetheless he displays
none of the same sense of ready sympathy with the magazine that he brings
to his analysis of other comics.

doesn't fit the critic's existing assumptions about what the natural audience's relationship to the text in question should be. This is exactly what happens when Barker turns his attention to Frazer's data. As a research strategy in relation to the romance it will do little to get critics beyond a view of girl readers as essentially passive and hapless dupes.

I am arguing against the notion of dividing the audience for romance into 'natural' readers whom we will study, and other kinds of readers whom we won't. I suspect this is a pointless exercise which simply creates a mythical group wholly dominated by the romance's agenda, whom we would have great difficulty in actually tracking down[2]. In the meanwhile it detracts from any full examination of a more varied range of responses.

However, I don't want to lose sight of Barker's reminder that different readers come to texts with very different histories of engagement with a particular form. This should be recognised in any analysis of what they have to say. The weakness of Liz Frazer's piece is that she provides no information about the relationship of the girls she interviewed to the magazine, or indeed any other kind of reading material. This makes it hard to set these girls' comments in context, or indeed, to know quite what weight to give them. This is a lack.

Reading histories – another approach

I am proposing another approach to girls' reading of the romance by starting, not with questions about ideological effects, but with questions about the reading histories which create and sustain girls' interests in particular texts. Starting with reading histories allows us to differentiate between levels of engagement and to build that into any analysis without prejudging the nature of the relationship with the text. It also enables us to focus on reading as a social activity – something which takes place at particular moments in time, in particular social settings, involving particular participants. This is in contrast with much of the work on ideological effects which, for all its concerns with the links between the contents of the text and the way people live their lives, still focuses on reading as primarily a

---

· [2]   Barker himself even seems to suggest at times that <u>Jackie</u>'s "natural" readers no longer exist (so who keeps buying the magazine, one wonders?). He explains this decline in terms of changes in the magazine's production history and the consequent mix of articles it carries, but then curiously admits in a footnote that the story Frazer's groups were reading (and rejecting) was recycled from that earlier, more potent, era.

mental phenomenon, something which happens in the interior space of the mind rather than in the social space of everyday transactions.

Examining reading histories allows us to consider the range of interests any one reader may have and the place for a particular genre within that range. This acts as a reminder that texts are not read in a vacuum, each one considered in lonely isolation on the merits of its contents. They are read through and against a social history of encounters with other texts at other times. Any one reading is both specific to the particular location in which it takes place, the particular text involved, and shaped by a much broader past. To concentrate on reading histories is to explore how a particular reading unfolds in time. This seems particularly important in relation to a young audience. Young people's interests differ from adults' in that they are developed during a period of rapid change for them. Different objects come in and out of fashion in rapid succession, old tastes are put to one side, revisited in a new light or superseded by other interests. Young people are not a stable audience whose interests have been sustained over considerable periods of time – in direct contrast, for example, to the adult audience for soap operas who may indeed bring a lengthy history of engagement with a particular text to a research interview (just as they will do to their reading of a particular episode). We need to be able to take such patterns of rapid change into account in any analysis we undertake.

In considering the data presented below, I will be analysing how the teen romance genre is judged alongside other texts, how a place is established for it within particular reading histories, and what is at stake for individuals in declaring themselves to be one of its readers.

One group – different readers

The data I will be considering comes from an interview conducted with four twelve year old girls – Ceri, Mitra, Sally and Nicola – during the summer term of their first year in secondary school about a range of books they read outside school. I want to start by saying something about how this group came to be interviewed together, and the general range of their interests.

The girls' class was one of six being used by the Television Literacy Research Project[3]. From this class, a sample had been recruited who would be interviewed on eight separate occasions over the course of eighteen months about their television viewing. I was the researcher working with this group. One of the activities the children undertook was to keep a diary of their TV, computer and video use. In the appendix they had been asked to name any books or magazines they had read in the period the diary covered. I decided to use this information to interview some of the children about other leisure interests besides TV. One of the girls, Ceri, had mentioned her liking for Sweet Valley High books, a popular teenage romance series. This looked like an interesting area to investigate further, so some time after the diary had been completed I asked Ceri to convene a group from among her friends in the class who would come and talk to me about romance reading. At this juncture I was imagining myself tapping into a group of committed readers – my label on the tape from this interview still reads 'Devotees: romances'.

In the event though, the group's relationship to the romance genre was more diverse, their interests in reading more eclectic. Ceri, in agreeing to get the group together, told me that she herself was no longer reading Sweet Valley Highs, she'd moved on to Jackie Collins, and the group she finally assembled had a much more diverse range of interests than simply the romance. Of the four, only Mitra was still regularly reading Sweet Valley Highs. At their broadest the group's interests in reading might best be defined as 'girls' fiction'. But even so, Sally declared on her way over to the interview that her interests were in 'gory books', and expressed a certain amount of contempt for the other girls' interests by labelling them as 'soppy books'. She mainly seemed to be there as Ceri's best friend rather than because of a shared interest in particular kinds of books.

In some senses such divergent histories complicate the interview: these girls clearly did not hold a common view of a common text. But I would also argue that (girls') tastes are often shaped in this way, against those of others as much as for the intrinsic qualities of a particular object considered on its own(See Richards, 1993). Hand-picking a group of committed readers who will only speak about one genre precludes finding out how that interest fits alongside others. Moreover Ceri's choice of the group may also reflect a more accurate picture of the kind of reading network which individuals find themselves part of, where interests differ as well as converge.

In Barker's terms, these girls do not constitute a group of 'natural readers'. The idea of a 'natural reader' focuses attention exclusively on the relation between one kind of text and one kind of reader. Any admission of other interests is seen to detract from the central point of enquiry. I think this is a mistaken view. Any reader, no matter how committed or obsessional, is unlikely to restrict themselves entirely to one kind of text. Ceri's viewing diary was compiled at a time when she considered herself to be a romance reader, yet her leisure interests considered as a whole were much more diverse. Her TV viewing comprised some programmes from Children's TV, including cartoons, magazine programmes and serials; and some programmes from mainstream TV, including chat shows, game shows, serials, soaps and particularly comedies. During the two week period the diary ran she watched several videos, mainly comedies, and looked at a couple of magazines: The Beano and Girl. It is precisely for this kind of reason that I would argue that we need to understand the way readers establish relations between different kinds of texts.

Teen romances and Sweet Valley Highs

In the interview the romance genre was most straightforwardly represented by the Sweet Valley High series (SVH). It is important to be clear about the nature of the particular text under discussion, for this helps shape the ways in which it comes to be read. The debate between Frazer and Barker, for instance, centres on the stories Jackie magazine carried as picture strips. These qualify as romances in so far as they centre on 'girl meets boy' scenarios, but as texts they are organised, produced and consumed according to different rules from those governing the production and consumption of teenage romance books such as the Sweet Valley High series. In any discussion of the romance it is all too easy to lose sight of the very different generic locations in which specific stories appear, and consequently to overlook the different social processes which govern the ways in which such texts will be circulated and read. For example, the Sweet Valley High series' ambiguous status as books featured prominently during the interview (See below).

Sweet Valley Highs are packaged and promoted in much the same way as Mills and Boon. The series rather than the individual author is given prominence, and each book relies on a clearly identifiable formula. Unlike Mills and Boon, though, the series gains much of its coherence from the central characters who feature in each story. These are identical twin sisters, Elizabeth and Jessica. The Sweet Valley High series focuses on their romantic encounters during their teenage years, and is marketed specifically for the young teenage audience. It is now preceded by the Sweet Valley Twins and Sweet Valley Kids series, featuring the same twins at earlier stages in their lives, and clearly aimed at younger readers. Neither of these two

earlier series makes reference to girl/boy relationships. In this interview the girls I talked to show themselves to be only too aware of the SVH's role as fiction sandwiched in between other kinds of books, appropriate only at a particular moment in a reading career.

I turn now to the interview transcript itself. There are two issues I want to concentrate on. I begin with the way in which these girls talk about book reading as a quite specific kind of social activity. In part, their romance reading is defined by its place in this wider context. I go on to consider the particular position each one of them constructs for Sweet Valley High books amongst the other texts they know.

Book reading – a regulated activity

When talking about children's leisure interests it is all too possible to imagine this as a free space where they make their own choices about how to spend their time. This is in contrast to the demands made on them at school, where they are not free agents. However, most of what children do is the subject of some kind of regulation, if only in terms of the amount of time and money they have at their disposal. Girls are particularly likely to live with constraints on how they spend their time at home: they are most likely to be asked to contribute to domestic labour.

Certainly, the account these girls give of their book reading shows this activity to be regulated by pressure from both parents and peers. The kinds of choices they make about what to read and when to read become the subject of others' approval or disapproval. Much of this is governed by the need to be seen to be doing well at reading. This may partly reflect the class and educational background this group share. The school is situated in a relatively affluent suburb which is predominantly white and upwardly mobile, though the ethnic mix includes a sizeable Greek Cypriot community, and a Jewish presence. The school itself continues to operate selection procedures and this group will only have gained entry to it via an exam taken at the end of their junior school. In this context it is not surprising that considerable social value is given to being a fluent reader. But I would argue that such notions have a wider social currency. At the same time gender may be at least as important an influence on the regulation of their reading as class and education. In many ways the reading of fiction has historically been associated with women (See Lovell, 1987), whilst the marketing of fiction for children and young adults continues to operate quite clearly with notions of gender distinct tastes. Certainly much of what this group has to say shows them in one way or another to be dealing with a sense of themselves as gendered readers.

162

How do the kinds of choices they make about what to read and when to read become the subject of others' approval or disapproval? As I've suggested, much of this is governed by the need to be seen to be doing well at reading. At this stage in their school careers the question of how well they can read is always on the agenda. Reading books in one's spare time has educational implications. It suggests making an effort to do something worthwhile. By contrast other leisure pursuits such as watching TV are not seen to have any bearing on progress at school. Nicola doesn't report any way in which her parents try to regulate what she reads, but she does say she reads because she gets told off for watching too much TV. Watching TV in comparison to reading appears a frivolous distraction.

If book reading itself is important, then the kinds of books that get read become another means for judging competence. These kinds of judgements are also used by the girls against each other. Sally gets taken to task by the group when her version of what she reads is interpreted by the others as too easy:

> Sally: I like these books called, I think it's published by Macmillans or something, and they're all different like the <u>Ghost of Culloden</u> or something, and they're all gory, and they're quite thin so you can read them in [bed at night and they're really good
>
> Ceri: [Oh I know, you read them in school/ [yeah] yeah, they're just really thin with lots of pictures in and so they're [(...) pictures {laughter}
>
> Sally: [NO (...)
>
> Mitra: YEAH, I used to read them when I was three!

Sally uses her interests in gory books as a means of denigrating the other girls' reading. But the description she gives of the books she prefers allows the others to judge her as not yet a competent reader. They get their revenge for the way she has attempted to discount their interests.

These girls come from homes where there is both a positive value put on reading, and some anxiety about how well it is being done. The romance fits uneasily into this space:

> Mitra: My Dad's always going 'Ooh reading all these soppy love stories' and everything, and I go, 'Ok I won't read at all' and he goes 'Oh alright then, read them!' (laughs)

In this instance Mitra actually uses this kind of educational anxiety over reading to defend the time she spends on reading romances against her father's concerns about the contents of the material. As a book the romance is to be welcomed. It

provides a sign of relative fluency, but it is not the best kind of book. This much is clear:

> Mitra: Cos my mum, like my mum and I, go to the library with me then she comes over to my bit and picks up like all these like big sort of enormous classics and goes 'Oh yeah, why don't you read this?', 'No thank you it's quite alright', cos she picks really like, boring books!

If thin picture books are a sign of relative inexperience as a reader, true adult status is not conferred by reading the romance. I have been drawing attention to the way the place for the romance is shaped by concerns which are not specific to the genre but relate to reading and schooling. How well these children are reading (indicated by the kinds of books they choose and the amount of time they spend on them) and what they are reading for (self-improvement or wasting time), are questions these girls must deal with.

Thus far, concerns about reading and competence have been shared by the group as a whole. But the view they present of themselves as readers, and the place they construct from which to read the romance are very different.

Mitra's story

Mitra was invited to the interview because Ceri knew she owned a great number of the SVH series and regularly read them during form-time. Of all the group, Mitra looks most like a committed romance reader. At the time of the interview she was reading Double Love, the first in the SVH series, presumably not for the first time. She also mentions reading other kinds of books, including children's books such as Enid Blyton and a great deal of teenage fiction, though SVH and another romance series, Sweet Dreams, seem to be her favourites. For Mitra, the appropriate audience for SVH is established by the series' place on the library shelves:

> Mitra: Cos like in my library it's got a whole teenage bit....and then like .. at the top there are all these Sweet Valley High books and Sweet Dreams and all that, then at the bottom there's all these really boring books and in the middle there's all these books you've never heard of before.

Mitra makes frequent references to her mother's reading in the course of the interview, often contrasting it with her own preferences:

> Gemma: Does she read, wha- does she read romances, does she read?

> Mitra: Well, I don't know cos like I always see her coming out of the library with books about that thick, with really boring covers, and they're normally about, I don't know what they're about really

Later in the interview Mitra characterises this kind of adult fiction by the way in which it is written:

> Mitra: I started reading one of my mum's books and they were so boring, right, the first was something like this man and he was driving and they like describe everything, right, they wouldn't say like, in the books that I read (..) there was like, say something like a brown table, and in their books right, there was an oak, I dunno, [(..)a varnished round oak
>
> Nicola: [yeah, which, which had a little scratch on it
>
> Mitra: Yeah and then I got through the first, the first one and a bit pages=
>
> Ceri: =page and it was still describing the table!

The other girls know exactly what she is talking about and join in the parody. Adult books are incomprehensible, too long-winded, and too full of description to be worth following.

For the moment Mitra stays in the teenage section, rejecting her mother's invitation to read 'boring books'. In the teenage section she has no hesitation about choosing the romance:

> Mitra: I like soppy books cos everything goes perfect, and I don't know, and at the, like, you always know wh-, like if you read the back of the book you always know what's going to happen and I like it when I know what's going to happen, cos I know what's going to happen (Laughter)......like, I dunno, she's madly in love with this boy but then he won't talk to her and you know in the end, that they're going to, right in the end then they're going to get together.

What she stresses about SVHs is the formulaic quality which makes them predictable, and also pleasurable. Whilst Ceri's foray into bestsellers has led her to stop reading SVHs, Mitra's first encounter with more adult material has led her back to SVH:

> Mitra: You know what Ceri was saying about like them being really boring and all that, they're not boring, they're just stupid. [What are?] They're really stupid, but I still like them.
>
> Gemma;   So it doesn't matter that they're stupid.
>
> Mitra: No, I like them cos they're stupid, cos I read Flowers in the Attic and that's like really, sort of, one of the, like they're really growing up people, and then I started reading them again and they seem really stupid but I still like them.

For Mitra the teenage section is a half way house between childhood and adulthood in her history as a reader. It is a temporary stopping off place. Behind her are children's books such as Enid Blyton and the Sweet Valley Twin series, ahead of her the kind of books her mother prefers.

Ceri's story

Ceri's reading includes adult bestsellers, some of the teen romances, and a variety of children's books. At the time of the interview she had just finished The Ballet Family. Most of what she reads could be described as girls' fiction, except for the bestsellers which are clearly targeted at an older female readership.

Like Mitra, the way in which Ceri talked about her reading indicated a clear sense of its future, as well as its past. Because they deal with girl/boy relationships, SVH qualify as teenage books. As such they have a certain status for both Ceri and Mitra. They are clearly to be preferred to Sweet Valley Twins, which they both reject pretty comprehensively:

> Ceri: [I read Sweet Valley Twins first of all and they're so boring, Sweet Valley Twins, I hate them.
> :
> Mitra: ..have you seen the dresses they wear, you know in the front of I don't know, forgotten what it's called, and then she's wearing like a pinafore, I wouldn't be SEEN DEAD in a pinafore!
>
> Ceri: I mean they wear dresses, yeah I mean they wear DRESSES, I mean no one wears, they wear dresses to picnics and things!

Yet there were differences here too. In contrasting the SVH series with the very different kinds of books her mother reads, Mitra mainly talks about the way the books are written. Ceri, in looking ahead from SVH to other kinds of adult fiction, is more concerned with differences in content:

> Ceri: Yeah, cos I like Sweet Valley High and then I read Lace and um, what's it, Lace and um things like that, and they're the same, right the beginning of Lace, it's about the same thing, the girl's about the same age and what they're, as um Sweet Valley High, what they're doing is like, it's just, it's really pathetic it seems in Sweet Valley High what they do, because they're much more/
>
> Gemma: Keep going, Ceri.
>
> Ceri: advanced in the oth, in Lace and things, in Sweet Valley High they just, if you just kiss with a boy, you know, you're just, you know, shock, and everyone hates you, but in Lace it goes much further/
>
> Gemma: [Cos they actually ..
>
> Others: [OOOOOOOOOHH....

For Ceri, SVH are increasingly being superseded by bestsellers. The romance is losing its place to more sexually explicit fiction. Ceri is very definite about why she reads the latter:

Gemma:　　On Jackie Collins, Ceri, is that because it happened to be around at home, is that how come you got to read it, because it?

Ceri:　Yeah, because I thought it would be dirty/ {laughter} and it was. I read Lace first, which was really boring.

At first glance, her curiosity seems to be about what books will tell you about sex. In the case of the SVH romance the answer is not a lot, so Ceri turns elsewhere. But this is not just a quest for the facts of life. After all, there are always 'body books' in every school library which will tell you that part of the story. In turning to the bestsellers Ceri also seems to be curious about what such books say to an adult audience. The books she reads are her mother's and she describes at some length how she first came across them:

Ceri:　My mum changed the furniture round and like, we found all these books which my mum's been hiding behind the settee cos she doesn't want anyone to know she's reading, yeah, cos they found out there were these three best, Lace and Lace 2 and this other one, I've forgotten what it was called, it was a Jackie Collins, oh yeah, Gamblers and Lovers that's it, and they're really boring actually but I like the dirty bits! (Loud laughter)

What she makes of the rest of the book or even how much of it she reads, is uncertain, as she consistently dismisses the plot lines:

Ceri:　.. they're really good, the story though is crap and it's a bit, it's a bit ..

Sally　It's a bit crap!

Ceri:　No, it's crap really, but the dirty bits are good. {laughter}

Each time Ceri talks about the dirty bits in the bestsellers one or more of the other girls joins in to tell about dirty bits they know, though their reference points are different. Nicola and Mitra both talk about Forever, a Judy Blume book which contains one notoriously explicit love scene, whose exact location seems to be common knowledge:

Nicola:　　If you want to read Forever, but you can't be bothered.. with the boring bit, chapter nine and thirteen are what to read.

In each case the stories they tell are of adults interrupting this kind of reading:

Nicola:　　I read it and everyone else in my school wanted to borrow it, so I lent it to Lisa, this girl, and she read it and she went out into the playground, and all the fourth years were, were, it was a massive circle because they were, because she was reading them out all the dirty bits/ [oh really] Yeah, and then all these first years were going, and suddenly the

Headmaster came so we were going 'LA la la' and sort of hiding the book and everything.

The story Mitra tells is very similar, only in this case the teacher interrupts a group of boys reading the same pages in class; Sally tells a story of a dinner lady almost confiscating a magazine a boy had brought into school and was passing around at lunch time. Making 'dirty bits' public in this way obviously involves breaking adult rules about who should know what. In following up Ceri's account of reading bestsellers with these kinds of stories, the other girls reinterpret what she has to say in that light. Nevertheless, it seems to me there is a difference here between their accounts and Ceri's. The other girls' stories focus on the possibilities of being found out, how this is avoided or what the adults actually do (Nicola tells another story about a friend's father throwing away a dirty book he found her reading). In Ceri's case, the roles are reversed: she has found her mother out. Moreover Ceri is therefore able to link these 'dirty books' directly to a known audience. In the case of the others I suspect it is much less clear precisely who these kinds of texts are intended for. Even Forever, which as a teenage book is readily available in that section in bookshops or libraries, isn't treated as intended for them. Rather they seem to regard it as information they have come across by mistake and which if adults realised was there they would do something about. Consequently, talking about these kinds of dirty bits doesn't seem to have any impact on the rest of their reading. By contrast, for Ceri the bestsellers are both replacements for and extensions of the romance. She sees them as treating similar themes in a more adult way. The bestseller recontextualises the romance.

For all their differences, in some respects Mitra and Ceri share a common view of their reading career. They see the teen romance as holding a particular place between children's and adults' fiction. They are neither of them bothered by the romance's connection with a female readership. Indeed their own place as female readers seems pretty secure: neither of them is put off talking about their own interests by gibes about soppy books. Ceri mainly ignores the word. She never uses it herself about her own or others' reading. Anything she doesn't like, from The Ballet Family to Gamblers and Lovers, she refers to as 'crap'. Mitra doesn't bother to deny that SVH are soppy books, but uses this label as a way of identifying the teen romance as a specific genre. By contrast, what can be labelled as 'soppy' becomes a bone of contention between Sally and Nicola.

Sally's story

Sally seemed less interested in reading fiction than the other girls. Almost all of Sally's books seemed to come from the school library and were chosen entirely by

168

topic, the gorier the better. The last book she said she'd read was <u>The Black Death</u>. Sally consistently referred to her own reading as 'gory books'. For her, 'gory' and 'soppy' act as mutually exclusive categories. In her view, someone who is interested in 'gory' books (herself) wouldn't possibly be interested in 'soppy' books. 'Soppy books' seem to be anything that could be associated with a specifically female readership, including of course books about girl/boy relationships. By contrast, her 'gory books' are generally to be found amongst the children's fiction, and tend to be those books which attract as many boy as girl readers:

> Gemma:　　　Do you read all different sorts of books?
>
> Sally: Mostly Roald Dahl, cos he's a combination of gory kind of/ but if I see like, I go round the library and I see　Roald Dahls, but I've got Roald Dahl, I've got a whole lot of Roald Dahl books, but I just go round the library, I see like, <u>The Black Death</u> or um <u>Murder on the Nile</u> or something, I just pick it up and then take it out and read it.

By dismissing what the other girls read as 'soppy books', Sally highlights the relative low status of fiction associated with girls. Yet her declared lack of interest didn't stop her coming to an interview where this kind of literature would be discussed. Indeed, part of Sally's assertive confidence in her right to be present seems to be tied up with the relative weight she gives to the official topic of conversation. She clearly thinks that the position she speaks from is a more powerful one. The other girls dispute this:

> Sally: ...it's good when you see someone's head getting chopped off or you're listening, you're reading: 'the guts fell on the wall'
>
> Mitra: Yeah, what's so good about that? It's disgusting
>
> Nicola:　　　She should watch The Fly!
>
> Mitra: Oh god, that's disgusting!
>
> Nicola:　　　The Fly, the Fly's head, that is evil.
>
> Mitra: At Maria's party in the middle of the night whenever a scary bit came on, she was in her sleeping bag, she was having a fit, going like this (laughter).

Sally's description fails to impress Mitra, although it also reminds her and Nicola of a 'gory' video they've seen. Yet their relationship to this kind of material seems quite different. Whilst Nicola remembers a disgusting bit to match Sally's, Mitra remembers Nicola as the terrified girl viewer. Watching 'gore' doesn't necessarily offer the kind of escape into a genderless space which Sally seems to look for.

Sally's division of the territory into 'soppy books' versus 'gory books' both signals the extent to which romances are seen as gendered texts, and stresses the

169

ambiguous position of the romance's female audience. To be a romance reader is not to speak from a position of power. Yet there is no consensus in this group as to what kinds of texts carry what kinds of prestige for girl readers. This contrasts sharply with a group of boys from the same class whom I interviewed about computer magazines. The boys spent more or less the whole interview vigorously arguing about who had the better computer and using the magazine to show up each others' lack of real knowledge. But they were all agreed on the central point, that computer knowledge was worth having.

Nicola's story

Nicola came to the interview because she was known to like Judy Blume books. Judy Blume has written a lot (though not exclusively) for the teenage girl market. Much of her work is concerned with the problems of growing up, whether that be to do with issues like divorce in the family, friendships or girl/boy relationships. Most of the other books Nicola mentions reading were more obviously girls' teenage fiction than the kind of books Sally talked about. But unlike Ceri and Mitra, Nicola eschews formulaic teen romances.

I've already pointed out that neither Mitra nor Ceri react particularly strongly to the use of the word 'soppy' to label their interests. Nicola is much more concerned. I think a great deal of this is to do with her assessment of the implications of being identified with a specifically female readership. Unlike Ceri and Mitra, Nicola vigorously denies that she reads soppy books:

> Nicola: ....The last book I read was um, Lonely Hearts, [a Stevie Day book
>
> Sally: [See, I told you you like soppy things
>
> Nicola: IT IS NOT SOPPY!

Despite the fact that the title suggests the romance genre, the book in question features a young girl detective called Stevie Day who goes round solving people's problems. There are another three books in the series. Later on, Nicola sums them up as follows:

> Nicola: It's really good because they've all got fun bits, they've all got really scary bits, it's a good mixture ...because she was going to stab her and the police break in and you're sort of going 'Oooh!'

The gender ambiguous name and the role the key character plays push these books towards at least a gender neutral readership, if not quite into the area of boys'

interests. The gory details Nicola provides in this instance also fit with Sally's interests. In this sense, Nicola redefines the book as suitable for a genderless reader, rather than being marked out for girls' consumption. Rather than challenging the appropriateness of using the word 'soppy' to label girls' interests, Nicola simply tries to line herself up on Sally's side of the divide.

But actually doing this isn't always so straightforward. It proves particularly difficult in relation to Judy Blume, who, as Sally reminds Nicola, provides the main reason for her presence at the interview:

Sally: Judy Blume's soppy.

Nicola: What's soppy?

Sally: [Judy Blume.

Ceri: [... god! {Possibly quoting a Blume title}

Gemma: Judy Blume is soppy books?

Nicola: I don't read them any more.

Sally: Yeah, well you're talking about them, she, she got you because Judy Blume.

Nicola: Yeah, but they're alright/ they're not that soppy, they're not like 'Ooh, love me [laughs] .. (help me, promise) me tonight! Promise me to go out with me tonight' [spoken in a little girl voice]. They're not all like that.

Having failed to deny any association with Judy Blume books, Nicola's strategy is to try to confine the term 'soppy' to a particular kind of romantic fiction (SVH) and to deny this has anything to do with the kinds of books she reads. In the process, what she mocks is not just this other kind of book, but also its readers. Throughout the interview she consistently puts on the tone of voice of a credulous little girl when talking about what she considers to be soppy books. In distancing herself from the fiction she also distances herself from those whom she imagines to be its readers:

Gemma: Sweet Valley Highs, do you read any of them?

Nicola: I read about three of them when I was about nine cos I used to 'Ooh' [in soppy voice] like that, but now I don't read them.

Mitra: On the front it says for, for people of eleven and upwards actually so

Whereas Mitra justifies her choice by quoting the recommended age on the blurb, Nicola dismisses the series by conjuring up a vision of herself as a once young and impressionable reader. She insists she is no longer that kind of girl:

Gemma: What put you off them, Nicola?

Nicola: They were just boring like all 'Ooh, hello, Herby' and then I've changed because I used to be really lardyda, and 'Ooh!' but, and then I sort of changed and became, weird

Ceri: Loud, loud and noisy

Nicola: (..) and now I don't like those books, they're too soppy.

There is something defensive about Nicola's reaction. At the same time as she is busily defending herself from the charge, she actually uses the word 'soppy' more frequently than any of the others during the interview, most often to label the books Ceri and Mitra read in a derogatory manner. In many ways Nicola's view is closest to that of the romance's critics. Like many of them, in rejecting the teen romance she also rejects its readers (Hoggart, 1984; Margolies, 1982). Yet the kinds of assumptions she makes about who the romance speaks to are not borne out by the kinds of comments Ceri and Mitra make.

Four different histories

In deciding how the genre will be read, critics have imagined a homogenous interpretive community, defined according to the social position they occupy. I am seeking a more divergent account, capable of dealing with change as well as stasis. This has led me to focus on the place the romance holds amongst other interests. I have sought to show how the romance is always contextualised in relation to specific reading histories, which may differ. These reading histories are constructed in relation to knowledge of specific social practices, in particular the ways books are shared out amongst their audience. Whilst broadly united in terms of class and educational background, these girls' reading histories are far from homogenous, and the places they construct for the romance very different. Concern over girls' romance reading fails to take this kind of contextualisation into account.

The romance does not speak about a single thing. It speaks differently to the girls in this group, but those differences can only be understood in relation to other kinds of texts which it is not, other kinds of reading from which it differs. The trouble with much of the debate over the romance is that it treats the romance as if it contained an abstract philosophical proposition with which readers either agree or disagree. Instead, we need to understand the genre in relation to the range of social practices which constitute reading and which mediate the text.

~~~~

How the analysis contributes to the developing theory

I began my analysis of the data by looking at the way in which my interviewees established what counts as reading the romance in this event. But, as with the horror genre, the anecdotes the girls told about their reading led me on from this literacy event to the broader social contexts for reading. Drawing on what they already know about texts and readers, the girls position themselves and each other in relation to the romance genre. Differences between them are directly addressed, conflicting formulations of the place for the romance tried out, in relation to their knowledge of these other social contexts for reading. From the researcher's point of view – working from the inside, out – talk in this literacy event could help map out what the relevant social contexts for reading a particular set of texts might be. But from the participants' point of view, such knowledge does not remain distinct or apart from the current flow of talk. On the contrary, the talk is intimately intertwined with and structured by the longer social history to which it refers.

· The girls' talk reveals the way in which the teen romance is contextualised and recontextualised in relation to the different social processes which make the teen romance available alongside, or in competition with other kinds of texts. The way in which the girls allude to the social processes in which the distribution and consumption of texts are embedded, both at school and at home, makes clear that the kinds of books which these girls are currently reading won't hold them for long. What they describe in the interview, though, are different kinds of trajectories into the future. If "adult books" occupy the horizon of these girls' reading, adult books are not a single genre. Indeed, they are variously defined by different members of the group as: what older readers read; books that are hard to make sense of; books which are boring; books which are sexually explicit; books which provide information about sex (Sally, not quoted above, refers to reading about AIDS in her mother's nursing text books); books which children shouldn't read. The different kinds of texts they nominate as "adult" mark out different kinds of readership. Whilst the difficulties with the teen romance are clearly delineated in this interview, the way in which the romance can be re-contextualised by other texts meets with no consensus.

In this interview, what the romance stands for is partly understood by these girls in terms of its relationship to other texts. One genre is judged in terms of others. Yet the girls make this move, not in the abstract, but in relation to the social processes which surround the distribution of these texts, and mark out their relationship to a predominantly female readership. These suggest a hierarchy of genres.

The account they give suggest that it is book reading which is organised in this way. The notions that "you could be reading something better", or "you could be reading something more difficult" are part and parcel of the ways books are used in the educational settings to which the girls, and, by report, their parents refer; in many ways these notions also underpin how books are marketed, and arranged at the point of distribution (See, for example, Mitra's reference to the social organisation of the library). Such distinctions permeate the informal contexts in which the girls themselves 'choose' what they will read. The act of choosing texts is itself socially organised, and has social repercussions (See Richards, 1993).

What does all this mean for how I theorise the social contexts for reading? In my work so far, a clear sense of the literacy event as an individual instance in a longer process had begun to emerge. Each event had both a before – the knowledge of other encounters with texts and readers which preceded and shaped this particular event – and an after – the knowledge of texts and readers created in the event itself and which each reader can then take away with them. The potential difference between what readers bring to a particular literacy event, and what they take away with them, evidenced in the way in which they deal with differences amongst themselves, challenging, contesting or simply ignoring them, turns the literacy event into a form of social exchange (See, for instance, my analysis of the interview with Steven, David and Shazad in Chapter Four).

In the romance data, I described how the social past got into the present by using the term "reading histories". "Reading histories" summed up the different patterns of references to the social contexts for reading which I had identified in their talk, as the girls linked what they had to say about content to the social settings in which particular books were consumed. At one level the term was descriptive of what the girls were doing in the

interview, how they contextualised the teen romance genre in this instance. In this sense it is part of L2, the language of enactment. But at the same time it also suggested an explanation for the differences observed. The social contexts for reading in the past generate the particular performance in the present. In my run up to the presentation of the data I stress the usefulness of the term for precisely those reasons (See p x). Perhaps this was L2 turning into L1? (Bernstein, 1996)

At the same time, running through the data is an increasingly complex view of what constitute the social contexts for reading. So far I had defined the social contexts for reading in terms of the social past, the range of encounters with other texts at other times, which children re-invoked in the current setting. In the horror data, these other social contexts for reading to which the children refer could be summed up as moments of activity. Adults physically prevent children from watching – they hide their eyes, eject them from the room – children turn their heads away, or hide from view. In the romance data different aspects of the social contexts for reading were delineated, most notably the discursive injunctions for and against different kinds of reading and the value judgements in which they were embedded in different settings. The girls highlighted the ways in which such injunctions varied according to the social setting for reading, whether it was a public or private space. (The public space of the library, or school, the more private space available at home, or away from adult eyes.) Crucially they dwelt on the value judgements which others form about their book reading. The stories they told underlined the consequences of these judgements for measuring school success, or indeed, constructing girls' subjectivities in more general ways (See Nicola's view of romance readers, for instance). In each case the girls identify different ways in which different social contexts for reading constrain access to texts.

Once again the term "regulation" had appeared in my writing, in this instance to identify the way in which girls' leisure time reading was subject to pressure from competing sources.
Once again, it had not yet become central to my analysis of the data but the grounds for it to emerge as a key concept were beginning to be delineated (See the summary of the different social contexts for reading in the preceding paragraph).

This data, taken in conjunction with the horror data, had highlighted the ways in which talk about text is intimately intertwined with and embedded in the longer social history of which the literacy event is part. In terms of my analysis I found myself increasingly expanding out from the initial occasions for talk about text which formed my data to the broader social contexts in which texts circulate. At the same time I was very aware that the broader social contexts for reading fed back into the talk, helping to structure the activity in these particular literacy events. So far I had tracked this move from talk to broader social contexts and back again, through what respondents themselves said. I now began to build into my data collection procedures ways of researching the social contexts in which reading was getting done, independently of what my respondents said. For instance, in 1992 and 1993 I issued questionnaires about their media use to the four classes from which my interviewees were drawn. In collecting sample texts for use in interviews during this phase of the research I also began to observe differences in the institutional structures through which texts from different media were made available. However unsystematic my exploration of these issues was at this stage (See my comments in Chapter Three), nevertheless, the information I gleaned in this way was to prove decisive in my analysis of boys' talk about WWF wrestling. This forms the subject of the next chapter.

- Chapter Six -

Boys talk WWF Wrestling

The material I present in this section of the thesis comes from a later stage in the research process (1992/3) than the material in the previous two chapters. It also stems from a time when I had begun to build into the data collection means of paying attention to the social contexts for reading. However, as I outlined in Chapter Three, what might constitute the social context for reading was as yet under-theorised. In this chapter I attempt a critical review of my own data collection procedures as they were established at this point in the research process, showing ways in which the limitations of the enquiry as then conceived, were to become apparent in relation to this data. These limitations have contributed to a review of my approach to researching the social contexts for reading, whilst on a more positive note they have also enabled me to formulate more precisely how the social contexts for reading can be defined.

I originally tackled this data for a paper delivered at the 10th Sociolinguistics Symposium at Lancaster University in 1994. The paper was constructed as a spoken, not written, text. In translating the paper from the medium of speech to the medium of writing, and from a known audience with a shared set of concerns, to the context of a PhD thesis I have found myself redrafting the argument, rather than reproducing the original. (The

original text consists of a series of headings, and mental prompts, not discursive prose.) Nevertheless, I have tried to keep to the same basic structure as in the two previous chapters. That is to say, I begin with the provenance of the data and reflect on how I selected it, and the main themes which have developed as I wrote it up. I then present the analysis of the data and conclude by reflecting on how that analysis contributes to the developing theoretical framework I am constructing in this thesis.

The data and its provenance

WWF Wrestling was briefly popular in the UK in the early 1990's, mainly amongst boys. (WWF is the name of a wrestling circuit which promotes wrestling bouts in the USA, where fights are also broadcast on cable TV.) The main data for this chapter consists of two interviews with the same group of four boys, conducted a year apart, in which I asked them to talk about WWF Wrestling, and in particular the magazines which they read. My data collection at this time (1992/3) was more systematic than in 1990. I had devised questionnaires which could tell me about the range of texts in use amongst my sample population and something about how those texts were acquired and consumed. Questionnaires were issued in 1992 and a revised version in 1993. I used the questionnaires to establish patterns of media use in each of the schools I was dealing with, and on that basis formed interview groups from respondents. In 1992 the boys were chosen as readers who had a particular interest in and commitment to a particular kind of text.

In the suburban primary, C school, the 1992 questionnaire had revealed a sharp division in the use of media texts by girls and boys respectively. The

single most popular item recorded by the boys was WWF Wrestling. Out of 16 boys in the class, nine mentioned WWF wrestling a total of 67 times in their answers to questions about the kinds of television programmes, videos and magazines they enjoyed and shared with others. By contrast, none of the girls in the class mentioned wrestling once in their questionnaires. (The texts they mainly shared at this time were the Sweet Valley Twins books.) Moreover, in conversation with me later the girls said that the boys wouldn't allow them to look at the wrestling magazines they brought in (Unfortunately this tape is not available for analysis). The girls were actively excluded as readers by the boys. My own observations had confirmed this.

Selecting the data

I chose to concentrate on WWF wrestling, first in collecting interview material, and secondly in writing that material up, precisely because it was a "boys only" pursuit. In this respect I thought it would compliment my study of girls and the teen romance presented in the previous chapter. At the same time, its overwhelming popularity with the boys in C school in 1992 was to be followed by an almost complete lack of interest in 1993. In 1993, where WWF was mentioned at all in the questionnaires I distributed that year, it was logged as an old interest. The intense set of practices associated with its viewing amongst a particular group at a particular time seemed to have petered out. The 1992 interview had taken place when the interest in wrestling was at its height; in 1993 when it was clearly over. In this respect the decision to re-interview the group in 1993 was deliberate. I brought the boys together again so that I could document contrasting moments in the progress of a particular set of texts. In this respect my strategy for data

179

collection was partly informed by my analysis of the horror and romance data.

The writing context

Part of what I brought to my analysis of the data was a set of concerns about gender and reading fashioned in relation to work on girls and the romance. Girls' reading of the romance genre has been the subject of intense scrutiny (witness for example, *Texts of Desire*, (Christian Smith, 1993) a collection of essays largely about girl readers), yet very little has been written about boys as readers. In choosing different kinds of texts, were they choosing not just different content, but different ways of doing reading? In my analysis of girls talking about the romance, the regulation of girl readers as a marked group, whether at home or in the school, seemed fundamental to how my interviewees negotiated a sense of what it meant to be a reader. By contrast how would the boys' talk be linked to the broader social contexts in which their chosen texts circulated, perhaps unmarked? I had a growing sense that there was a difference running through the data in the ways in which girls and boys presented themselves as readers in respect of texts they knew well: girls expressed familiarity with such texts (See the girls' talk about Neighbours in Chapter Three, above); boys claimed expertise. Would the WWF data bear this contrast out? If so, how could these differences be described in the interactions of the participants in the interview? The WWF data seemed a good place to try out these questions as the split between boys and girl readers appeared to be marked by the children themselves in the sharing of texts in the classroom (See below).

In the original paper, and in the analysis presented below, I concentrate on the 1992 interview. This interview was about 45 minutes long. In 1992 and again in 1993, I brought copies of the WWF magazine to the interview. (The boys' interest in WWF was supported by reading magazines, watching videos of fights, and more rarely attending actual matches.) By producing familiar materials in a small group setting, coupled with the open-ended nature of the interview, I hoped to collect the same kinds of talk about the magazines that I had observed happening in the classroom when small groups of boys looked at the material together. In the 1992 interview, my own copy of the WWF magazine (Vol 11, No3, March 1992) was supplemented by five or six other copies that were in class that day, and which I borrowed for the occasion. In the 1993 interview, the boys looked at the 1992 copy again, and at the current edition of the magazine (Vol 12, No4, April 1993) before turning to other comics and magazines I had brought in. In 1993, the time the boys spent on WWF was about 15 minutes.

In many respects the 1992 data has proved difficult to work on. Part of what I have puzzled over is why this should be so and this has led me on to consider the differences between this data and the other material I have analyzed. These questions in themselves have added to the theoretical and methodological review which I have been undertaking as the enquiry has progressed.

Doing the analysis

The transcripts which formed the basis for analysis consisted of the whole of the 1992 interview, which lasted roughly 45 minutes, and the first fifteen minutes of the 1993 interview during which the boys talked about WWF, before they turned their attention to other magazines. As the 1992 interview was collected at a time when the boys were actively involved in WWF I started my analysis with this literacy event, before turning to the 1993 data. As with both the horror and the romance data, my initial intention was to home in on the criteria the participants were using in establishing "what counts as reading" here. I hoped this would enable me to describe the activity in the present literacy event from an emic perspective. However, as I looked at the 1992 data I soon became aware that it was quite distinct from the other material I have considered. Identifying quite what was different about it became one of my first tasks.

One difference I faced was that there was very little self-generated talk about the social contexts for reading wrestling. About the only time when the group spontaneously touch on the social contexts for their consumption of wrestling materials is when they talk about how much of the material they own, or have access to. In the example below they have started talking about WWF fan club membership. I quote and then analyze it here as it raises a number of issues which are germane to my analysis of the literacy event as a whole which form the substantial part of this chapter.

> Neils: I am, one of the members
>
> Richard: I joined it (&)
>
> Alim: Yeah, so have I
>
> Richard: (&) And you get the watch and everything/ But(&)
>
> George: Yeah, watch and car

Richard: (&) you know this is er AMERICAN things so if you, [yeah]
if you send off, er, you know one of the things in the, you have to send
actual money for the sending over, [postage,

This interchange performs a variety of functions.   On the one hand this has a
didactic quality, which characterizes much of the talk (see below).   The boys
take it upon themselves to instruct me in matters which relate to WWF
wrestling.   Here Richard, in spelling out the details of precisely what's
involved in sending off for goods to America, is addressing me as someone
with no previous knowledge.   But the group have also taken the opportunity
to identify for each other who are members and who are not. Richard's
reference to the watch in this case both adds substance to his claims in front
of his peers as well as providing me with a highly specific level of detailed
information.   The way the group join in this interchange, whilst I cannot,
reinforces their status as cognoscenti, mine as ignorant outsider. At the
same time the details about the postage Richard recalls underlines the
difficulties of acquiring much of the merchandise they might aspire to when
it has to be bought from the States. Alim makes this connection clearer when
a few turns later he makes direct reference to the way in which parents
oversee the kind of monetary transactions that the magazine, through its
merchandising, promotes:

Alim: Well sometimes my dad doesn't allow me to get a few of the things
but I do get quite a lot of these

Elsewhere in the data they reply to the questions that I put to them about
how they get hold of the materials, and who they share them with, but this
leads to precise answers directed towards me, not used to generate talk
amongst themselves:

Gemma: Anybody else in your house that's interested in it, Alim?

Alim: My dad likes wrestling a bit

Neils: Yeah my Dad as well

Gemma: And your dad as well

Richard: Me, my dad everyone in my family except for my mum
(laughs)

This particular extract illustrates part of the problem of dealing with audio
transcript as the sole record of an event which also encompassed use of

actual texts. The transcript records the talk. It does not record the rest of the non-verbal activity which accompanied the talk. I am not making a general point here about the inadequacy of a method of recording dialogue which leaves hidden gaze, gesture, body posture and other accompaniments to speech (See Swann and Graddol, 1994). My point is more specific. In this interview, the talk accompanied the activity of turning the pages in the magazines as the group read their way through the texts I had brought with me. The 1993 interview, which I videoed as well as audio-taped, shows that lots of things are going on relevant to reading, which do not get into the speech record. For instance, whilst one child talks to me, others may be turning on through the magazine, silently scanning the pages, pausing over a particular stretch of text or sequence of pictures, or pointing particular items out to each other, without making a sound which would register on the audio-tape. In the stretch of talk above I suspect that the children are doing several things at once. Paying some attention to me, enough attention to each other to follow the flow of talk, but also looking elsewhere, studying the text. The talk is not the sole object of their attention. This dual aspect to these literacy events – attention to other participants and attention to text – needs to be borne in mind when considering the data which I present below.

However, having said all that, there are other ways in which the 1992 data is distinct. For instance, it is different from the talk I collected from the same group using some of the same texts in 1993. Equally, other groups who were presented with a selection of magazines to read in the rest of the INLP interview sequence, organised their talk around the texts quite differently. Talk in the 1992 interview posed particular problems because procedurally it was harder to get a handle on. There was very little evidence on the tape of the kind of negotiation over what counts as reading which I had relied on in my analysis of horror and the romance. For a good deal of the tape the children seem to be announcing what they knew to me with very little evaluation of what they said from others in the group. Thematically, the structure of the conversation seems underdeveloped (See below). For these reasons, as I struggled to make sense of the transcript, I found myself turning to other sources of information about WWF Wrestling – the boys' questionnaires; the texts themselves, and how they were distributed; the observations I had made of how the texts were used in school – in an attempt to understand the data.

Bearing these points in mind I turn now to my presentation of the data. In this instance, the data has been written up to fit the context of this thesis, and consequently the knowledge the reader of this thesis can bring to bear on the developing topic at this point.

Boys talk WWF wrestling

So far, the data I have considered in this thesis has been collected away from the site of the first reading. That is to say, in the horror and romance interviews, children reflect back on what they already know about texts, about readers and about how reading gets done in other social settings with which they are familiar. They bring this knowledge to bear in the present context, where they reconstruct what they know about reading in collaboration with others. On this basis they set out terms for reading in the future.

The data to be presented here is different. The texts are there, ready to hand, and their presence in important ways structures the talk. (More on this below.) In the 1992 interview, the talk itself includes little reflection on the social processes through which texts are shared in other settings. Nor is there much evidence of negotiation over the contents. In many respects, individuals simply seem to take it in turns to announce what they know about wrestling. (Again, more on this below.)

This brief synopsis might in one sense be taken to reassert the primacy of the text. Where the text is present it will dominate, and other sources of knowledge will be left on one side. Certainly, conventional views of reading, familiar within English, Psychology and Media Studies, start their account with the text and what the text says, before considering readers. The text is assumed to impose itself on readers. If readers negotiate its contents, they do so by judging what the text says on the basis of their existing beliefs, attitudes, world knowledge or social identity. (Audience Studies, and reader-response theories, which take a broader view of the relationship between text and reader have themselves been constructed in reaction to this kind of textual analysis. (Corcoran and Evans, 1987))

By contrast the view I have been putting forward is that readers make sense of texts primarily in relation to the social contexts in which they circulate. What bearing can the social contexts for reading have on understanding the literacy event in which this group of boys read WWF magazines? Elsewhere in dealing with the data I began with the question "What counts as reading?". This led me to the

anecdotes the children themselves told about the regulation of texts, and subsequently to reflect on the social processes through which these texts circulated. So I worked outwards, from the present moment to the longer history of which it is part. Here, in presenting the data below, I will begin the other way round, with what I found out about WWF wrestling and the cluster of texts of which it is composed as I myself struggled to make sense of the interview transcript.

What was WWF wrestling? Pinpointing a moment in time

WWF wrestling enjoyed a brief period of intense popularity in the UK during the early 1990s, particularly amongst young boys. I first heard about it in 1989 when a colleague who prided himself on his street credibility puzzled over the fact that many of the 15 year old boys in an inner city secondary school he was visiting were avidly talking about wrestling and swopping magazines. He had no idea as to what it was all about or where the material was coming from. By 1992 interest in WWF seemed to have become much more general. In the summer of that year, my next door neighbours' children and their friends (all boys aged 6-10) played at little else out in the garden or on the street. One year later and the phenomenon was all but finished. Wrestling no longer seemed routinely part of children's play, nor indeed to have any particular status amongst the junior age group. It is in this context that I set my own investigation.

WWF: the texts

WWF (The World Wrestling Federation) is one of several american-based wrestling organisations which promote fights. WWF bouts are generally staged in the US and form an on-going sequence of contests, punctuated by annual events such as: the Royal Rumble, when the 30 top wrestlers challenge each other in the ring; WrestleMania and the WWF Championship title; the WWF intercontinental championship. In the US, many of these contests are broadcast on cable tv before being distributed as videos, usually in a compilation format. Besides fights, the broadcast materials also include chat shows, interviews and other occasions before and after matches when the wrestlers and their promoters speak directly to camera and sometimes confront each other. Snatches from these other kinds of events are also incorporated into the videos. The organisation also distributes a range of magazines, including WWF magazine, subtitled Official Publication of the World Wrestling Federation, which is available monthly. This was the magazine which the sample in C school were reading and passing between themselves. The magazine acts as a means of promoting a range of WWF merchandise: posters of some of the top wrestlers; T-shirts, rucksacks, pillowslips, headscarves and the like emblazoned

with the logos of the different wrestlers or pictures of them; wrestling outfits for children; games and colouring books. In the US it is also used as a vehicle to build interest in up-coming live events, and in the variety of programming available on cable tv. Feature articles refer to previous fights as well as set the scene for future matches.

WWF: Accessing the texts in 1992 and 1993

In the spring of 1992, when I interviewed the group at C school, it was easy to get hold of the WWF magazine at large newsagents. I had no difficulty in finding the then current copy to bring to the interview with the boys. Accessing the broadcast materials was more difficult. WWF wrestling was only directly broadcast on satellite TV at that time, and satellite TV was itself still in short supply. (None of the group I interviewed had satellite TV in their own homes. Some of them could access the material by asking friends to tape the programme for them.) One of the terrestrial channels carried WCW wrestling, another American wrestling circuit, but this only went out between 12.50 and 1.50 am on Sundays. (Whilst WCW was specifically mentioned by children in the sample in some of their questionnaires, it was also tagged "boring" by two of the respondents, and certainly didn't seem to have the same cachet as WWF. All the key wrestlers the children talked about: Hulk Hogan, The Undertaker, the British Bulldog, were from WWF.) The most accessible sources of broadcast material available in the UK at this time were therefore videos. WWF videos could be purchased from the larger chain stores such as WH Smiths and Woolworths or borrowed from Video Shops. From a ten year old's point of view, however, both of these required more capital outlay than would have been involved in simply watching TV.

Paradoxically, by 1993, whilst the craze itself had already died out amongst my respondents, WWF was enjoying a higher profile in the media generally. Other materials I was collecting for use in interview that year incorporated WWF in various ways: a WWF computer game was being widely advertised; Hulk Hogan, one of the key players on the 1992 wrestling circuit, appeared as a full page spread in Fast Forward magazine, which is aimed at the general youth market in April 1993. He also made a live appearance on prime time British tv (Noel's House Party) in the run up to Christmas 1993, though he'd long since left the WWF circuit. In this instance, media exposure was lagging behind the children's interest.

In 1992, the questionnaires from C school recorded a high level of activity associated with WWF wrestling amongst the boys. Of the nine boys who mentioned WWF, eight said that they read WWF Magazine, and seven of them nominated it as their favourite read. In a section asking for the title of those videos they had most recently

watched, five of them listed one or more wrestling videos. All five said they had watched these videos repeatedly. Four of them owned their own wrestling tapes. Two of them said they sometimes had access to taped broadcasts of wrestling, at that time being put out on Sky TV, though none of the group had direct access to this satellite channel in their own homes.

Observation in the classroom in 1992, confirmed subsequently in conversation with the class teacher, showed that she both recognised and tolerated the boys' passion for wrestling, to some extent incorporating the boys' use of the materials into the classroom routine. Boys were allowed to bring WWF magazines into school and look at them when they had finished other work. They could also read them during silent reading periods. Their teacher commented that she knew who acted as the class librarians for this material ie would have the largest collection of magazines in their desk available for loan. I observed many of these texts being actively shared in class time by the boys. At appropriate moments the boys would cluster round copies of the magazine and look at them together. Girls never formed part of these groups.

In 1993 this pattern of sharing texts no longer held in the classroom. There was more variety in terms of the print materials boys were reading in class and less intense interest in sharing just one kind. To some extent Computer Magazines had replaced WWF magazines (this is the way the boys put it in conversation to me in 1993), but Fighting Fantasy books were also popular with the boys for use in free reading time. However, there were still clear lines being drawn in this class between boys' and girls' reading materials. Like the boys, the girls' reading interests had diversified but along different lines. Sweet Valley Twins, the girls' favourite in 1993 had been largely superseded by Babysitters Club and pony stories.

In the 1993 questionnaires, none of the boys mentioned WWF as an active interest. In a section asking what comics or magazines they used to collect, only two of my original interviewees included WWF. By and large it appeared to have sunk without a trace.

Above I have brought together the information I have collected from different sources about WWF wrestling and the classroom context in which I observed it being read. It sets the scene against which I will introduce the data below. In the first instance I will concentrate on the 1992 interview, collected whilst the interest in WWF was at its height.

WWF Wrestling: the 1992 interview

I interviewed four boys about WWF Wrestling: Alim, Richard, George and Neils. They were chosen on the basis of their questionnaire returns. Of the boys who mentioned WWF Wrestling, they looked as if they were most involved as in each case they claimed a familiarity with at least two, sometimes three, kinds of wrestling materials ie the videos, magazines and TV programmes. In the interview, however, I set out to focus mainly on their use of the WWF magazines. I had become interested in how they were incorporated into the school context, read at the margins of the official curriculum, and yet exclusively by boys. To help the interview along I brought some copies of the magazine with me. My own copy of WWF magazine was Vol 11, No3, March 1992. I have no record of the other five or six copies that were there. I had simply asked to borrow whichever copies were in class that day.

In this literacy event, the fact that the texts were physically present had an impact on the talk. The copies of the magazine I'd brought along were piled onto the table at which we all sat. During the interview, the group clustered round a single copy as its pages were turned over. In other interviews where I produced several comics or magazines this by no means always happened. Sometimes individuals would seize on different ones and read them quietly to themselves. More often, members of the group would choose different copies and then read bits out from them to each other. Occasionally the texts themselves remained unread, and instead general conversation about them would flow. In this instance, by pooling individual copies, the boys turn this into an occasion for shared reading. Given the opportunity in class, this seemed to be how the boys preferred to use the magazines.

During the interview Alim did most of the page turning, in effect pacing the group's progress through the magazine. The rate at which the pages were turned was partly tied to the way the conversation flowed. Sometimes whole chunks of the magazines would elicit no comment, so the pages would only be briefly scanned. At other moments the group would pause to look and exclaim in greater detail and there would be no hurry to move on. Consequently, not all parts of the magazine get equal attention. Once the group had got from the beginning to the end of one copy, another one would be found to be shared in the same way. Individuals would interrupt this process to look for particular items in particular issues, but that copy would then be produced to be shared with the group as a whole. Once talk on the particular item was concluded, the page turning through the rest of the magazine would resume. The talk is partly structured by this movement through the text.

In one sense, talk happens in response to the text. Yet the boys' perusal of the magazine rarely seems to involve "reading" the text as that would be conventionally understood. Very occasionally someone reads a bit from the magazine out loud, but this is rarely more than a single sentence. Moreover, reading out loud is not

generally used to share new information from the text, rather to confirm what the reader has already asserted about a particular incident. For instance, in cruising through my March issue of WWF magazine, the group had paused over a four page spread detailing the break-up of the members of the Rockers tag team, Shawn Michaels and Marty Jannetty. The article, headed "The mark of Cain: Shawn Michaels betrays his tag team brother" dwells on the incident which went out on WWF television when Shawn Michaels first insulted, then "cruelly brutalized" Marty Jannetty by sending him flying through a plate glass window in the studio where they were being interviewed. The boys' talk first focuses attention on the dramatic pictures which accompany the spread, then turns to whether or not the wrestlers are brothers. It is at this point that George and Alim turn to the verbal text which accompanies the pictures, in an attempt to settle the argument:

Alim: It's got this bit when the Rockers actually [break up

George:
[Yeah, break up, ki, there

Alim: Look, here, [and then there

George: [And then he kicks him

Alim: He actually tears up this page, in one of the wrestling books (....)
makes, um, so that he's broken up

Richard: And them two are actually brothers

Alim: Yeah

George: No they're not, [it says um

Richard: [THEY ARE

Alim: They are brothers

George: They're as close as brothers [it says on this page

Richard: [NO/ it's bro, [they're
brothers

Alim: [They're brothers

Gemma: What, and they, [they used to be a tag team (&)

George: [That's in the barber's shop

· Alim: Yeah

Gemma: (&) together, [but now they are no more a tag team

Richard: [Yeah/ and tag team's [different(&)

Alim: [It says here

Richard: (&) from doing single wrestler because you can slap their hand when they're hurt, [if they

Alim: [It says

Gemma: [Right, yup, then they, one they go out the ring and their other person comes in the ring and   [carries on the fight

Alim: [Well, but it says in here, "During an episode of the Barber Shop, the Rockers ended their partnership when Shawn turned against his former party, partner Marty and cruelly/ brutalised him."

In this case reference to the text doesn't prove conclusive.

There is just one instance when the group as a whole pause over the text and take the time to study a particular picture and accompanying writing. In this instance they can't immediately make sense of what is being portrayed. That is to say they are not sure who is in the picture or what they are doing. This is also one of the few occasions in the data when there is a direct appeal for information from one of the boys to the group as a whole:

Richard: I don't know what that is, do you, "Lowdown"? {Reading out the heading from a one page spread, one third of which is text, half photograph.}

George: What is it?

Neils: I don't get it, who are they?

Gemma?:   "Mighty Mike Quinn" {Reading from the picture caption}

Alim: "W, WBF super star Mighty Mike Quinn"//

Gemma: Yeah, he's "joined forces with WWF super star Brutus "The Barber" Beefcake"!//

Alim: "to benefit Toys for Tots"

The picture they find so hard to place shows two helmeted men riding down a road on motorbikes. There is a woman riding pillion on one of the bikes. All three are wearing jeans, black tops and shades. They are looking towards the camera. Looking at the accompanying text now I would think they were taking part in a sponsored motor bike ride for charity.

The text as prompt

This exception to the typical use of the text serves to highlight the general practice: these texts are not treated as new information in this interview, to be perused and studied carefully. Rather the text operates as a prompt for a verbal display of what the readers already know. Members of the group react to items on the page –

something in a picture, a name in the text, or the heading to an article – and go on to identify, comment on or announce something about what they see. Looking at the talk which arises as they cruise through the March issue of the magazine, in every instance except one (an attempt by Neils to discuss WCW and pro-wrestling) the conversation develops directly from the text in this way. Once a prompt has been identified, turns in the talk build minimally on what has gone before as each speaker sets down a new piece of information. Once information has run out on a particular topic, or when a more interesting prompt turns up as the pages continue to be turned, the whole process starts again. The exchange below shows this process clearly.

Cruising the text

In this instance the talk has arisen from the four page spread on the Rockers. The extract below follows on directly from extract 1 quoted above. Having failed to reach any consensus on whether or not Michaels and Jannetty are brothers, the group go on to say what else they know about other aspects of the spread. Here Richard is commenting on Brutus the Barber Beefcake, host of the Barber Shop, the TV slot where Michaels and Jannetty broke up. He appears in some of the pictures:

Richard: He, he was a wrestler, Brut, Sir Barber Beefcake but he [had the motor cycle [accident so he, he just [works as (&)
George: [Mm,   [accident, yeah

Gemma: [Mmm

Richard: (&) you know one of the/ an[d(&)

George: [(parts?)

Richard: (&) so was Mr Perfect but he became, became um, um/

Neils: Mr Perfect got an injury

Richard: He be, he was, he was um er, a commentator [or something

Neils: [No [he got an injury, or something like that

George: [Yeah

· Richard: He always de, {Looking at page 49} there's a ring, over there

Alim: and that's at the Royal Albert Hall

R & G: Yeah

Richard: They, the British Bulldog is the o, the only British wrestler, isn't it

Gemma: He's the only British wrestler, [yeah] Oh my goodness!

Richard: That's why he's called the British Bulldog

Neils: You can get wrestling in England but it's useless

Talk about Brutus "the Barber" Beefcake leads on to talk about Mr Perfect, another ex-wrestler turned commentator, although he does not appear in this part of the magazine. Meanwhile, the group continue turning over the pages until Richard breaks off from talk about the commentators to remark on pictures of the WWF's recent European tour (line 13). This becomes the prompt for the next sequence of talk. Identifying the only British venue in the magazine leads on to talk about the only British wrestler who competes on the WWF circuit, and so to the merits of British wrestling.

The two extracts quoted above are typical in the way in which contributions follow one another (each one only loosely linked to the one before) and in terms of the sparse detail supplied. There is very little evaluation by participants of what each other say. If they acknowledge previous contributions at all, members of the group simply express agreement or disagreement before adding their own nugget of information. Consensus about particular events, or what really happened, is seldom reached. Instead, one or other party to a disagreement simply drops out from the conversation, as George does in the first extract above. Having failed to persuade the others he switches his attention to something else he knows about. In this case he names the setting for the dispute between the tag team members.

Reading WWF: arbitrating collections

As the boys cruise through the pages of the magazine they treat the text as a series of prompts which enable them to display to me and to each other what they already know about wrestling. Their collective activity confirms for the group as a whole what it is important to already know about wrestling, as well as defining what it is possible to ask questions about. Very little falls into the latter category. Their individual contributions allow them to compete, not so much over the accuracy of what they recall as over who knows most about wrestling. Attention in this literacy event passes from the text to the readers.

The absence of conclusion where there is conflict over detail, and the lack of recursivity in their pooling of knowledge of the texts leads to a pattern of exchange where attention is not so much on arbitrating individual incidents in the text (which wrestler did what to whom) as on arbitrating who has the best collection of information (which speaker knows most about wrestling). Success in this literacy

193

event means having the floor long enough to display what you know, and being able to produce the information you possess. What is important for the participants is sustaining a contribution, finding more bits to say and keeping going longest. Hence the importance of being able to make use of the maximum number of prompts, seizing on them, labelling them, disposing of them and being ready to start again on the next one as soon as it comes into view. In these respects Richard does better than any of the other speakers. Looking at the transcript overall, he comes in on more topics than any of the others, initiates more topics, and has twice as many turns in the conversation as a whole. Early on in the interview he lays claim to having started the class's interest in WWF wrestling along with a friend. Throughout the interview he produces more evidence than the others of his credentials as a connoisseur of wrestling – he has seen more, and collected more. He leaves the conversation with his status as the one who knows most about WWF wrestling intact.

WWF Wrestling: what counts as being an expert

The content of their contributions defines relevant knowledge about wrestling, which can be brought into play as they skim the text. This includes: the ability to identify who is who; who has fought who; what can be found in which magazines. The ability to use the specialised vocabulary which comes with wrestling and which I initially found so confusing. They demonstrate that they understand and can use terms like the "Royal Rumble", "Wrestlemania", "clotheslined", "body-slammed", "cage matches" and so on. They know about and have access to the range of materials which make up wrestling. (Alim identifies the parts of the magazine – interviews, the quiz section, what you can buy – as we cruise through; as the group pause over the merchandising section they all help identify the range of goods on offer as well as telling me what they own themselves; in a suitable pause, Richard has a go at telling me about the range of video tapes you can get.) They understand the rules of wrestling. (Witness Richard's definition of tag team wrestling, which he delivers to me as part of the comments on the Michaels and Janetty bust-up, quoted above.)

Producing these bits of information as they cruise through the texts proves their status as experts. Moreover, the fact that they can muster all of this information whilst I can't simultaneously acts as a demonstration of their position as insiders and mine as a rank outsider, no matter how hard I strive against this (See above). My very ignorance gives them licence to talk. Their talk puts both myself and them in our rightful places.

The organisation of the talk clearly functions in this way to position the group as experts. Yet the information individuals produce remains curiously discrete. Individual items of knowledge are only loosely linked, and are rarely used to establish a collective view of a particular text. This is in contrast to the way that, for instance, the girls' recounting of the casseroles bits from Neighbours, quoted in Chapter Three, cements their view of the soap as well as their view of themselves as its readers. Very little narrative coherence is given to the nuggets of information which are produced, even when the boys are recalling particular fights. I will go on to consider this point in more detail by linking the boys talk about text to the social contexts in which WWF wrestling materials were distributed at the time of the interview (March 1992), and to the texts themselves.

WWF texts: managing the materials

I have already pointed out that in 1992 wrestling was only broadcast on satellite tv. Out of the group, only Richard had access to Sky TV, through a friend

> Richard: Yeah, and it's on Sky
>
> Alim: Two weeks
>
> Richard: And my friend's taped it for me, it's from seven, ten o'clock until half past one in the, (...)
>
> ?;   It's on late, it's on late
>
> Richard: Yeah

If the others wanted to watch they had to rely on video, but this means borrowing or buying whatever the local video shop has in stock. Whilst some of the tapes available can be assembled into a coherent relationship with one another, (the yearly event, Wrestlemania, is distributed on tape, and can be acquired in number sequence. Both George and Richard said they owned numbers 1-8) others can not. So the boys also mention compilation tapes such as Greatest Matches, or tapes which review one wrestler's finest hours eg the History of Hulkomania, tapes which relate to one off events eg Wrestlefest 91, and so on. Given the diversity of choice and the lack of any obvious hierarchical relationship between the tapes – the latest tape may only be the last one the video shop acquires – which tape had been seen by whom seemed to be a random affair. In other words, there is little sharing of key texts. Only George and Richard's video collections overlapped, according to their questionnaire returns, and even here, given that they were sitting next to each other when they filled out the questionnaire, and submitted several other duplicate answers, it may be that one of them had simply copied the other's list. For this group as a whole, the monthly magazines, and not the videos, were the key shared

text. (Neils actually mentions at the beginning of the interview that he has only recently started to watch WWF, rather than reading about it in the magazines.)

But the monthly magazines are themselves what Fiske describes as secondary texts (Fiske, 1987). Secondary texts in Fiske's definition are all those texts which the publicity industry produces "in a wide variety of forms – journalistic criticism, gossip about the stars, specialist magazines for fans.., "novelizations" of the television scripts..., advertisements, posters, and television promos." (Fiske, 1987, p85). In Fiske's view secondary texts in all their forms exist to be read back into the primary text, and thereby control the polysemic potential of the latter. But in this instance the secondary text, with all its many layered references to primary texts (which have been or are about to be distributed in the US not necessarily in the UK!), are in fact operating for this group of consumers as their primary texts. They are the chief source of information and the only widely shared text. The kind of stable, hierarchical relationship between texts which Fiske's terms of primary, secondary and tertiary imply, cannot hold for the field of wrestling texts to which these boys have access. By paying attention to the collector and the collection rather than the text, the boys are in effect glossing over a lack of certainty over sources in which it is hard to judge the status of a particular piece of knowledge in itself, or to know which wrestling texts they actually have in common.

What I am arguing here is that the texts to which the boys have access in themselves have largely unstructured relations. The notion of an original or primary text becomes blurred when the bit of text to which the boys have access is but one version, one selective repetition, of a particular event which is still being replayed slightly differently in many other textual locations. Where there can be no general consensus on what makes the primary text, which is the original moment to which all others refer, it is difficult to know what weight to give to the particular version to which any one individual has access, or how one would arbitrate between them. In this sense sorting out the text, in terms of deciding exactly what counts as its contents, (See Chapter Four) is not an issue for this group.

WWF texts: disorder and uncertainty

If the texts to which the boys have access have largely unstructured relations, and cannot easily be arranged in an order of salience, I would argue that the wrestling form itself also plays with incoherence and uncertainty. Compared with other sports where who gets to meet who has to be seen to be well-organised and carefully planned, wrestling bouts are presented as much more ad hoc affairs in which motives are both personalised and localised. For instance, as part of the matches

organised for the Royal Rumble 92, an event which was subsequently distributed as a compilation video, one of the bouts presented is between Rowdy Roddy Piper and the Mountie. This match is explained on the video by a mini-narrative, delivered by one of the regular commentators, Lord Alfred Hayes, and accompanied by footage from previous occasions. The Mountie had behaved badly towards another wrestler, Brett "Hitman" Hart, whom he had brutalised in the ring in his previous fight. Watching ringside was Roddy Piper, a friend of Hart's, who was so incensed at the turn of events, particularly the Mountie's behaviour after he had won the belt in the contest (hitting Hart with it), that he leapt into the ring to defend his friend. The current match is then organised to settle this personal score.

Sometimes these kinds of grudge matches are given elaborate and long lasting histories: Shawn Michaels' break with his erstwhile tag team partner, Marty Jannetty, an event given considerable coverage in the March 1992 issue, was still being referred to a whole year later, and used as damning evidence of Michael's lack of sportsmanship. It had been added to in the April 1993 issue of WWF Magazine by a catalogue of further misdemeanours in which Michaels mistreated friends and allies, most prominently his one time manager, Sherri. The mini-narrative here constructs a character profile for Michaels: viewers can join in condemning or applauding his behaviour and so take sides in whatever the next up and coming fight is. They provide an orientation to the events.
.

But such well worked out histories seem comparatively rare. More often fights are contextualised by the claims and counter claims of wrestlers and managers in which they laud their own side and denigrate the opposition in brief speeches to camera. There is very little narrative cohesion to such events – just insults delivered to the opponent, and claims made for one's own prowess immediately prior to a particular encounter. Why this match at this moment, rather than another, how it stands in relation to a wider sequence of events, is not made clear.
This lack of order is writ large in one of the key events in the wrestling calender: The Royal Rumble. This match is organised so that up to thirty wrestlers can enter the ring at two minute intervals. Those who are already in the ring try to get any one else there over the ropes, which effectively disqualifies them. The last one left in wins. The two minute interval before the next wrestler comes along more or less ensures that one bout can't finish before another participant enters the fray, and at times there may be as many as 10 or more wrestlers, ambling around the ring trying to decide who to gang up on or pick off, or whether simply to stay out of the action and let others do the work. Even the camera seems to have some difficulty in following events, and deciding who to focus on. Individuals come into shot during moments of sporadic activity, which may well just peter out, or remain unresolved when the camera swirls onto some other piece of action. Again, the kind of coherent

narrative drive which seems to dominate most sports events, seems strangely absent here.

Insiders/outsiders: two different views of WWF

In my reading of the wrestling texts above, I have been trying to approach the material through the boys' own practice. That is to say, methodologically, I have turned to the video tapes and magazines only after analysing what the boys had to say about it. I have been arguing that the boys' talk about wrestling is structured in such a way as to leave unresolved the exact nature of the text. Exactly what happened and the status of events recalled is not made clearer by the pooling of information, even as individual boys assert with maximum displays of confidence that x or y was so.

Yet leaving open exactly what happened is also a feature of the wrestling texts: the ways shots are composed, both on the video tapes and in the magazines; the way items are reported; the use of exaggeration in insults delivered to opponents, in the promotion of the next fight, and indeed in the commentary which accompanies the fights themselves, all make it hard to judge the most important question, exactly who has damaged who to what extent. Wrestling purports to be about inflicting terrible damage, pain and suffering on its participants, as evidenced by the contortion of the wrestlers bodies and limbs, the cries and groans they utter during the course of the match. Yet at the same time the texts are constructed in such a way that we can't be sure that it is ever more than a sham, a fix, a charade (Fiske, 1987). I will argue below that for these boys this ambiguity in the texts themselves gives the possibility of playing with the dangers of violence whilst not ultimately having to believe in them. (Really nobody gets hurt.) Yet this remains for this group insider knowledge – not to be shared with others less familiar with the texts, and indeed part of what makes the texts in this instance the exclusive preserve of boys

WWF: the status of the text

There are several occasions in the 1992 interview when speakers assert that wrestling is fake, and indeed, given the limitations of the way in which the talk is organised, this comes nearest to being a topic of conversation in its own right (an organising principle beyond the text itself which guides their selection of material, and the comments they make about it. See Bereiter and Scardamalia, 1982). A speaker contributes details of a particularly spectacular moment from a fight when gruesome physical punishment is seen to be inflicted: the blinding of Jake the Snake; Macho Man's bleeding arm; the squashing of Jake's snake. In response

others raise questions about whether the action is fake. The matter is briefly pursued through the pattern of assertion and counter assertion which characterises so much of the transcript before the boys turn to something else without resolving the issue. It is but one point amongst many about which they disagree.

In the remaining part of the chapter I take one such instance and explore it in relation to the insider/outsider split which has seemed so fundamental to the nature of the interview as a whole. I consider this split in the light of the gender of the participants.

Insiders/outsiders: gendering the WWF text

The following extract comes towards the middle of the interview. In this instance Alim mentions a particular fight which he thinks is covered in one of the magazines, and the group then look for and find the particular article:

Alim: [There's actually a match in here when Sergeant Slaughter versus Hulk Hogan/ [here you are, he actually burnt Hulk Hogan's face

George: [Yeah

Richard;   [Oh yeah, I've seen that

Gemma: What!/

Richard: No, no, [that, it's in this one, it's in this one

                           [{speaking over several other voices}

George: [Yeah, (..) yeah, here

Neils: [Yeah, I know, I saw it, where his face is all burnt

Gemma: Oh my goodness!=

{They turn over the pages in the magazines looking for the relevant picture}

George: =Here

Gemma: =That's disgusting!

Richard: No, look, it's in this one, it's actually got him in, they came in his dressing room, but [yeah] it's, it's fake it doesn't show Hulk [Hogan's face cos it didn't touch him

George: [There's (?a picture...)

Alim: It did look, here it is, here's his face, it's there=

George: =That, it did touch him

199

| Gemma: | That's really nasty |
| George: | That's not nice |

All the boys in the group claim a familiarity with the incident where Sergeant Slaughter "burnt Hulk Hogan's face". Yet it remains unclear exactly what they have seen: the picture in the magazine which Alim is looking for; the original broadcast where the incident first happened; or the incident as subsequently re-packaged and replayed as a prelude to a re-match? Typically, the source of their knowledge does not become an issue for the group in this exchange, nor a means of adjudicating between counter-claims.

The talk amongst the boys is structured as a sequence of assertion and counter assertion. Alim opens proceedings by glossing a particular event as " a match..when Sergeant Slaughter..actually burnt Hulk Hogan's face". This brief summary initially wins consent from the rest of the group, and the proposition is then restated by Neils: "I saw it, where his face is all burnt". Richard then puts forward a counter assertion about the nature of the incident by glossing it differently: "It's actually got him in...but it's fake, it doesn't show Hulk Hogan's face cos it didn't touch him". Alim then re-asserts the original proposition and is backed up by George. Shortly afterwards, the talk turns to other matters.

As I've argued above, this pattern of exchange between the boys, where one assertion is followed by another until the group tire of the matter, is typical of the interview as a whole. In this instance the disagreement is over the status of the events depicted, but again, this is not unusual. Elsewhere in the interview the group explicitly mention the possibility that what they see may be fake, as Richard does above. As elsewhere, the appeal to the text does not resolve the issue for this group of readers. What is different in this instance is my initial reaction to what gets said. My comments "What!" "Oh my goodness!" "That's disgusting" are quite unlike any the boys deliver.

I am drawn to express a response because I read Alim's opening assertion as if it were actually true. I relate his comments to a moral universe where to actually do these things would be repugnant if not illegal! What they are arguing about, though, is clearly the meaning of the text, and what it does or doesn't show. Despite the confident manner in which their respective summaries of the text are couched, it is questions about the text which remain largely undecided and to which they will return. For them, this is but one episode in an ongoing debate. By contrast, I overlook the question of "did it/didn't it happen", and instead focus on "what if it had?". Yet as soon as I get to see the picture which provides the only reference point in the argument, the issue is resolved for me. Nobody's face got burnt! The

picture is certainly composed with maximum ambiguity in mind. In the foreground is a large spurt of flame, probably coming out of a blow torch, though this is not shown, nor is the figure wielding the flame. The flame obscures Hulk's face, hidden in the background. But the distance between the two, allowing for the distortion of the camera angle, is clearly such that the cowering Hulk is well out of range.

Throughout much of the rest of the interview I have adopted the role of willing recipient for everything this group want to tell me about wrestling. In different ways I have tried to encourage them to hold forth. But in this instance I express a strong reaction of distaste to the subject matter. Richard's response, to re-frame the incident as a fake, immediately removes it out of the realm of moral responsibility and back into the realm of entertainment – just fun. It is a judgement on the modality of the incident which neutralises my response to it. (Although I don't take his comment on trust, it is precisely this judgement on events which changes my mind about the incident) In this instance it may be that he is saying to me what other adults have said to him. By implication, this is not to be taken too seriously. The rest of the group read my reaction of disgust rather differently. They emphatically re-state the original proposition.

For me what this extract reveals is the boundary where the boys police the girls out of the practice. That is to say the practice has both an internal and external aspect. The uncertain status of events, the difficulty of adjudicating between texts is central to the way in which the boys structure the practice, yet this aspect of the practice remains hidden from those who are not in on the texts, who do not already know how to read them. In this class, girls occupy this role. The comments I make in the extract above exactly fit the boys' version of how the girls would read wrestling. In the closing stages of this interview when Alim and Neils had stayed behind to look at the magazines, two girls from their class wandered into the room. I asked Alim and Neils why they thought no girls in their class showed any interest in wrestling. They were unequivocal in their response: because it is about fighting

> Alim: Maybe some girls are soft and, you know, they don't like fighting, they think (.....)
>
> Gemma: But, I mean a lot of this isn't really nasty fighting from what, well it's nasty, but it's also fake though
>
> Neils: Well it is get lots of blood in cage fights, there's blood all over people's face
>
> Gemma: So you think it's just cos this is gory
>
> Alim: Yeah, probably

Neils: I don't think girls like to watch people having their face smashed up like what happens with Virgil, he whacks his nose and broke it

Chloe: Errgh!

By stating that the fights are fakes, I am doing no more than repeating what the boys themselves at different intervals throughout the interview have said. But my conclusion, that consequently it isn't really nasty, is not a conclusion the boys themselves ever explicitly draw. In this instance it reads as illegitimate knowledge. In response, Neils restates a series of propositions about wrestling which are far more categorical in tone than those put forward within the main body of the interview, and directly contradict my assessment. Amongst the boys themselves, these kinds of propositions about what really happened have been disputed. But here no one calls this statement of the facts into question. The girls react to the image the boys paint. Like myself in the earlier extract, they are not in a position to challenge that account precisely because, like me, they are unfamiliar with the texts. The boys' regulation of the texts in class, keeping them solely for the perusal of insiders, is designed to keep them that way. In this instance, Chloe takes at face value the boys reports of the events, and expresses her repugnance. Her reaction of distaste contrasts with the boys' ability not to be shocked or put off. Consequently, the boys can claim additional status for their ability to both master and enjoy this material.

WWF: The 1992 interview summed up

The themes I have been pursuing in my analysis of the data from the 1992 interview are: the premium on being able to claim status as an insider; the hidden ambiguity of the wrestling texts, and the way in which this is covered over by claims and counter claims about who knows what. As a consequence, it is the status of the readers not the status of the texts which is ultimately getting decided in this literacy event.

At the heart of how the boys talk about wrestling in this literacy event is the division of the audience into those who know –insiders – and those who don't – outsiders. Insiders can and do call into question the truth status of the material. Yet their uncertainty about what the displays of violence and suffering really can be taken for is only made available to those who already committed to the texts. The boys' presentation of what wrestling is about to the girls acts to keep them out. They confirm their misreading to exclude them. So the practice has an internal and external face. In the public domain the boys stress that what they do with these texts is both serious and hard, requiring skill at memorising the text and an ability not to be shocked by violence. What their performance in this interview detracts from is precisely the ludic quality of the wrestling texts themselves, their excess

and exaggeration (See Fiske, 1987). In fact what ultimately makes them harmless fun for this age group.

Re-reading wrestling from the vantage point of 1993

Going by the account the boys give of the text in the 1992 interview, I would have no idea that wrestling was fun, not just serious, yet judging by their comments in 1993, the former was indeed the case.

I returned to the school approximately one year after I had distributed my first questionnaire. In the meantime the class' interests had changed and WWF wrestling had fallen out of favour. None of the group mentioned wrestling as a current interest, moreover, only Alim and George acknowledged that they had once collected the magazines. For Richard and Neils WWF wrestling appeared to have sunk without a trace. As one of my intentions in this round of interviews was to focus on any obvious differences in the range of practices between the two points of data collection, I decided to re-interview the same group. I brought my 1992 issue of WWF magazine to the interview with another current copy, and some other magazines which reflected current tastes amongst the class as a whole. I began by asking them to look just at the March 1992 issue, then went on to look briefly at the current copy (April, 1993), and only then did I produce the other magazines. Out of an interview lasting approximately one hour, we spent about 15 minutes on WWF.

Once again the group flip over the pages of the magazine together and comment as they go, but the kind of competitive labelling of prompts from the text which was so typical last time is wholly absent. Instead the group largely develop a conversation about why they have gone off wrestling. They are much more selective in the prompts they chose, mainly concentrating on items in the magazine which allow them to poke fun at the wrestlers or demonstrate that the whole business was fake. The latter point is important. In the account they give about why they no longer like wrestling the fact that they discovered it was faked is cited as the key factor:

> George: If I never found out it was fake I would probably still be on it,
> probably
>
> Several: Yeah

Labelling wrestling as "fake" now operates in a different way. In 1992 it left open the ambiguous nature of the material. It was apparently violent, and yet nobody really got hurt. In 1993, "fake" becomes a way of disengaging themselves from

wrestling. They can no longer take the action seriously. Here are their comments on the article about the break-up of the Rockers tag team:

> Richard: Yeah look at that fake kick
>
> Alim: exactly look
>
> George: yeah, they, they probably, the glass would probably smash because they would put it on the floor to ma, he just stood there like that
>
> Neils: yeah, the thing is I can't really believe we didn't realise it was fake.

But of course Neils is precisely right here. The claim that they turned from wrestling after they realised it was fake is in fact re-writing history.

In 1993, labelling the material "fake" becomes the means by which the group re-frame what they see now and assert a position of greater detachment. Cruising through the magazine they assess the contents in the light of this perspective. One consequence is that the group is much more likely to comment in some detail on the way in which the text itself constructs wrestling.

> George: Look at that that's fake, he just, he just misses him, there, he looks like he's going to punch him cos the cameras facing the wrong way, innit, he's

George not only makes an assessment of the nature of the encounter depicted, but he also draws attention to how the picture has been composed to give the illusion of a hit when none has happened.

But labelling wrestling "fake" also becomes the means by which they account for their own reading history, the difference between their interests now, and their interests then. They were interested once, but only because they had been taken in. Now, reading the magazine together becomes an occasion on which the group rehearse their distance from Wrestling. Yet some of the group seem to find this new position easier to manage than others. Richard at times struggles to stop himself falling back into old habits:

> Richard: I like the Undertaker, he's funny, he's my// if, if I went back to wrestling I'd like him
>
> Neils: I believe some of it
>
> George: Yeah, he wears, his eyes go all white
>
> Alim: Look these two have split up
>
> George: I don't, I don't think I'll go back to wrestling

Richard: Yeah I won't but/ (&)

Neils: I won't

Richard: (&)if I did I'd like him

Achieving the necessary level of detachment is hard. Yet as the conversation progresses and they recall more of the way things used to be for them, what they remember is not the practice they enacted at the 1992 interview. Their stated recollection of their involvement in wrestling hinges around on the one hand having favourites, and on the other, acting out wrestling with suitable props:

Neils: I used to jump off the sofa and try to do drop kicks and hurt myself {laughter}

Richard: Yeah

George;   There's this teddy bear that my sister had when she was young and like it's about that big it's a bunny rabbit and I used to punch it, slam kind of thing {laughter}

Alim?; Yeah, that's what I used to do, that's what I used to do

Neils: I used to pile driver this panda and now it's all smashed up {laughter}

Gemma: So what was, what was, was that part of the fun, what was fun at the time?

Several: Yeah

Richard: it's entertainment

Neils: I wouldn't have liked it if I didn't do the wrestling on my brother, probably, and that teddy

Partly of course this may be a way of contrasting their current detachment with their previous involvement. In the light of their new cynicism about wrestling, their excuse for ever having been taken in is that they were too young to know any better:

George: I think I'm a bit too old for it now, it used to be

Richard: Yeah, it's babyish, baby's

But it may be that they are now free to recollect areas of the practice which were contemporary with, but excluded from, the 1992 interview.

The literacy practice revealed in the 1992 interview was in many respects a closed practice, geared to a competitive display of expertise. Only insiders could participate, and insiders were gender-segregated. But it was also a partial practice, tied to the particular setting in which the interview took place.

~~~~

How the analysis contributes to the developing theory

Two points are worth making straight away about this piece. Both are to do with the way in which analysis of the data has been framed by other sources of information rather than the talk of the interviewees alone. In my account I have drawn on 1) information I collected through classroom observation and from the questionnaire about the boys' consumption of wrestling materials; 2) information I have subsequently garnered about the distribution of WWF materials; and 3) some analysis of the texts, both magazines and videos. There are some distinct differences in the way in which I mobilise these points of reference from my use of similar sources in the pieces on horror and the romance.

In the published pieces about the teen romance and horror the data was initially framed in relation to academic debates about the subject matter. These debates, in different ways, might both be characterised as centring round an "effects" discourse. In the case of horror, the piece was framed by debates about the vulnerability of the audience, or its knowing expertise, in the face of often violent and frightening texts (Barker, 1984). These debates are of long standing in relation to the media, and have been the focus of a good deal of psychologically-based work in media studies, much of it concerned with the child audience (See Buckingham 1993; Palmer, 1986 for an overview). In the case of the teen romance, the piece was framed by debates about the relationship of girls/women to the dominant ideology as represented by romance fiction targeted at the female audience. In this case the "effects" are perceived to be hegemonic, the debate conducted largely in feminist circles, mainly by those drawing either on a literary criticism background, or media studies background.

My reading of the data is played off against these debates. The data itself largely tells its own social history which I explicate and then use to directly counterpoise the more conventional reading. The fact that my interviewees themselves refer to the social settings in which their initial reading takes place strengthens my argument that reading is primarily a social act, to be understood in relation to the social contexts in which it takes place. However, in the case of WWF wrestling there is no such lead in. This is partly because the male reader has not been the subject of the same kind of scrutiny as his female counterpart. Where male readers are in fact the object of concern this is rarely made explicit. For instance, the label "children" is used to identify the "at risk" group in the audience for horror films. But in fact the real source of concern is male children who may then transpose the violence they see on the screen into off-screen violence. Witness the moral panic (Cohen, 1973) which got under way in relation to horror videos, particularly Child's Play III, in the aftermath of the Jamie Bulger murder trial, ultimately resulting in legislation in 1994. The same could be said about the real target for smaller scale worries regularly voiced over cartoon violence, or, currently, programmes such as Power Rangers.

Writing about wrestling stems from a different set of concerns which largely evades these kinds of issues. Conducted as textual analysis, it concentrates on the symbolic value of the wrestling texts, in terms which overlook the gender of the audience, and rarely deal with effects. Wrestling is the carnivalesque inversion of the normal rules of fair play (Fiske, 1987); in the set of oppositions it establishes between winners and losers it embodies the conflicts inherent in modern capitalism (Freedman, 1982; Lincoln, 1987); or displays for the popular audience suffering, defeat and justice (Barthes, 1973). Yet in my work so far I have side-stepped any attempt to address

what a text means for its audience. Methodologically I took the decision early on in this enquiry to leave textual analysis on one side. I did so because I could see no easy way of preventing my own reading of the text in question becoming the norm against which other's reading of the text would be judged. If I were to include my own reading I felt I would have to subject the procedures which generated it to as much scrutiny as the procedures which my interviewees employed. In effect this would take me away from my primary data – informal talk about texts – to consideration of another kind of data, and the institutionalised and academic set of procedures which produced it. Methodologically, my interviewees' version of the text in question has come to define what the text is. I deliberately set out to provide an emic description of the data. In the case of both horror and the teen romance this has been enough. But in the case of WWF I haven't been able to keep the text out of account. The boys' minimalist version of the text in the end of the day only makes sense when contrasted with other possible versions: their own, generated in the interview a year later; my own, produced during the interview itself; the versions I present in this write up, through analysis of the relationship between the magazine's contents and the mode of distribution of the wrestling texts, or through analysis of the ambiguity of the way individual incidents are composed, recounted and reproduced. This has led me to reconsider the place for the text in any investigation into the social contexts for reading.

In the thesis so far, I have striven to account for the way in which talk about texts is produced in relation to the social contexts for reading. What is difficult about the WWF interview is that the social context(s), (as distinct from the immediate setting), which generates this kind of display is not made fully visible. The kinds of explicit commentary or social interactions between

participants which underpin my analysis of the relationship between text, context and readers in other literacy events don't deliver here. In this instance it is hard to account for the particular display of knowledge. Is it simply a response to the immediate social setting and the way I ask the group questions about what they know? Is the display framed by the broader institutional context in which these magazines are circulating? Do the boys and I converge on a display of knowledge because these magazines are tolerated by the teacher so long as their use looks like serious reading? Does the display relate to other informal contexts in which insiders talk amongst themselves? Are the texts themselves structured with this kind of display in mind? The trouble is that whilst I can certainly speculate on these issues I am not in a position to deliver categoric answers. To do so I would have to move beyond the parameters of the current enquiry, to a more explicit investigation of the different elements I have now defined as important to understanding the social contexts for reading, and the ways in which they combine.

- Chapter Seven -

The conclusion

When I analyzed the 1992 WWF interview, I was unable to fully resolve what the relationship between the current activity in the present and the longer social history which underpins it might be without turning to independent means of investigating the social contexts for reading. Yet at the outset of the enquiry I had felt unsure how to conduct just such an investigation.

Now, by reflecting back on all three cases, I want to consider the range of ways in which I have defined the social contexts for reading; how these can be brought together under the term "the social regulation of text" and how this concept, as I now use it, can account for differences within the particular cases and common patterns across. In other words it is a theoretical formulation which both "hovers low" over the data and yet can provide the principles upon which to conduct a new, and expanded, kind of enquiry.

From social contexts to the social regulation of texts

So far in the horror and romance data I had defined the social contexts for reading which both sustained and helped generate individual literacy events

in terms of (a) moments of activity and (b) discursive injunctions and judgements which framed the act of reading. These formed the basis for explicit reflection by participants on reading as a socially differentiated process and in different ways impacted on how reading was done in the particular literacy events I analyzed.

In the 1992 WWF interview, respondents gave few indications of the social history which generated the way in which reading happened here. Yet in seeking to make sense of the boys' interactions in the present literacy event, I found myself turning to different aspects of the social contexts for reading: How did the boys get hold of the materials they collected so vigorously? Their consumption apparently uncontested at home, how were the materials distributed at the official level, via TV, video shops or newsagents? Was this relevant to the way the talk about text was organised? What relationship might there be between the structure of the texts and the structure of activity which it elicited? What impact did the gender segregation of the audience have on the way reading happened here? Trying to find answers to these questions, from a position of comparative ignorance, also led me to reflect back on what I had taken for granted about the broader social contexts in which both horror and the romance circulate. For instance the ambiguous status of the Sweet Valley High teen romance, as a generic series, rather than an authored collection. The fact that such fiction is rarely given official recognition in schools – it is not on the reading curriculum. The key role that legislation has played in determining who watches horror. The way in which the horror genre itself and who had access to it became the source of considerable debate in both the mid-eighties and again in the early nineties. These were matters which I had

taken for granted in my analysis, but had not made the focus of explicit attention.

My difficulty in understanding the WWF material had led me to investigate the public and official processes through which these texts were shared. Looking back at the horror and romance articles I came to see that such public processes were also implicated in the local, interpersonal processes which constituted the social contexts for reading in the instances I had documented. Yet this was not a case of the public processes unilaterally determining how a particular literacy event would be played out. On the contrary, public and institutional procedures were being re-inflected in the social contexts my participants referred to, even as they themselves re-worked and re-negotiated the social contexts for reading in the literacy events which I had recorded. These literacy events were themselves part of the social regulation of texts through which particular texts would be made available to particular readers in particular settings. They formed part of the on-going social contexts for reading.

Looking across the different categories of social context, I began to see that how texts are made available to whom is always socially regulated in some sense. Regulation needn't be defined in terms of prohibitions – the way in which some are legally prohibited from watching horror, for instance. Regulation could also be defined more positively in terms of encouragement to read. Schools regulate for the reading of some kinds of texts at least as much as they do against the reading of other kinds of texts. They do so in many different ways, tied to the varied institutional procedures they employ at different levels of the school system (See Bloome, 1992; Street and Street, 1991). Different social contexts regulate different kinds of texts in different

kinds of ways. Describing the social contexts for reading in terms of the social regulation of texts turns context from a list of discrete items, centred on the setting or the roles of the participants involved, to a sequence of socially constituted activities, materially and discursively embedded in the social world. (See Street on culture as a verb, Street, 1993b; and on context in linguistics and anthropology, Street, 1993a.) The phrase "the social regulation of texts" reminds us that something is being made available by someone to somebody. The regulation of texts sets up a relationship between these three elements. These are not neutral processes, but on the contrary, culturally loaded. In this way the social regulation of texts frames reading as a social process.

Social regulation of text: defining categories

Looking across the data which I have produced as evidence for this thesis I can now define the categories of activity which make up the social regulation of texts. These are:

> How texts are distributed (including both official and technological processes of distribution - where and how texts are marketed, for instance)

> How they become available within particular settings for particular readers (including the local processes through which members of the audience encourage or restrict access)

How texts are to be consumed, or knowledge of them displayed
(ways in which attention to text in specific settings is itself
socially structured through the interactions between readers
which take place in particular literacy events)

The organisation of institutional settings and procedures which
impinge on these factors (in particular the way in which
institutional settings and procedures impinge on the
organisation of talk about texts. They may do so without regard
to the specificity of the text. See my comments on the English
curriculum and the incorporation of texts from informal settings
in Chapter One.)

These are the broad categories which make up the social regulation of texts.
However, in any one literacy event, some may have a more immediate bearing
than another. For instance, in Chapter One I provide an example of talk
about television, which I typified as "Did you see?" (p24), where a small
group identified particular incidents from recent viewing in the briefest of
terms, reacted, and then moved on to the next one. I linked this way of
talking about text to the way in which terrestrial TV is currently organised,
with little choice amongst channels and therefore a good chance that those
who have been watching in different places will have seen the same things.
Hence the implicitness, and brevity of the references when they come
together. They can assume shared knowledge (Edwards and Mercer, 1987).
The key factor in the social regulation of texts in this instance would be how
the texts were distributed.

In respect of the 1992 WWF data, however, whilst how the texts were distributed clearly had some impact on the interaction in the literacy event I recorded, the driving force in that case seemed to be the opportunity for competitive display in the setting in which the texts were consumed. In this instance the organisation of the present moment dominated over the longer social history.

What I am suggesting here is that processes of backgrounding and foregrounding are going on in particular literacy events (Duranti and Goodwin, 1992, pp 9-12) which make different aspects of the social regulation of texts more or less prominent. This means that part of the methodological aim in any investigation should be to identify what it is in the particular mix which will act as the prime driving force in this instance. The formulation I have come up with doesn't allow me to predict which element in the social contexts for reading will be most important in any one case, but it does tell me how to structure my enquiry into the relationship between a literacy event and the broader social context, in other words what kinds of factors might be at work and how I could identify them.

If I had started my enquiry by looking at the broader social contexts for reading independently of the talk I would not have known where to start, where to stop or how to relate what I found out about the social contexts for reading back to a particular literacy event. By contrast, working this way round, from the talk, outwards to the social contexts and back to the talk again, has shown me how talk about texts and the social contexts for reading sustain each other. They are intimately intertwined.

Social regulation of text and the language of enactment

With my language of explanation (L1) now in place, I turn back to the
language of enactment (L2). What is notable about the vocabulary I have
used to describe the activity which takes place in the literacy events I
present is the extent to which it differs from case to case. Even relatively
general terms such as "the literacy event as a form of social exchange" don't
quite travel across all three cases. (The 1992 WWF data is hard to read as a
form of exchange, rather than as a more static display.) The phrases which
seem to travel most easily include: reading as a social performance; sorting
out the text; sorting out their place in the audience (though again, the kind
of provisionality implied in the latter two is barely in evidence in the 1992
WWF data.) "Reading history" seems to do best when children consciously
reflect on how their reading has, or might yet, change. Yet in the data this
process happens only in the romance and 1993 WWF interview. However,
overall the specificity of the vocabulary, the extent to which it is tied to and
emerges from particular performances, seems to be helpful in terms of one of
the aims for L2 laid down by Bernstein: that it should remain "permeable to
the potential enactments of those being described" (Bernstein, 1996, p138).
L1, by foregrounding processes of regulation, guides how I look at the
activity played out in the current setting and its relationship to the wider
social context. L2 remains open to the particularity of this performance, and
the configuration of texts, readers and social history which pertains in any
one instance.

Social regulation of text and the research agenda

The theoretical formulation of the social regulation of text has given me the principles according to which I could now design a broader enquiry, encompassing talk about text and the independent investigation of the social contexts for reading in ways which would be mutually supportive. Working from the outside in, on the basis of the principles I have identified, I could now specify how to look for evidence of the relevant social contexts for reading and begin to identify their relationship to any specific literacy event. At the same time, working backwards from individual events, or inside out, I now know what kinds of explanation might help to understand a given literacy event.

The framework for research I have now evolved would, I hope, help me navigate my way round the kind of difficulties presented by the 1992 WWF interview, in which I had garnered a partial account of reading WWF, yet at the time had no immediate way of recognising that. Building in a variety of means for independently researching the social contexts for reading would allow me, not so much to check for the representativeness of any one performance, as bring into view the way in which shifting social contexts for reading contextualise and then recontextualise texts.

In the event, the theoretical formulations adopted in this thesis have now been applied in a new research proposal, designed to investigate the relationship between gender and literacy in the primary school age group. Entitled: *Fact and Fiction: the gendering of reading in the seven to nine age group*, this proposal was successfully submitted to the ESRC in July 1995. The proposal sets out to contribute to debates about the different levels of achievement in reading and writing identified for boys and girls by studying

the use of non-fiction texts by primary age children in informal and official contexts.

The new proposal directly addresses and builds upon methodological issues raised in the course of this thesis. Using the concept of the social regulation of text, as defined above, the research sets out to identify the range of regulatory processes involved in the distribution and consumption of non-fiction texts amongst the 7-9 age group. A variety of methods are being used to document both the social contexts for the distribution of texts and the social contexts for the consumption of texts in the different domains of home and school. These will include auditing reading resources in different settings, the systematic observation and recording of literacy events in school and the use of photography to record literacy events in the informal domain. The fuller picture of the social organisation of reading in different settings gained in this way will then be used to inform the interview phases of data collection, allowing for more structured enquiry into participants' views of the social organisation of reading (For instance, the photographs will be used in interview as a means to encourage participants to reflect explicitly on the social organisation of literacy events.) and providing a better means of contextualising participants' talk about texts.

The new form of enquiry may well yield a new picture of the links between the social contexts for reading and how reading gets done in any one instance. However, the basis for such a revised means of enquiry has stemmed directly from the work undertaken for this thesis, and is guided by the concept of the social regulation of text. This theoretical concept has emerged directly from the analysis of talk about text, undertaken in this thesis.

Bibliography

Alvermann, E. (1987) Using discussion to promote reading comprehension, NJ: International Reading Association

Anderson, A.B. and Stokes, S.J. (1984) 'Social and institutional influences on the development and practice of literacy' in Goelman, H, Oberg, A and Smith, F (eds) Awakening to Literacy London: Heineman

Anderson, A.B., Teale, W.H. and Estrada, E.(1980) 'Low-income children's pre-school literacy experiences: some naturalistic observations' The Quarterly Newsletter of the Laboratory of Comparative Human Cognition. 2, 59-65

Ang, I. (1985) Watching 'Dallas': Soap opera and the melodramatic imagination, London: Methuen

Ang, I. (1989) 'Wanted: audiences. On the politics of empirical audience studies' in Seiter, E, Borchers, H, Kreutzner, G and Warth, E. M. Remote Control, London: Routledge

Baker, C. D. (1990) 'Literacy practices and social relations in classroom reading events' in Luke, A and Baker, C. D. (eds) Towards a critical sociology of reading: Papers of the 12th World Congress of Reading, Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Barker, M. (ed) (1984) The Video Nasties London: Pluto

Barker, M. (1989) Comics: ideology, power and the critics, Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Barlow, G. and Hill, A. (eds). (1985) Video violence and children, London: Hodder and Stoughton

Barthes, R. (1973) Mythologies St Albans: Paladin

Barton, D. (1991) 'The Social Nature of Writing' in Barton, D and Ivanic, R (eds) Writing in the Community, London: Sage

Barton, D. (1994) Literacy: An introduction to the ecology of written language. Oxford: Blackwell

Barton, D. and Ivanic, R. (eds) (1991) Writing in the Community, London: Sage

Barton, D. and Padmore, S. (1991) 'Roles, Networks, and Values in Everyday Writing' in Barton, D. and Ivanic, R. (eds) Writing in the Community, London: Sage

Batsleer, J. (1981) 'Pulp in the Pink' in Spare Rib, No 109.

Bauman, R. (1986) Story, performance, and event. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Bauman, R. (1992) 'Contextualization, tradition, and the dialogue of genres: Icelandic legends of the kraftaskald' in Duranti, A. and Goodwin, C. (eds) Rethinking context: Language as an interactive phenomenon. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Baynham, M. (1995) Literacy Practices: Investigating literacy in social contexts. London: Longman

Benton, M., Teasey, J., Bell, R. and Hurst, K. (1988) Young Readers Responding to Poems, London: Routledge.

Bereiter, C. and Scardemalia, M. (1982) 'From conversation to Composition: The role of instruction in a developmental process' in Glaser, R (ed) Advances in Instructional Psychology (vol 2) Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum

Bernstein, B. (1990) Class, Codes and Control VolIV: The Structuring of Pedagogic Discourse. Oxford: Blackwells

Bernstein, B. (1996) 'Research and Languages of Description' in Pedagogy, Symbolic Control and Identity: Theory, research and critique London: Taylor and Francis

Besnier, N. (1993) Literacy and feelings: the encoding of affect in Nukulaelae letters in Street, B. (ed) Cross-Cultural Approaches to Literacy Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Besnier, N. and Street, B. (1991) 'Literacy' in Ingold, T (ed) Encyclopedia of Anthropology London: Routledge

Bloome, D. (1989) Classrooms and Literacy. Norwood, NJ: Ablex

Bloome, D. (1992) 'Reading as a social process in a middle school classroom' in Bloome, D. (ed) Literacy and Schooling. Norwood: Ablex

Bloome, D. (1993) 'The Social Construction of Intertextuality and the Boundaries of School Literacy' in Changing English 1:1

Branston, G. (1992) 'Audience' in Lusted, D., (ed). The Media Studies Book, London: Routledge.

Brown, M.E. (1987) 'The Politics of Soaps: Pleasure and Feminine Empowerment' in Australian Journal of Cultural Studies 4:2, 1–25

Buckingham, D. (1993a) Children Talking Television: The making of television literacy. London: Falmer Press

Buckingham, D. (1993b) (ed) Reading Audiences: Young People and the Media Manchester: Manchester University Press

Buckingham, D., Fraser, P. and Mayman, N. (1990) 'Stepping into the Void: Beginning classroom research in media education' in Buckingham, D. (ed) Watching Media Learning. London: Falmer Press

Burgess, T. (1985) 'The Question of English' in Changing English: Essays for Harold Rosen London: Heineman

Camitta, M. (1993) 'Vernacular writing: Varieties of literacy among Philadelphia high school students' in Street, B. (ed) Cross-Cultural Approaches to Literacy Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Cazden, C. (1988) 'Social Context of Learning to Read' in Mercer, N (ed)

Language and Literacy from an Educational Perspective_ Vol 2. Milton
Keynes: Open University Press

Christian-Smith, L. (1993) Texts of Desire, London: Falmer Press

Clanchy, M.T. (1979) From Memory to Written Record Cambridge, MA: Harvard
University Press

Clover, C. (1989) 'Her body, himself: Gender in the slasher film' in Donald, J
(ed). Fantasy and the cinema, London: BFI

Coates, J. (1994) 'No gap, lots of overlap: Turn-taking patterns in the talk of
women friends' in Graddol, D, Maybin, J and Stierer, B. (eds) Researching_
Language and Literacy in Social Context. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters

Cohen, S. (1973) Folk Devils and Moral Panics, London: Paladin

Collins, J. (1986) 'Differential treatment in reading instruction' in Cook-
Gumperz, J. (ed) The Social Construction of Literacy, Cambridge: Cambridge
University Press

Corcoran, B. and Evans, E. (eds) (1987) Readers, Texts, Teachers. Milton
Keynes: Open University Press

Dais P. and Hayhoe, M. (1988) Developing Response to Poetry, Milton Keynes:
Open University Press

Davies, B. (1989) Frogs and snails and feminist tales, Sydney, Allen and
Unwin

Dombey, H. (1988) 'Partners in the Telling' in Meek, M and Mills, C (eds)
Language and Literacy in the Primary School London: Falmer Press

Dombey, H. (1992) 'Lessons learnt at bed-time' in Kimberley, K, Meek, M and
Miller, J (eds) New Readings_ London: A & C Black

Duranti, A. and Goodwin, C. (eds) (1992) Rethinking context: Language as an
interactive phenomenon. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Dyer,R., Geraghty, C., Jordan, M., Lovell, T., Paterson, R. and Stewart J. (eds)
(1981) Coronation Street, London: BFI

Edwards, D. and Mercer, N. (1987) Common Knowledge_ London: Methuen

Falk, J. (1980) 'The conversational duet' in Proceedings of the 6th Annual
Meeting of the Berkeley Linguistics Society 507-14

Finnegan, R. (1992) Oral Traditions and the Verbal Arts London: Routledge

Fishman, A. (1991) 'Because This Is Who We Are: Writing in the Amish
community'in Barton, D. and Ivanic, R. (eds) Writing in the Community,
London: Sage

Fiske, J. (1987) Television Culture, London: Methuen

Fox, C. (1993) At the very edge of the forest: the influence of literature on

storytelling by children, London: Cassell

Frazer, E. (1987) 'Teenage girls reading Jackie' in Media, Culture and Society, 9:4. 407-425

Freedman, J. (1982) 'Will the Sheik use his amazing fireball: Ideology of professional wrestling' in Manning, F (ed) The Celebration of Society Ontario: Broadview

Gee, J.P. (1986) 'Orality and literacy: From 'the savage mind' to 'Ways with Words'' in TESOL Quarterly 20:4, 719-746

Gee, J.P. (1991) Social Linguistics and Literacies London: Falmer Press

Geertz, C. (1973) The Interpretation of Cultures New York: Basic Books

Geertz, C. (1983) Local Knowledge New York: Basic Books

Geraghty, C. (1981) 'The continuous serial – a definition' in Dyer, R., Geraghty, C, Jordan, M., Lovell, T., Paterson, R. and Stewart, J. (eds) Coronation Street, London: BFI

Gilbert, P. (1987) 'Post Reader Response: The deconstructive critique' in Corcoran, B and Evans, (eds) Readers, Texts, Teachers. Milton Keynes: Open University Press

Gilbert, P. and Taylor, S. (1991) Fashioning the Feminine. Girls, Popular Culture and Schooling, Sydney: Allen and Unwin.

Goelman,H., Oberg, A. and Smith, F. (eds) (1984) Awakening to Literacy London: Heineman

Goody, J. (1987) The interface between the written and the oral. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Graff, H.J. (1987) The Legacies of Literacy Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press

Gray, A. (1987) 'Behind Closed Doors: Video recorders in the home' in Baehr, H. and Dyer, G. (eds) Boxed in: Women and Television. London: Pandora

Green, J. and Bloome, D. (forthcoming) 'Ethnography and Ethnographers of and in Education: A situated perspective' in Flood, J. Heath, S. Alvermann, D and Lapp, D. (eds) A Handbook for Literacy Educators New York: Macmillan

Gregory, E. (1990) 'Negotiation as a Criterial Factor in Learning to Read in a Second Language' in Language and Education 4:2 103-115

Gregory, E. (1992) 'Learning Codes and Contexts: a psychosemiotic approach to beginning reading in school' in Kimberley, K, Meek, M and Miller, J (eds) New Readings: Contributions to an understanding of literacy London: A & C Black

Grillo, R. (1989) Dominant Languages. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Hammersley, M. (1992) What's wrong with ethnography? London: Routledge

Hardcastle, J. (1992) 'What was necessary to explain' in Kimberley, K., Meek, M. and Miller, J. (eds) New Readings: Contributions to an understanding of literacy London: A & C Black

Heap, J. (1990) 'A situated perspective on what counts as reading' in Luke, A. and Baker, C. (eds) Towards a critical sociology of reading: Papers of the 12th World Congress of Reading, Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

Heath, S.B. (1982) 'What No Bedtime Story Means: Narrative skills at home and school' in Language and Society 11, 49–76.

Heath, S.B. (1983) Ways with Words Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Heath, S.B. and McLaughlin, M.W. (eds) (1993) Identity and Inner City Youth: Beyond Gender and Ethnicity New York: Teachers' College Press

Hill, C. and Parry, K. (1994) From Testing to Assessment: English as an International Language London: Longman

Hobson, D. (1982) 'Crossroads':The drama of a soap opera, London: Methuen

Hoggart, P. (1984) 'Comics and magazines for schoolchildren' in Miller, J. (ed) Eccentric Propositions, London: RKP

Hymes, D. (1974) Foundations in Sociolinguistics, London: Tavistock

Ivanic, R. and Moss, W. (1991) 'Bringing Community Writing Practices into Education' in Barton, D and Ivanic, R (eds) Writing in the Community, London: Sage

Kullick, D. and Stroud, C. (1993) 'Conceptions and uses of literacy in a Papua New Guinean village' in Street, B. (ed) Cross-Cultural Approaches to Literacy Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Lewis, A. (1992) 'Group child interviews as a research tool' in British Education Research Journal 18:4 413–421

Liebes, T. and Katz, E. (1990) The Export of Meaning: Cross-cultural readings of Dallas, Oxford: Oxford University Press

Light, A. (1984) '"Returning to Manderley": Romance fiction, female sexuality and class' in Feminist Review, 16;

Lincoln, B. (1989) Discourse and the Construction of Society Oxford: Oxford University Press

Long, E. (1994) 'Textual Interpretation as Collective Action' in Cruz, J. and Lewis, J. Viewing, Reading, Listening Oxford: Westview Press

Lovell, T. (1987) Consuming Fiction London: Verso

Luke, A. (1988) Literacy, Textbooks and Ideology London: Falmer Press

Luke, A. and Baker, C. D. (eds) (1990) Towards a Critical Sociology of Reading: Papers of the 12th World Congress of Reading. Amsterdam/Phliadelphia: John Benjamins

McRobbie, A. (1982) 'Jackie: an ideology of adolescent femininity', in Waites, B. Bennett, T. and Martin, G. (eds) Popular Culture: Past and Present, London: Croom Helm and Open University.

Malinowski, B. (1923) 'The Problem of Meaning in Primitive Languages' in Ogden, C. and Richards, I.A. (eds) The Meaning of Meaning New York: Harcourt, Brace and World

Margolies, D. (1982) 'Mills and Boon – Guilt without Sex' in Red Letters, No 14

Marshall, C. and Rossman, G. (1995) Designing Qualitative Research London: Sage

Maybin, J. (1993) 'Dialogic Relationships and the Construction of Knowledge in Children's Informal Talk.' in Graddol, D. Thompson, L. and Byram M. (eds) Language and Culture, Clevedon: Multilingual Matters

Maybin, J. (1994) 'Children's Voices: Talk, knowledge and identity' in Graddol, D, Maybin, J and Stierer, B. (eds) Researching Language and Literacy in Social Context. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters

Maybin, J. and Moss, G. (1993a) 'Children talk text' in Changing English 1:1, 43-52

Maybin, J. and Moss, G. (1993b) 'Talk about texts: Reading as a social event' in Journal of Research in Reading. 16:2, 138-147

Mercer, N. (1994) 'Neo-Vygotskian Theory and Classroom Education' in Stierer, B and Maybin, J (eds) Language, Literacy and Learning in Educational Practice Clevedon: Multilingual Matters

Meek, M. (1992) 'Literacy: redescribing reading' in Kimberley, K, Meek, M and Miller, J (eds) New Readings: Contributions to an understanding of literacy London: A & C Black

Michaels, S. (1986) 'Narrative presentations: An oral preparation for literacy with 1st graders' in Cook-Gumperz, J. (ed) The Social Construction of Literacy, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Miles, M. and Huberman, A.M. (1984) Qualitative Data Analysis London: Sage

Miller, G. A. (1988) 'Reflections on the conference' in Mercer, N. (ed) Language and Literacy from an Educational Perspective , Milton Keynes: Open University Press

Miller, J. (1990) Seductions. Studies in reading and culture. London: Virago

Mills, C. (1988) 'Making Sense of Reading: Key words or Grandma Swagg' in Meek, M. and Mills, C. (eds) Language and Literacy in the Primary School London: Falmer Press

Minns, H. (1990) Read it to me now! London: Virago

Mitchell, J.C. (1983) 'Case and Situation Analysis' in Sociological Review 31:2, 187-211

Morley, D. (1980) The 'Nationwide' Audience, London: British Film Institute

Morley, D. (1981) 'Nationwide: A critical postscript' in Screen Education, 39.

Morley, D. (1986) Family Television: Cultural power and domestic leisure. London: Comedia

Morley, D. and Silverstone, R. (1990) 'Domestic communnication: Technologies and meanings' in Media, Culture and Society 13:1, 31–55

Moss, G. (1989) Un/Popular Fictions, London: Virago

Moss, G. (1989b) 'Powerful Texts: English teaching and feminism' in The English Magazine, 22

Moss, G. (1991a) 'Media texts, English texts or How to read differently' in English in Australia. 95

Moss, G. (1991b) 'Children and TV: Exploring gendered reading' in Women: a cultural review. 2:1

Moss, G. (1993a) 'Children Talk Horror Videos: Reading as a social performance' in Australian Journal of Education, 37:2, 169–181

Moss, G. (1993b) 'Girls tell the teen romance: four reading histories' in Buckingham, D (ed) Reading Audiences: Young People and the Media Manchester: Manchester University Press

Neale, S. (1980) Genre, London, BFI

Neville, M. (1988) Assessing and teaching language, literacy and oracy in schools, London: Macmillan

Northern Examining Association. (1988) Media Studies Syllabus A, Manchester: NEA

Oakhill, J. and Beard, R. (eds) (1995) Special Issue: The Contribution of Psychological Research, Journal of Research in Reading, 18:2

Ong, W. (1982) Orality and Literacy London: Methuen

Palmer, P. (1986) The Lively Audience, Sydney: Allen and Unwin

Potter, J. and Wetherell, M. (1987) Discourse and Social Psychology. London: Sage

Protherough, R. (1983) Developing Response to Fiction Milton Keynes: Open University Press

Purves, A C. and Beach, R. (1972) Literature and the Reader, Urbana, Illinois: NCTE

Radway, J. (1984) Reading the Romance, Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press.

Radway, J. (1987, British edition) Reading the Romance, London: Verso

Richards, C. (1993) 'Taking sides? What young girls do with television' in

Buckingham, D. (ed) Reading Audiences: Young People and the Media Manchester: Manchester University Press

Rockhill, K. (1987) 'Gender, language and the politics of literacy' in British Journal of the Sociology of Education 8:2, 153-167

Rosen, H. (1992) 'The Politics of Writing' in Kimberley, K, Meek, M and Miller, J. (eds) New Readings: Contributions to an understanding of literacy London: A&C Black

Rosenblatt, L.M. (1978) The reader, the text, the poem: the transactional theory of the literary work. Southern Illinois University Press

Saxena, M. (1994) 'Literacies Among the Panjabis in Southall (Britain)' in Maybin, J. (ed) Language and Literacy in Social Practice. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters

SCAA, 1995, Children's Use of Standard Spoken English London: HMSO

Scardemalia, M. and Bereiter, C. (1985) 'Development of dialectical processes in composition' in Olson, D. (ed) Literacy, Language and Learning Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Schiefflin, B. and Cochrane-Smith, M. (1984) 'Learning to read culturally: Literacy before schooling' in Goelman, H., Oberg, A. and Smith, F. (eds) Awakening to Literacy London: Heineman

Shuman, A. (1986) Storytelling rights: the uses of oral and written texts by urban adolescents. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Shuman, A. (1993) 'Collaborative writing: appropriating power or reproducing authority' in Street, B. (ed) Cross-Cultural Approaches to Literacy Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Steedman, C. (1982) The Tidy House, London: Virago

Stones, R. (1983) Pour out the cocoa, Janet London: Longmans

Street, B. (1984) Literacy in Theory and Practice, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Street, B. (1993a) (ed) Cross-Cultural Approaches to Literacy Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Street, B. (1993b) 'The New Literacy Studies: Implications for Education and Pedagogy' in Changing English 1:1, 113-126

Street, B. (1993c) 'The new literacy studies. Guest editorial' in Journal of Research in Reading, 16:2, 81-88

Street, B. (1994) 'Cross-cultural perspectives on literacy' in Verhoeven, L (ed) Functional Literacy: Theoretical issues and educational implications Amsterdam: Benjamins

Street, B. (1995a) Social Literacies London: Longmans

Street, B. (1995b) 'Academic Literacies: a case study' in Fox, C, Baker, D and Clay, J. (eds) Alternative Ways of Knowing: Literacies, Numeracies, Sciences Brighton: Falmer Press

Street, B. and Street, J. (1991) 'The Schooling of Literacy' in Barton, D and Ivanic, R (eds) Writing in the Community, London: Sage

Swann, J. and Graddol, D. (1994) 'Gender inequalities in classroom talk' in Graddol, D., Maybin, J. and Stierer, B. (eds) Researching Language and Literacy in Social Context. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters

Taylor, D. (1983) Family Literacy: Young children learning to read and write Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann

Todorov, T. (1988) 'Knowledge in Social Anthropology' in Anthropology Today 4:2, 2-5

Vygotsky, L.S. (1962) Thought and Language. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press

Vygotsky, L. S. (1978) Mind in Society London: Harvard University Press

Walker, J. (ed) (1993, 9th edition) Halliwell's Film Guide, London: Harper Collins

Williams, R. (1974) Television, Technology and Cultural Form. London: Fontana

Willinsky, J. and Hunniford, R.M. (1986) 'Reading the Romance Younger. The Mirrors and Fears of a Preparatory Literature' in Reading-Canada-Lecture, 4:1. 16-30

Winnert, D. (1994) Radio Times film and video guide, London: Hodder and Stoughton

Appendix

Data Transcription in Negotiated Literacies

In transcribing the extracts which are presented in this thesis, my approach has been to maintain maximum readability, whilst producing as accurate a record as I can of the sequences of talk. Punctuation has been kept to a minimum, with commas rather than full stops used to show how the original speech flow was chunked into smaller units. There has been no attempt to represent pronunciation. However, "yeah", "cos" and "innit" have been used in the transcription. "Yeah" and "cos" have been preserved as markers of informality in speech. It would substantially alter the flavour of the speech record if they were replaced with "yes" and "because". "Innit" has been retained as it is used as an affirmative tag in London non-standard English (See SCAA, 1995, *Children's Use of Standard Spoken English*). It's meaning is therefore subtly different from "isn't it".

The following transcription conventions have been used.

(...)   Words undeciphered

(?word?)   Transcription uncertain

:
:   Used to mark omitted discourse

[
[Marks the point at which speakers overlap

(&)   Indicates where one speaker is continuing to talk over another speaker, whose turn is presented next in the written record.

/   Pause of less than 2 seconds

//   Pause of more than 2 seconds

{}   Used to enclose contextual information eg {Giggles}

[]   Used to enclose short interjections from other speakers which do not interrupt the flow of the talk eg [Yeah]