

**REPRESENTATIONS OF MEN'S VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN:
AUDIO-VISUAL TEXTS AND THEIR RECEPTION**

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ABSTRACT

Portrayals of sexual and/or domestic violence committed by men against women appear in the television schedules and in movie theatres on almost a daily basis. There is a long established tradition of concern about how depictions of violence in the audio-visual media can impact on audiences. However, minimal consideration has been given to what kind of discursive 'messages' such portrayals might contain and how audiences engage with these.

This research explores to what extent audio-visual portrayals of violence against women might offer certain ways of reading and understanding that violence, and how women audiences interpret these. It investigates this through both textual and reception analyses, with the framework through which reception is examined being directly related to the textual material itself.

The study assesses to what degree audio-visual texts are capable of structuring audience interpretation, and whether there is any direct relationship between this and how women viewers actually read the texts. Four audio-visual products are examined: the Hollywood film *The Accused*; an episode of the soap opera *EastEnders*; the television play *Closing Ranks*; and an edition of *Crimewatch UK*.

Ninety one women, formed into 14 focus groups, participated in the reception research. Half of these women had experienced violence of a domestic and/or sexual nature, whilst the other half had no experience of such violence. Groups further varied in terms of nationality (Scottish and English), class (working-class and middle-class) and ethnic background (white, Asian and Afro-Caribbean).

The research demonstrates that neither audio-visual texts nor their reception can be considered without an appreciation of how social and cultural factors influence both. The media are involved in the circulation of cultural meanings about acts of violence against women and in mediating this cannot help but draw on existing discourses which surround such violence. As audiences, women also draw on their socialised conceptions of such violence, though how they engage with and read its representation is affected by their social and cultural positionings and their own lived experiences.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The Research Perspective

The debates surrounding audio-visual representations of violence can generally be characterised through two arguments. On the one hand there is the belief that violent portrayals on television and in film have the potential to incite aggressive and violent behaviour in viewers. From this perspective concern is also expressed that so frequently are depictions of violence found in film and television that audiences are desensitised to the suffering and effects of real-life violence. On the other hand there are those who reject outright any claims that audio-visual representations of violence might have damaging or negative social consequences, be it in terms of inciting aggressive behaviour, or in terms of distorting how we generally think about violence as a social phenomenon. Both of these positions are informed more by dogmatism than sound empirical research.

This study argues for the need to examine audio-visual representations of violence both in relation to the social and cultural contexts in which they are produced, and in relation to how audiences read and interpret these portrayals. This entails exploring questions of why and how depictions of violence appear on our television screens and in movie theatres, and what 'meanings' are taken from these by viewers. However, in considering such questions it is necessary to assess how violence is shown in a variety of audio-visual forms, including both factual and fictional texts. Research which limits itself to the analysis of any one type of audio-visual genre is constrained in its ability to discuss the range of discourses which might play a part in both how violence is portrayed, and how it is received by audiences.

Four audio-visual texts are analysed in this research: *The Accused*, *EastEnders*, *Closing Ranks* and *Crimewatch UK*. Each of these represents a different audio-visual form and all depict acts of sexual and/or domestic violence committed by men against women: *The Accused* features an explicit gang rape of a woman in a public bar; *EastEnders* depicts domestic violence committed by a white man against his Afro-Caribbean wife; *Closing Ranks* also portrays domestic violence, but in excess of that shown in *EastEnders* in additionally including a marital rape; and *Crimewatch UK* contains a reconstruction of the events surrounding the sexual assault and murder of a young female hitchhiker.

The concern is to examine how these four texts might each promote certain understandings of violence against women, and which discourses they draw on - either intentionally or unintentionally - in mediating this violence. This is researched through a combination of both textual and reception analyses, with the latter drawing on focus group interviews to assess how different women read and interpret the violent representations. This concentration on women facilitates the analysis of how the audio-visual texts might encourage such viewers to adopt certain discursive understandings of how and why *their* gender is vulnerable to male attack, and what can be done to prevent this.

Included in the reception study were both women with experience of sexual and/or domestic violence and women with no such experience. Groups were further differentiated according to class (working-class and middle-class), ethnicity (white, Asian and Afro-Caribbean) and nationality (Scottish and English).

Textual analysis and reception studies are rarely combined. This is due to some broadly conflicting theoretical arguments concerning whether 'meaning' is immanent in texts, as in the former approach, or whether it is produced only at the point of audience reception, as in the latter perspective. Textual analysis *is* important in the production of audio-visual criticism. However, unless supported by empirical audience research, its

arguments are open to accusations of speculation and/or subjectivism. Reception research, has, at times, been weak in providing *critical* analyses of the audio-visual media, and particularly so in relation to popular fiction television programming (Brunsdon, 1989; Gray, 1987). It is also an approach rarely applied to the study of cinema texts (Stacey, 1993).

For reception research to make a useful contribution to textual criticism, and promote an understanding of how audio-visual media texts may influence how audiences make sense of their wider social and cultural environments, it needs to be recognised that *textual signification* plays an important part in structuring the range of ways in which a text can be read and comprehended. Therefore, the aim of this research has been to identify how each of the featured texts might prompt certain readings of violence committed against women. This is approached through a multi-focused textual analysis assessing how production and marketing contexts, generic conventions, narrative structure, plot construction and characterisation affect the interpretive potential of the text. The investigation then turns to examine what evidence, if any, there is to indicate how these factors might have affected the women interviewees' reception of the texts and their representations of violence against women.

A Note on the Background to this Research

This thesis draws on audience reception data originally used in the research project *Women Viewing Violence* (Schlesinger *et al*, 1992). It therefore also focuses on the same four audio-visual texts as that publication. In doing so it represents both a continuation and development of that earlier work.

Commissioned by the Broadcasting Standards Council, *Women Viewing Violence* had been primarily concerned with reporting on women's reactions and responses to portrayals of violence against women. Because it did not attempt to assess how the four

texts may have encouraged, supported or challenged certain discursive understandings of the portrayed violence, its critical scope was limited. Consequently, the present research represents an attempt to extend further the scope of previous work and, thereby, to contribute to the understanding of how audio-visual portrayals of violence against women might affect various ways in which the social issue of such violence is perceived.

Organisation of this Study

This study is divided into seven chapters. Chapter Two presents an overview of literature relating to the research of audio-visual portrayals of violence, theories of the text, and approaches to the analysis of audience reception. This argues that whilst screen violence has been examined through a variety of theoretical traditions, none of these include a sufficiently sophisticated understanding of the text-audience relationship. The chapter then presents a critical discussion of approaches to the analysis of audio-visual texts. These are taken to task for promoting a belief in the primacy of the text and for the lack of any empirical evidence to support their arguments. Next, in focusing on recent trends in reception theory, the chapter illustrates how this theorising has been limited by both a tendency to understand reception only in relation to single genres, and/or in relation to a restricted view of the diverse nature of audiences. It is argued that because an influential number of reception theorists have rarely attempted to examine audience interpretation in relation to textual content and its signification, the perspective provides little understanding of how the audio-visual media might influence audiences' understandings of their wider social and cultural environments.

An extended account of the background to this research, its methodological design, and implementation is provided in Chapter Three. This expands on the limitations to the *Women Viewing Violence* project and explains why and how I have sought to further develop that research. The chapter also details both ethical and practical difficulties

encountered in conducting the reception study of portrayals of violence against women. An account is then provided of the approach used in constructing the textual analysis of each of the four audio-visual texts. Finally the chapter details how this research went about reanalysing the interview groups' responses to the texts, and assessing these in relation to the claims put forward in the textual analysis.

Chapters Four, Five, Six and Seven each contain the textual analysis and reception theorising of one audio-visual text: *The Accused*, *EastEnders*, *Closing Ranks* and *Crimewatch UK* respectively. The lay-out of these chapters has been broadly standardised so as to aid comparison of how and why each of the texts mediates violence against women, and how these representations are read and interpreted by the groups of women respondents. Each chapter provides a brief synopsis of the text in question. This is followed by an analysis of its production and marketing contexts, generic conventions and narrative structure. There then comes a close and in-depth assessment of how the text portrays violence committed against a woman. Supporting the arguments put forward in the analysis with scene-by-scene breakdowns, it is assessed how plot development and characterisation affect the range of ways in which it is possible to make sense of and comprehend that violence.

Each textual analysis is then followed by an examination of how the women respondents did indeed read and interpret the texts. These reception analyses are structured around and related to the arguments put forward in the textual research. Thus, the validity of the claims made in that textual research is empirically tested. Throughout the reception analyses care is taken to identify whether and how different women might have read the text in different ways. Where such differences are found attempts are made to explain why they occurred and to explore their relationship to the social, material and cultural experiences of the respondents. It is also discussed what implications any variations in response have for the theorising of the relationship between texts, their systems of signification and audience interpretation.

CHAPTER TWO

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES ON AUDIO-VISUAL REPRESENTATIONS OF VIOLENCE AND APPROACHES TO TEXTUAL ANALYSIS AND RECEPTION STUDIES

Introduction

This chapter presents the case for examining audio-visual representations of violence against women through a synthesis of textual and reception research. First it discusses how screen representations of violence have been researched within a variety of theoretical traditions. It is argued that these fail to give sufficient consideration the textual contexts in which violence is portrayed, and/or that they involve simplistic conceptions of the text-audience relationship.

To date textual and reception analyses have rarely been combined. Deriving from literary theory and sociological/cultural studies respectively, it has proved difficult to establish a common basis for the study of both texts and audiences (Kuhn, 1984; Stacey, 1993). However, it is argued here that the meaning which can be constructed from audio-visual texts is structured by those texts, and that this meaning is socially and culturally situated. Therefore, the analysis of audio-visual depictions of violence against women needs to examine how textual mechanisms encourage certain interpretations of that violence. Reception research then needs to assess whether these claims hold up to empirical investigation and whether and why different viewers are at all inclined to read the violence differently. Through these combined methods of analysis it can be examined how audio-visual texts might contribute to the various ways of understanding the phenomenon of violence against women.

Given so few precedents for the combining of textual and audience research, this chapter considers how these two fields have developed in recent years. It is outlined how some text based theories fail to acknowledge the interactive and complex nature of the text-audience relationship. Even when it is appreciated that viewers play a constructive role in the reading of the text, theorists are unable to appreciate that their analysis of how a text reads is, and only can be, a partial analysis. Rarely do such researchers 'acknowledge the limits of her/his research regarding readers and spectators' (Staiger, 1989: 358).

The third part of the chapter examines recent trends in reception research. This assesses the ways in which audience reception has been examined and theorised and asserts that there has been a move away from any *critical* focus on the text in much of this research. The implications of this are discussed and the argument put forward that the combining of textual analyses and reception research would facilitate a return to textual criticism. This is particularly needed in the analysis of audio-visual representations of violence, which have tended to be ignored within recent reception theorising.

Violence in the Audio-Visual Media: Theoretical Concerns and Methods of Analysis

Effects Research

From the very early days of television broadcasting concern was expressed about its presentation of violent imagery (Gunter and Wober, 1988: 3). Similar worries have been expressed about the representation of violence in various forms of literature, comic books, the cinema and on video (Barker, 1993). Concerning television it is commonly thought possible that viewers might 'emulate the actions of aggressors or possibly feel themselves intimidated by some types of violence' (Cumberbatch *et al*, 1987: 18). However, as Cumberbatch states, the most commonly expressed view is

that 'mass media violence causes violence in society. Indeed this has been the most researched question in mass communications' (1989: 32). It is recognised that concerns about the effects of viewing representations of sex and violence usually include the assumption that those most likely to be affected are children and the lower classes (Barker, 1993; Jensen and Rosengren, 1990: 209; Kuhn, 1988). As Morley argues, such thinking represents 'a theory about what television does to other, more vulnerable people' (1989: 16) rather than those advocating the 'effects' thesis.

It is generally agreed that evidence supporting the claim that the viewing of violent portrayals can prompt aggressive behaviour remains inconclusive (Cumberbatch and Howitt, 1989; Gunter, 1993; Schlesinger *et al*, 1992: 3). The assumptions of this behaviourist model of communication - variously described as stimulus-response, hypodermic needle and magic bullet theories - involve highly simplistic and naive views of the relationship between media texts and their audiences. It fails to acknowledge that the context in which the violence is shown plays a crucial part in establishing whether it is actually worth imitating or not. Additionally, as Cumberbatch argues, there is a significant difference between learning from the media and putting that learning into action: 'We may learn how to rape, rob or murder from what we see in films or on television but the barriers to our performing these acts in everyday life are more motivational than knowledge based' (1989: 36). Therefore, how television messages are responded to has to be considered within the context of social and cultural forces beyond the text. Moreover, as Frenzel-Zagorska argues, the behaviourist tradition

treats the receiving individual as being influenced by the material received, rather than intellectually perceiving, understanding and interpreting it. In consequence it does not concentrate on the interaction between the recipient and the ... message (...) whereas ... insight into these processes should precede the investigation of effects or impact. (1988: 398)

Some effects researchers have conceived of the audience as involved in interpretative activity and not passively manipulated by media messages (see Curran, 1990: 146-50).

Objections have been made to the caricaturing of effects research through the hypodermic needle/magic bullet/stimulus response models (Curran, 1990; Gerbner, 1983; McLeod *et al*, 1991; Lang and Lang, 1983). Nevertheless, undeniably, there remains a popular belief that mass media representations of violence do cause violence in society. This indicates that research should be used to assist a wider discussion of exactly why portrayals of violence are found in the audio-visual media, what they might be socially and culturally representative of, and how audiences engage with and interpret these portrayals.

The Cultural Indicators Project

The Annenberg School of Communication's Cultural Indicators Project does not accept the view that mass media violence *causes* social violence. It argues that media representations of violence constitute a means of social control in that they 'vividly dramatise the preferred power relations and cultivate fear, dependence on authority, and the desire for security rather than social change' (White, 1983: 287). This type of concern has recently emerged in relation to the broadcasting of television crime reconstruction programmes. It has been argued that these could prompt an exaggerated fear of crime (Culf, 1994; Grade, 1989: 32-4; Sweeney, 1992), and encourage public support for the policies on law and order (Schlesinger and Tumber, 1993: 22).

The Cultural Indicators Project identifies how frequently certain forms of violent imagery appear in American fictional television programming. For example, its content analysis of character types most likely to be portrayed as perpetrators and victims of violence found that 'of the 20 most victimised groups (...), all but three are composed of women' (Gerbner *et al*, 1978: 191). It is argued that television's repeated portrayal of certain groups as victims represents a symbolic expression of their social impotence (Gerbner and Gross, 1976: 82). In terms of the audience, such symbolic imagery is theorised as cultivating social conceptions about 'who are the aggressors and who are

the victims' where 'there is a relationship between the roles of the violent and the victim. Both roles are there to be learned by viewers' (Gerbner *et al*, 1979: 180). The more heavily television is watched, the more vulnerable is the viewer to this learning (Gerbner and Gross, 1976).

The Cultural Indicators Project draws entirely on qualitative content analysis, it includes no empirical audience research. There is then considerable reason to be cautious of its arguments, especially when no distinction is made between the types of programmes in which violence is shown. In the analysis, violence in children's cartoons is weighed on the same scale as violence in realist drama and horror movies (Cumberbatch, 1989: 49). Another problem is that the research fails to examine mediations of violence in factual television. It is not assessed how these might affect perceptions of social and cultural power relations or whether their 'effects' are the same as those of fictional portrayals. Moreover, the issue of how viewers *interpret* violent portrayals is totally neglected. As Gunter argues, the method simply *assumes* a link between what is shown on television and how individuals understand the world around them, 'no evidence is presented to show whether or not "messages" identified through content analysis are actually perceived and learned by viewers' (1985: 33). Neither does it acknowledge that the material experiences of different audiences could affect their interpreting violent portrayals in different ways. The Cultural Indicators thesis is further flawed in that it 'abstract[s] the relationship of message content and individual perceptions from the historical, political, and economic conditions which influence both' (White, 1983: 288). It does not examine what connections there might be between social contexts and the types of violence shown on television. This is then, a purely text based theory, and a weak one given its quantitative methodology and lack of empirical substantiation.

Representations of Violence and Audience Response

Attempts have been made to assess how television viewers relate and respond to audio-visual portrayals of violence. As with the Cultural Indicators Project, Barrie Gunter's *Dimensions of Television Violence* (1985) concentrates on fictional representations of violence. This investigates 'the ways in which ordinary viewers perceptually differentiate and evaluate a wide range of different forms of violence extracted from current television drama output' (1985: vii). Grounded in social psychology it assesses how individual respondents' self-perceptions, social beliefs, attitudes toward aggression and personalities affect reactions to selected violent portrayals. The social and cultural meanings of violent representations are not examined in this research. Gunter, however, does find that '[a]s the proximity of the fictional setting of violence approached more closely to contemporary everyday reality, portrayals were perceived to be more violent and disturbing' (1985: 101); and that '[m]ale violence on a female victim was perceived as significantly more realistic, more frightening, more personally disturbing, and more likely to disturb other people than was a female character attacking a male victim. Scenes showing female victims were rated as less suitable for children, less exciting and less humorous' (1985: 121). However, as the data on which these findings are based were collected through quantitative questionnaires, Gunter is unable to explain in interpretative terms *why* respondents reacted as they did. Neither can the research identify how interviewees' social, cultural and material experiences affected their relationships to and interpretations of the violence. The research is even more problematic in that only excerpts of programmes were screened to respondents. Through this method 'scenes shown ... are ripped from the overall context in which they are normally viewed. Extracts ... are abstracted from the overall narrative and lose their original meaning' (MacGregor and Morrison, 1995: 143). Therefore, responses to such excerpts cannot be claimed to represent responses to the material as constructed and presented by broadcasters.

Generally, audience responses to violence on television are not investigated through an interpretative perspective. For example, Gunter and Wober's *Violence in Television: What the Viewers Think* assesses whether viewers believe there to be too much violence on television, whether they consider it harmful and how they feel it should be regulated. Whilst these questions are addressed in relation to both fictional and factual television programming, they are again researched through quantitative rather than qualitative methodologies.

Docherty's investigation of viewers' attitudes toward violence in television fiction, utilising both survey research and in-depth group discussions, does suggest an interpretative analysis of this issue. It is intended to establish 'how the meaning of assertions about violence on television are related to our opinions about violence in society' (Docherty, 1990: 10). Yet the study fails to provide any *elaborate* discussion of interviewee response. Little is revealed beyond the fact that viewers are far more concerned by portrayals of violence in realist drama than in escapist horror films. Docherty does not theorise to any significant extent why this is. It could have been considered what this reveals about viewers' relationships to different generic forms of programming and styles of presentation. Equally Docherty could have explored whether it is the actual violent image which offends viewers or the wider 'message' surrounding the violence. Neither is it theorised to any depth whether and how viewers' interpretations of realist and escapist presentations of violence make connections with their sense of social and cultural reality. On this point it is especially surprising that no attempt is made to analyse differences in response when white, Asian and Afro-Caribbean interviewees were all included in the study.

Using qualitative and quantitative methods of investigation, Schlesinger *et al* (1992) explore how women's social, cultural and material experiences affect interpretations of violence against women in both factual *and* fictional screen texts. In considering a range of programme genres the research is able to assess how textual form might

impact on the reception of violent portrayals. It also recognises the need to show these portrayals in their full narrative context.

This project takes the research enquiry beyond simplistic concerns about *reactions* to audio-visual representations of violence. It looks at 'how such portrayals are actually received and how the impact of televised violence upon women's conceptions of themselves - their gender identities - might be variously described' (Schlesinger *et al*, 1992: 3). It therefore recognises that any *effects* of the viewing of violent representations must depend on how representations of violence are read. Subtle differences in how different women engaged with the texts were found. Class, ethnicity and women's experience or non-experience of male violence all impacted on response.

There are some incongruities in Schlesinger *et al's* findings of how women interpret portrayals of violence. For example, whilst many interviewees argued that violence against women should not be portrayed for entertainment's sake, *all four texts* discussed in the research could be regarded as in some way produced for this purpose. Yet very few respondents argued that any of these should be censored. It also needs to be considered how these audio-visual texts may have promoted certain social and cultural assumptions of why women are vulnerable to male attack and in what contexts. It then needs to be assessed to what extent the women interviewees might have accepted these assumptions. This, however, requires a combination of both textual and reception analyses. Without textual research, reception can only be discussed in the context of the interviewees' lived experiences and not in relation to how texts might be presenting particular discursive mediations of violent events. However, theories of the text, as is illustrated below, generally make little concession to reception research.

Textual Analysis: Recent Trends and Arguments

Practitioners of textual research rarely reflect on their methods of investigation, nor explain why they adopt any one particular model of analysis over others (Stacey, 1993). Textual analysis is used to make all manner of claims about the 'meaning' of media communications. Yet unless supported by audience research such claims remain unsubstantiated speculation. As will be discussed below, reception theorists have gone to great lengths to demonstrate the fallibility of text-based theorising. However, because reacting against claims that meaning is immanent in texts, reception research often ignores the role which of textual signification plays in audience interpretation.

In-Depth Theories of the Text: Psychoanalysis and Ideology

The 1970s saw a great deal of textual theorising of the screen media and the messages they were assumed to communicate to audiences. Asserting some dominance in media analysis of this period was the approach often described as *Screen* theory. This argues that popular film, and especially Hollywood film, confers a capitalist ideological subjectivity on audiences. It was also argued from a feminist perspective that this ideology was a male-centred one (Mulvey, 1975). Central to this theorising is the notion that the dominant narrative form of Hollywood film constitutes an ideological discourse. Defining this form - structured through the posing of an initial narrative enigma which is resolved by the film's close - as that of the classic realist text, MacCabe theorises this as incorporating 'a hierarchy amongst the discourses which compose the text and this hierarchy is defined in terms of an empirical notion of truth' (1974: 8). He argues that as it is impossible for any discourse to objectively represent what is 'real' and 'truthful', that which purports to do so is ideology, and when audiences accept the validity of that representation they become a subject of that ideology.

It is further argued that as the mechanisms of production are not visible in the popular cinematic text, the audience is led to see film as a 'window on the world', and not a representation of that world (MacCabe, 1974: 9). Lacanian psychoanalysis was then used to explain why audiences gained pleasure from the cinematic experience.

Claiming that classic realist texts can neither deal with contradiction nor allow differing definitions of the 'real' or 'truth' to co-exist, MacCabe argues that filmic representation denies itself as 'language'. Thus, a link is made between the nature of the film text and Lacan's theory of the human psyche. Lacan argued that individuals continually deny their subjectivity in language, that which constitutes a 'pre-established world of rules, meanings and relationships into which we are born, and which structures interhuman reality' (Robins, 1979: 367). The person likes to believe, though this belief is constantly under threat of exposure, that they are in control of defining her/himself and their world. Film viewing is then theorised as pleasurable because 'the spectator enjoys a secure imaginary relationship to the film, a feeling bound up with the illusion of privileged control over and unmediated access to its fictional world' (Johnston, 1985: 247). Though this imaginary relationship is disrupted whenever a film shot is recognised as a mediated construction, the movement between shots re-establishes the viewer's illusion. This supposedly explains why audiences are attracted to the classic realist text and why they submit to and become the subject of its ideological discourse.

The notion that audiences are subject to a capitalist ideology of popular texts is not confined to theories of the cinema. This theoretical model is also used in the analysis of factual television programmes (Heath and Skirrow, 1977) and even realist drama (MacCabe, 1985). There are, however, considerable problems with this textual theory. Firstly, Althusserian and Lacanian theories are not put to the test in this form of media research. They are simply regarded as truthful accounts of the workings of ideology and the psyche. As Thompson argues, 'Marxism and psychoanalysis work from the top down, arriving at the artwork with a huge body of major assumptions already made

and proponents of such theories must in effect find an ontology and aesthetic of art to fit' (1988: 9). Also highly problematic is MacCabe's ahistorical formulation of the classic realist text. According to MacCabe, all classic realist texts promote the interests of the dominant ideology no matter when and where produced and irrespective of their content. For example, no distinction is made 'between a nineteenth-century novel and a Hollywood movie or between different groups of Hollywood films' (Woollacott, 1982: 107). Further, because of its ahistorical bent this model neglects to consider how different production contexts affect textual content and how the media *might* have potentially progressive 'effects' as well as regressive. As Robins argues:

there is no concept of social change, no estimation of how films might contribute to the process of social change. The cinema has no active role within the dynamics of class struggle. Emphasis is put, instead, on the way in which cinema interpellates and fixes individuals as the mere subjects of ideology, structures them as the 'bearers' of social relations. (1979: 362)

For many *Screen* theorists, however, it is impossible for a capitalist mode of production to provide space for the representation of social and political struggles. Only the avant-garde film text is capable of accommodating this role.

The most common criticism made of the theory of the classic realist text is that it regards audiences as passive subjects of ideological discourse. Because the theory relies on the conception of an ideal spectator, it fails to consider the 'reader as an empirical reality ... and constantly falls back into an abstract and essentialist position' (Robins, 1979: 363). Therefore, the approach is incapable of allowing the analyst to speculate on how different viewers might read texts in different ways and take different meanings from those texts. This is enhanced by psychoanalytic theories being based on universalistic criteria which render redundant any formulation of difference among audiences (Morley, 1989: 19). It is ironic that theorists advocating such universalism did not question why they were able to see film and television texts as mediated constructs when others evidently could not. But then, as Robins argues, the

perspective is one advocating the 'romanticism of the intellectual, the theorist '(1979: 358).

Theories of psychoanalysis and ideology are still very prominent in the analysis of audio-visual texts, with the former retaining a centrality within film studies (Stacey, 1993). However, theorists are now careful not to conflate the spectator/subject of the text with actual viewers (as Mayne notes though (1993: 107), some slippage does inevitably tend to occur here), or to make claims about how audiences are affected by their viewing. Further it is recognised that audiences play an active part in constructing a viewing position for themselves within the text, and that they need not adopt the position 'ideologically preferred' by the text. For example, Cormack states:

There is clearly in the text a preferred role for the viewer, a preferred subject position, but just as the viewer has to actively adopt that position (on the promise of pleasures which the film offers), so he or she can adopt some alternative. (1994: 25)

However, it is unclear how theorists can make claims about the successes a text might have in encouraging viewers to adopt a particular subject position, or how they can substantiate the argument regarding a 'preferred' position, *unless* they draw on reception research.¹

Psychoanalytic approaches to the analysis of texts are very difficult to combine with reception research. As Stacey notes 'Drawing on psychoanalysis, theories of cinema spectatorship have tended to privilege questions of unconscious processes, thus rendering "audience studies" irrelevant' (1993: 262). Ideological analyses do not suffer this blockage and there are critical advances to be gained from considering how audio-visual texts encourage certain interpretations of their content, and how these connect with ideologically motivated meaning systems. It is also important to consider how

¹ Obviously this causes a particular problem for historical textual analyses where it is not possible to conduct reception research.

these might be shaped by economic contexts of production, an issue of central concern to the original *Screen* theorists. Yet it also needs to be examined how audiences engage with these texts, and how their social, cultural and material experiences *combined* with their interpretation of textual content may produce certain ideological understandings of the way things are. As Kuhn argues 'the text is but a single element in a series of social relations of cultural production, all of which need to be taken into account in any work of representation' (1982: 14). Therefore consideration needs to be given to the communication process as a whole from the point of 'message' production right through to its reception.

Encoding/Decoding Theory

A view that audiences need not be subjects of textual determination was expressed in the encoding/decoding theory of communication. Developed at the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies by Stuart Hall, this theory set out to critically challenge uses and gratifications research (Morley 1989).

Uses and gratifications research is concerned with assessing the 'needs' which are gratified by media products. From this perspective:

the causes of media use are held to lie in social or psychological circumstances which are experienced as problems and the media are used for problem resolution (the meeting of needs), in matters such as information seeking, social contact, diversion, social learning and development. (McQuail, 1987: 234)

Here audiences actively select and interpret media material in such a way as to provide for the gratifications they seek. However, uses and gratifications research leans too heavily upon the individual psychological disposition to explain how media products are used and interpreted. There is no accounting for how the social and cultural experiences of viewers affect the use and interpretation of media texts. Even when these factors are considered (for example, Weibull, 1985), the approach remains

limited. It fails to explain *why*, and *with what social implications*, different viewers use and interpret media texts in different ways. In short, it fails to theorise how, and why, certain 'needs' which require gratification come into being in the first place.

Drawing on sociological and semiological theories, Hall argues that for any message to 'have an effect (however defined), or satisfy a "need" or be put to a "use", it must first be perceived as meaningful discourse and meaningfully decoded' (1973: 3). His concern is to assess how texts are encoded so as to produce 'meaning' through a system of signs. But it is appreciated that 'audience members are engaged in semiotic labour too. They bring their interpretative frameworks to bear on the message' (Moore, 1993: 17). Within the encoding/decoding model, neither the text nor the audience assert a deterministic power of meaning over the other: '[d]ecoding must be seen as a product of two determinations, the reader and the text, reducible to neither' (Wren-Lewis, 1983: 183).

Like MacCabe's theory of the classic realist text, Hall's encoding/decoding model conceives of texts as mediating dominant ideological discourses. However, drawing on Gramsci's concept of hegemony and Volosinov's theory of social semiotics, rather than a fixed Althusserian notion of ideology, Hall's model provides space for meaning to be ideologically contested (Moore, 1993: 18). Here, broadcasters reproduce dominant ideological discourses because they 'are linked with the defining elites not only by the institutional position of broadcasting itself as an "ideological apparatus" (...), but more intimately by the structure of *access* (i.e. the systematic "over-accessing" of elite personnel and "definitions of the situation" in television)' (Hall, 1973: 17, original emphasis). Yet as audiences need not be party to the discourses of the dominant ideology, this creates the potential for a lack of fit between the meaning encoded into a text and the decoding of that text. Those who share the same ideals and discourses as the dominant ideology will accept the 'preferred' encoded reading of the text. Degrees of difference in the discursive position of broadcasters and viewers

could, however, result in either negotiated or oppositional readings. Within this theory, whether a viewer adopts a preferred, negotiated or oppositional reading is dependent on their class position.

The encoding/decoding theory is one which implicitly calls for the combining of textual and reception analyses. These two fields become inseparable as:

Production and reception of the television message are, not ... identical, but they are related: they are differentiated moments within the totality formed by the communication process as a whole. (Hall, 1973: 3)

Indeed, attempts to use the model as a basis for both text and audience analysis (Brunsdon and Morley, 1978; Morley, 1980) were influential in stimulating an interest in media reception research in the 1980s.

The encoding/decoding model does, however, lack a sufficiently sophisticated understanding of the text-audience relationship. The notion of the 'preferred reading' assumes broadcasters *intend* their work to be interpreted according to the interests of the dominant ideology. This in turn implies an ideal spectator/subject of that ideology. Those who do not adopt the preferred reading are conceived of as exhibiting that ideology's lack of total 'effectivity' when they could instead be theorised as demonstrating the existence of different discursive interpretations (Wren-Lewis, 1983). Further, there is the issue of how a text's preferred reading can be identified. As Morley asks:

Is the preferred reading a property of the text per se? Or is it something that can be generated *from* the text (by a 'skilled reading'?) via certain specifiable procedures? Or is the preferred reading that reading which the analyst is predicting that most members of the audience will produce from the text? In short, is the preferred reading a property of the text, the analyst or the audience? (1981: 6, original emphasis)

It is evident, then, that textual research needs to assess the *range* of ways in which texts can be decoded. It should not make assertions about how texts *demand* to be read.

The encoding/decoding model also assumes that it is only class which impacts on the production and reception of texts. It fails to consider the possibility that other factors such as gender, ethnicity, age, group and institutional belonging might also affect reception.

The claim that media production will *always* reflect the interests of a ruling or dominant class is also somewhat problematic. The media could be considered an arena where a range of interests gain expression through the variety of types of production output and different audiences to which broadcasters need to appeal. This is not to say however that the media are egalitarian in approach. As Murdock argues:

[whilst] prime-time programming has to provide multiple points of pleasure for a socially differentiated audience, the formats it employs clearly operate to regulate the range of discourses and presentations called into play in important ways, preferring some whilst marginalizing or excluding others. As a consequence there are identities, experiences and forms of knowledge which are consistently pushed to or off the edge of the schedules. (1993: 83)

Yet it will not always be self evident 'whose' discourses are being preferred and how. Therefore, before moving to the question of how ideological meaning resides in texts, research needs to look at those textual mechanisms which make meaning production possible in the first place. This would entail, for example, considering how historical contexts of production, genre, plot and characterisation facilitate the reading and interpretation of texts. From these it can be examined how audiences might be prompted to make certain inferences about the causes, effects and outcomes of events depicted in those texts. Then, and only then, can it be assessed how the narrative offers ideologically encoded reading possibilities. But still the validity of the argument

needs to be supported by empirical reception research. In terms of the textual analysis side of such a project, cognitivist theories of the text offer some indications of how this can be approached.

Cognitivist Theories of the Text

Cognitivist textual theory has to date concentrated on the study of fiction film. Yet there seems no reason why it should not be applied to the analysis of other forms of audio-visual output. Grounded in cognitive psychology, the perspective theorises how texts' 'formal systems *cue* and *constrain* the viewer's construction of a story' by attempting to 'construct distinctions and historical contexts which suggest the most logically coherent range of conventionally permissible responses' to the text (Bordwell, 1985: 49, original emphasis). Essentially the concern is to identify how texts 'read'², and to account for the relationship between film form (in its many manifestations) and the perceptual activities called upon in viewing a film. For this reason cognitivist theorists are more interested in explaining 'those basic features of a film which can constitute it as an art' (Bordwell and Thompson, 1990: xiii) than they are in the discursive nature of film texts.

Cognitivist theory does present the case that texts need to be analysed from a variety of perspectives: in relation to their historical contexts, generic conventions, narrative structures, use of plot, characterisation and style of presentation. It also usefully

2 Although the term 'read' is used here it should be noted that Bordwell consciously avoids the use of this term because of its associations with 'interpretation'. He prefers to use the term 'viewing' as this 'does not require translation into verbal terms' (1985: 30). His aversion to the verbal stems from his primary concern with perceptual cognition. However, as is argued below, one of the problems with the cognitivist approach is that it fails to recognise the discursive and culturally bound nature of cognitive perception processing. It is actually quite impossible to present a theory of 'viewing' without that being a theory of 'reading'.

argues that the comprehension of a text requires reading narrated events according to notions of motivation and cause and effect. For example, in relation to motivation, it is noted that certain textual elements might be generically motivated (gun fights in a western), realistically motivated (plausible character traits), or compositionally motivated in that they add to the story (Bordwell, 1985: 36). How stories can then be explained depends on reading relations of cause and effect into the narrative. Bordwell *et al* identify '[c]haracter-centred - i.e., personal or psychological - causality [as] the armchair of the classical story' (1985: 13). Yet they also note that narrative causality can be impersonal, social, or determined by coincidence or chance (1985: 13). However, at this point cognitivist theory becomes somewhat inadequate for the researcher interested in theorising the discursive relations involved in conceptions of causality. Cognitivists are primarily interested in the aesthetics of narrative causality. However, as Branigan argues:

Narrative causes (...) are ... principles of explanation, or criteria for grouping elements, which are derived from cultural knowledge as well as physical laws: the human plans, goals, desires, and routines - realised in action sequences - which are encouraged, tolerated, or proscribed by a community. (1992: 116)

Representations of causality therefore should be assessed semiologically in terms of how they utilise, encourage or challenge forms of cultural knowledge and understanding. Analyses of portrayals of violence, as a case in point, would focus on how texts contain suggestions about how that violence was caused - whether it be by a character's personal psychology, by social factors or by some other factor. These can then be theorised in relation to cultural discourses on violence.

Cognitivist theory is in some ways compatible with reception research. From this perspective viewers read screen narratives through bottom-up and top-down perception processing. Bordwell states that 'both bottom-up and top-down processing are influential in that perceptual "conclusions" about the stimulus are drawn, often

inductively, on the basis of "premises" furnished by the data, by internalised rules, or by prior knowledge' (1985: 31). Involving, for example, the simple recognition of images, colour and depth of field, bottom-up perception would be of minimal interest to reception research as it is 'serial and "data-driven", and produces only short-range effects' (Branigan, 1992: 37). Top-down perception processing, however, is of concern to reception analysis being 'overtly based on assumptions, expectations and hypotheses' (Bordwell, 1985: 31) and, therefore, socially and culturally determined. As Bordwell states 'The spectator brings to the artwork expectations and hypotheses born of schemata, those in turn being derived from everyday experience, other artworks, and so forth' (1985: 32).

However, cognitivist theories of the text have not been carried over into reception analysis³, and though the perspective does have its merits, it also has its failings. Rather than researching empirical audiences, cognitivists focus on investigating the range of ways in which a *hypothetical viewer* could respond to a text (Bordwell, 1985: 30; Thompson, 1988: 30). Bordwell argues that 'we could undertake empirical investigations of how actual spectators construe particular films. While worthwhile, this enterprise would not necessarily lead to insights into how films encourage, sustain, block, or undercut specific viewing operations' (1985: 49). However, this has to be understood in the context of, and is certainly revealing of, cognitivists' belief in the dominance of the text in the text-audience relationship. As Staiger points out,

³ One could argue that Sonia Livingstone (1990) draws on a perspective similar to this, as her audience research does draw on theories of perception. However, her approach has primarily been to introduce media reception studies to social psychology and is somewhat restricted, therefore, in the ability to theorise reception in relation to cultural and discursive structures. Equally Birgitta Höijer (1992) draws on cognitivist theories in her reception research. However, she does not attempt to first assess how texts might encourage certain forms of reading strategy on the part of the audience. Instead, as with the case with many studies of the audience, she places the primary emphasis on analysing reception without theorising the specific question of what role the text might play in structuring that reception.

'Bordwell even suggests that films *prescribe appropriate cognitive activities for the spectator*' (1989: 357, emphasis added). Thus, it is evident that the 'viewer' in cognitivist theory is as much a textual construct as is the subject/spectator in 1970s *Screen* theorising. Even though the approach is supported by a constructivist theory of psychological activity it remains empirically unsubstantiated. Further, it is yet another theory which provides no account of how historically and culturally varied audiences might view films differently. It is a perspective which 'pursues something akin to the competent-reader approach' (Staiger, 1989: 357) and therefore assumes a general uniformity in how texts will be viewed.

This means that whilst we might attempt to assess how audio-visual texts can be read in certain ways, claims cannot be made about how texts *are* read. It is only legitimate to speculate on the *range of ways* it might be possible to interpret a text, and to relate these to particular discursive forms of knowledge. It then becomes the task of reception research to describe and explain how and why audiences choose one reading over another (or even one the textual analyst has not identified), and why they find that one the most culturally intelligible and acceptable reading in relation to their cultural, social and material experiences.

Reception researchers have been extensively concerned with examining how the social, cultural and material experiences of viewers affect the meaning which they take from texts. In terms of cognitivist theory then, those researchers have been investigating the 'top-down perception processing' of texts. However, due to a considerable scepticism of textual research, reception theorists generally do not attempt to first investigate how texts might, through a variety of conventions and narrative strategies, invite certain interpretative approaches to their content, and *then* assess how audiences do read texts. Recent reception research has provided significant insights into how audiences interact with the audio-visual media. However, as is argued below, for reception research to make a useful critical contribution to the understanding of how media texts are involved

in the circulation of discourses in society, it has to turn to the specific question of the relationship between textual signification and viewer interpretation.

Reception Analysis: a Critical Overview of Recent Trends

Reception research has, in recent years, progressed along two lines of inquiry: that of assessing relationships between factual television programming and public knowledge; and that of looking at audiences' tastes and viewing pleasures in relation to popular fiction programming (Corner, 1991). This division in reception research reveals an assumption that different textual forms involve different types of reception. It implies that any pleasures involved in viewing factual programmes play little part in how these are received, and that fiction programming contributes little to the audience's understanding of the public sphere.

Audiences and Factual Programming

David Morley's *The 'Nationwide' Audience* (1980) is often cited as representing a highly important turn in British media theory (Ang, 1989; Corner, 1991; Jordin and Brunt, 1988; Moores, 1993). This publication is significant on two counts. First, it challenges the theory that the spectator inscribed in the text and real audiences are one and the same thing. Secondly, it establishes a model for the investigation of how audiences' social and cultural positionings impact on the reception of texts.

The research involved the textual analysis of two editions of the early evening news programme *Nationwide* (Brunsdon and Morley, 1978), and a reception study conducted through group interviews (Morley, 1980). Theoretically the work follows Hall's model of encoding and decoding.

Brunsdon and Morley's textual analysis seeks to expose the dominant ideological discourse inscribed within *Nationwide*. They conclude that the programme:

relies on an ideology of television as a medium which allows a 'direct perception of the world', and provides an immediate 'direct link with experience'. The programme's own production work is rendered invisible. (1978: 87)

Although this contains arguments similar to those of deterministic theories of the text, in the encoding-decoding model the viewer is not *compelled* to adopt the text's dominant ideological reading. However, as has been detailed, the model's reliance on the notion of the preferred reading is highly problematic. This had not been recognised when the *Nationwide* project was embarked on. Indeed, it was primarily this research which highlighted the inadequacies of Hall's model.

Having identified how *Nationwide* was encoded, Morley examined how 28 selected groups of viewers decoded the programme. From the responses it was found that, *contrary* to Hall's theory:

Social position in no way directly correlates with decodings - the apprentice groups, the trade union/shop steward groups and the black groups all share a common class position, but their decodings are inflected in different directions by the influence of the discourses and institutions in which they are situated. (1980: 137)

It would have been valuable had Morley examined those other 'discourses and institutions' affecting the decodings. However, so strongly was the analysis tied to the notion of an encoded preferred reading and 'questions of class, ideology and power, where social structures are conceived as also the social foundations of language, consciousness and meaning' (Morley, 1980: 20), that the analytical scope was intrinsically limited. The problem lay in the supposition that social and discursive structures could be equated with the single phenomenon of class. This fails to appreciate that within and across class groupings there exist other groups whose discursive relationships to each other vary. Hypothesising that class alone determined

decoding practices, Morley's analysis was misguided by 'a case of the over-emphasis of one structural factor at the expense of all others' (Morley, 1981: 8).

Also concentrating on aspects of encoding and decoding, but unusually including observations on the pleasure derived from news viewing, is the work of Lewis (1985). In an adaptation of Hall's encoding/decoding model (see Wren-Lewis, 1983), he assesses the relationship between the narrative structure and viewers' reading of Independent Television's *News at Ten*. This approach acknowledges that how texts are formally constructed affects viewers' ability to comprehend them. The research details cases of respondents not able to make any sense out of certain news items. On other occasions meanings were found in news reports which Lewis believes were not intended by the programme makers. It is claimed that these findings reflect the fact that news reporting poses questions about events, but fails to provide answers to these questions. News narratives are always, therefore, incomplete narratives. Thus, it is theorised that television news viewing provides little pleasure for viewers - 'a denial of pleasure that few other programmes would risk' (Lewis, 1985: 218).

Throughout Lewis's discussion of the production and reception of news programming is the implicit notion of a preferred reading of the news items.⁴ This is illustrated in his suggesting how news programmes could be better encoded so as to produce more accurate audience decodings. Additionally, as though it were of no relevance, no demographic information is provided concerning the 54 respondents who participated

4 Jensen has argued that this notion still remains strong in reception studies. He states that 'although the studies of decoding (...) have outlined various combinatory approaches to content as well as audiences, some notion of a preferred reading tends to remain the basis of concrete analysis' (1986: 138).

in this research.⁵ Therefore, Lewis omits any discussion of how decoding is affected by viewers' social and cultural experiences.

Dahlgren, like Lewis, attempts to introduce a theory of 'reading' to audience research in assessing how levels of comprehension and recall affect news reception. However, his unique attempt to 'establish a typology of how viewers may attend to TV news programmes [which is] ... intended to be of relevance to all genres of programming' (1985: 244) focuses not on textual encoding, but the 'epistemic bias' of television and cognitive factors affecting viewer reception. Dahlgren developed a theory of three modes of reception designed 'to be of heuristic use in organising ethnographic studies' (1985: 245) after testing his own and other researchers' comprehension and recall of news items. These were found to be 'surprisingly low'. The modes: the 'archival', 'associational' and 'subliminal', all cognitive in nature, relate to how viewers attend to news items. 'Archival' reception is described as that which takes information for storage; 'associational' that which connects with some prior experience; and 'subliminal' that which connects with the unconscious through 'the realm of the mythic, of archetypes, of dream' (1985: 245).

Dahlgren's reception theory might assist an understanding of the cognitive activities involved in watching television. However, neither Dahlgren nor any other researcher has produced empirical evidence to support the reliability of this approach. What is also lacking in this perspective is any suggestion of what viewers might do with received messages - how they are used and incorporated into the everyday lives of the audience.

5 The reasoning for this would appear to stem from Lewis's argument that selecting research interviewees according to certain demographic variables presupposes that such variables are influential in interpretation (see Wren-Lewis, 1983).

Jensen offers both a comprehensive theorising of the relationship between the news text and the audience and one supported by empirical research, although this is based on a very limited sample of two groups of male respondents. This details attitudes to and uses of public service and commercial American news programmes.

Jensen's two interview groups differed in that one consisted of university professors and another of employees working in university service positions. Some respondents in both groups were from the same class. What distinguished the groups was that the university professors' work was 'centrally concerned with gathering and assessing information for various research purposes in their daily work' (1986: 152). This was supposedly not the case for those respondents in the second group; although included in this group was a PhD student and five university graduates. In this respect both groups can be described as middle-class, but of differing positions within that class. Differences in attitude between the respondents, who were individually interviewed, were not significantly great. Indeed, of interest was the commonality of response, a feature which Jensen found disturbing when:

as an account of social and political reality, the respondents tend to accept the television news genre as credible and relevant, or legitimate. No basic criticism is directed at the news as a form of knowledge, at its current patterns of selection or at its presentational features. (1986: 295)

This Jensen links to the perpetuation of a social and political hegemony, and one in which viewers are implicated due to their acceptance of 'news' as defined by its generic conventions. It is noted, however, that respondents held a certain uneasiness toward news communications, this being articulated through a dissatisfaction with the media's ability to provide sufficient information about social and political events and their ramifications.

What is significant about Jensen's research is how it is used not simply as a means of demonstrating how audiences make sense of television programmes, but as a means of

reaching 'an understanding and critique of the social functions of communication' (1986: 298). The intentions are to identify how the media might be involved in contributing to and framing public knowledge of 'reality'. However, there are problems with the basis of the study's conclusions. The research draws on a very limited sample of 24 respondents which included neither women nor any explicit class sampling. Further, no details of the racial background of respondents are given. The ability to generalise about the social functions of news from this - particularly gender biased - sample has then to be questioned.

A different approach to the analysis of factual programming is taken by Corner, Richardson and Fenton (1990). This contrasts with other analyses through its investigation of how mediations of one specific public issue are responded to by television viewers. The authors explore responses to four programmes featuring the subject of nuclear energy. Two of these were produced for video distribution: a promotional videotape for the Central Electricity Generating Board and a 'video journal' distributed to trade union and labour organisations which included a report on the dangers of nuclear energy. The two other programmes consisted of a television documentary focussing on the health risks of nuclear energy, and a current affairs programme assessing debates on the use of nuclear fuels.

Corner *et al* conducted in-depth textual analyses of these four programmes to assess their framing and presentation of the nuclear energy issue. It is concluded that:

The wide range of variation and conflict in approach between these programmes is both substantive and discursive. Substantively, although there is some shared ground on the kind of 'knowledge' which constitutes the parameters of the nuclear debate, conflict about the status and meaning of that 'knowledge' is very apparent. Discursively, too, the approaches are very different, both at the level of general rhetorical strategies not unique to television as a medium, and in relation to the specific conventions of audio-visual discourse. (1990: 45)

These programmes are, then, substantively situated within a social and political reality outside television. This being the case, the authors expected audience responses to the programmes to vary, those being also affected by social and political discourses beyond television.

Corner *et al* recruited a range of diverse groups for their reception research. These included members of the mainstream political parties, members of the Rotary Club, Friends of the Earth and women's organisations, school pupils, medical and other students from a university, unemployed people and individuals working in the nuclear energy industry. Responses were then assessed according to the criteria of how the programmes were both understood and evaluated. Rightly, these two factors of reception are analytically distinguished because it is:

entirely possible for viewers to agree as to how to understand an item but to disagree in their responses to it. Less obviously, it is also possible for viewers to appear to share a response yet (...) to hold different basic understandings of what they have seen and heard. (1990: 50)

This research therefore examines how *frames of understanding* affect the evaluative response to texts. It finds four framing criteria prevalent in interviewees' reactions to the programmes: a 'civic' frame affecting beliefs about how the issue of nuclear energy should be mediated; a political frame; a personal frame; and an 'evidential' frame relating to evidence and arguments put forward in the programmes.

The responses gained by Corner *et al* reveal how the reception of texts can be affected by a wide range of factors. Political affiliation, occupation or the lack of formal occupation, professional and academic interests and personal feelings all figured in how the programmes and nuclear energy were responded to. Missing from the analysis is discussion of race and any explicit reference to class. Even without such discursive influences being accounted for, the research demonstrates that reactions to the programmes on nuclear energy were as much reactions to the social and political

discourses which surround that issue, as they were reactions to its televisual mediation. However, of significance is that the dominating force in response to the programmes was:

the extensive presence in viewer's accounts of the 'civic' frame, a frame which strenuously, and sometimes with great difficulty, seeks for overall 'fairness' above the weighted presentation of even a preferred viewpoint. Such a sought 'fairness' is massively problematized by its inter-articulation with ideas of balance and (more so) of truth, but it is the single most powerful regulator of interpretative assessments we found and it frequently provides the parameters within which a critical scrutiny of form is carried out by the viewer. (1990: 107, original emphasis)

This indicates an extensive critical awareness of the media's limited ability to communicate the full context of social and political issues on the part of viewers. It demonstrates how audiences, far from being duped by audio-visual representations, can take issue with such representations.⁶ Having focused on one specific topic within a factual programming context, Corner *et al* thereby illustrate that reception processes involved in the viewing of factual television texts are firmly embedded in, and are not autonomous from, concerns beyond the media.

As is evident, news and current affairs programming is of interest to reception researchers due to its disseminating information of social and political significance. Reception studies of such programming will often feature *critical* textual analyses because research is concerned with how texts affect audience understanding and knowledge of the public sphere. However, in the analysis of fiction programming textual criticism has all but disappeared and been replaced by an emphasis on celebrating popular programming and the freedom of audiences' ability to produce their own interpretations of these texts.

⁶ This is also confirmed in the findings of Roscoe *et al* (1995).

Audiences and Fictional Programming

Reception research into fictional programming has focused extensively on the soap opera genre.⁷ It is for this reason that much of the following discussion centres on reception analyses of this genre. Feminist researchers have been particularly interested in conducting audience analyses of soap opera due to the form's ability to attract high numbers of women viewers (Tasker, 1991). Although much of this research does make some attempt to theorise the relationship between texts and audiences, rarely does it include any close *critical* analysis of the text. In most cases it is primarily the generic form of the text and the pleasures which *women* derive from that form which are of interest and not the specifics of the material mediated within individual programmes. This has led to some highly generalised conclusions being drawn about reception where questions of the relationship between textual *signification* and interpretation are ignored, being displaced by questions of viewing pleasures, with these being theoretically conceived of as somehow progressive, radical and 'empowering' for audiences.

The Pleasures of Viewing Soap Opera

Reception studies of soap opera have been heavily influenced by Janice Radway's 'ethnographic' research into women's reading of romance novels (1987). Examining the relationship between the content of romance novels and women's reading, Radway found an investment of 'guilty pleasure' in this activity as it takes women away from tending to the needs of their family and home. Radway argues that romance novels provide the opportunity to indulge in feminine emotions and values which are censored and denied in patriarchal culture.

⁷ See Allen (1989) for a detailed criticism of the use of the term 'soap opera' in reception analyses.

Radway's study of women's reading of romance novels provides a detailed account of the 'meanings' women find in these texts. The research also offers its own detailed textual analysis of romance novels, an analysis developed out of the reception findings.

As Palmer states, this work is therefore able to:

construct a speculative model of the elements of our culture which are responsible for women seeking the forms of satisfaction that they do in such texts; the model in question is a feminist analysis of female gender roles in a patriarchal society. (1991: 32)

However, Radway admits that what she cannot reveal is:

what practical effects the repetitive reading of romances has on the way women behave after they have closed their books and returned to their normal, ordinary round of daily activities. (1987: 217)

Therefore, as Curran asserts, Radway 'offers an account of romance addicts' relationship to patriarchy but not to their flesh and blood husbands' (1990: 154). Indeed, this is a major weakness in much reception theorising: it does not attempt to assess how media texts might offer 'images and frameworks for everyday understanding, through which we subsequently interpret other social texts' (Livingstone, 1990: 28).

In many respects Ang's analysis of the pleasures involved in watching *Dallas* draws identical conclusions to those of Radway's research and duplicates some of the failings of that work. Ang claims that the pleasures women derive from watching *Dallas* relate to feelings of 'powerlessness' and 'unease'. It is argued that these feelings are given a valuable vehicle of expression through a 'tragic structure of feeling' articulated through and within the programme. This feeling is defined as:

the expression of a refusal, or inability, to accept insignificant everyday life as banal and meaningless, and is born of a vague inarticulate dissatisfaction with the here and now. (1985: 79)

According to Ang, in giving this 'tragic structure of feeling' freedom to express itself through identification with characters dominated by that same feeling, viewers will find pleasure in *Dallas*. However she argues that this pleasure is only achieved by viewers 'for whom a tragic look into daily life is in principle logical and meaningful' (1985: 61). It would appear that for those not sensitive to a tragic structure of feeling - which is evoked by *Dallas* through a 'combination of melodramatic elements and the narrative structure' (1985: 78) - the only alternative means of gaining pleasure from the programme is through adopting an ironical stance and turning it into parody. However, where Ang discusses respondents dismissive of any pleasure evoked by *Dallas*, they are accused of adopting the superior attitude of an ideology of mass culture. Additionally, some respondents remarked on how they disliked the programme's portrayal of women, others described it as idealising wealth. Yet Ang fails to regard these responses as politically informed statements or legitimate responses to the programme. Instead they are [mis]appropriated as statements deriving from the ideology of mass culture.

Ang does appreciate a need to ask '*what implications* the sentimental pleasure of identification with the tragic structure of feeling has for the way in which women make sense of and evaluate their position in society' (1985: 133, original emphasis). However, she does not go any way toward answering this. Instead, she separates the reception processing of *Dallas* from the reality of everyday life by placing the former within a world of fantasy. Thus, she avoids making any criticisms of *Dallas* and allows her research to inhabit a populist position.

There are major inadequacies with the empirical evidence upon which writers have based their conclusions of audiences' reception of soap operas. Ang is no exception to this. Her theory of the pleasure involved in the viewing of *Dallas* is based on only 42 letters gained in response to an advertisement placed in a Dutch women's magazine. It is stated that the letters varied in length from 'a few lines to around ten pages' (1985:

10). However, it is not revealed which letters, from which respondents - fans of *Dallas* or otherwise, consisted of how much material. Additionally, it needs to be asked why the respondents were disposed to write such letters. Apart from that fact that three of the 42 were male, Ang can provide little evidence about the backgrounds and motivations of these writers.

These criticisms of Ang's work could be refuted given that other reception studies of soap opera draw similar conclusions concerning the nature of the viewing pleasures which women derive from soap operas. Hobson's research into women's engagement with *Crossroads* concludes that soap operas are:

precisely a way of understanding and coping with problems which are recognised as 'shared' by other women, both in the programme and 'real life'. Differences in class or material possessions seem to transcend [sic] in the realisation that there are problems in everyday life which are common to all women and their families. (1982: 131)

As with Radway and Ang, Hobson fails to assess whether and how the reception of a soap has any bearing on how viewers negotiate their everyday situations and relationships with others. For example, how does *Crossroads* specifically help women to understand and cope with their problems beyond facilitating an identification with a shared female experience? However, reception theorists have been more interested in recouping a culturally denigrated 'women's' genre and legitimising the pleasures audiences found within it and then claiming these as representative of a 'feminist cultural politics', than they have been in answering this form of question.

Audiences and the Content of Soap Opera Texts

Most work on soap opera tries to build a *general* theory around the reception of such programmes. It relies entirely on an analysis of viewing pleasures, and explains the relationship which audiences have with programmes only in terms of these pleasures.

Researchers do not often explore how different viewers' social, cultural and material experiences affect their interpretation of the specific content of soap texts and its signification.

In fact Seiter *et al* do not consider soap opera a genre which can be deconstructed in an assessment of how textual coding might affect interpretation. Instead, they argue for an approach which allows:

for the determination of the text from the perspective of the viewer, who tends to discuss soap opera narratives in terms of plotlines, rather than in terms of individual episodes. (1989: 232)

This asserts that if it can be understood how viewers perceive 'soap opera', this will sufficiently explain how they read the material contained within individual episodes. Yet this fails to recognise the diversity of programmes within the soap genre and, in doing so, represents an essentialising strategy.

A great deal is lost in presenting totalising theories of soap opera reception, as would be the case with respect to any genre. This is illustrated by the fact that so many analyses of soap opera audiences simply explain their pleasure and appeal through the acquiring of 'genre competence'. This is equally the case with Seiter *et al*'s study of soap opera viewers in Oregon. In this research it is stated that the soap opera text:

has considerable potential for reaching out into the real world of the viewers. It enables them to evaluate their own experiences as well as norms and values they lived by in terms of the relationship patterns and social blueprints the show presents. (1989: 236)

It would surely be pertinent to assess the reading of these 'relationship patterns and social blueprints' and consider how viewers make sense of them. In a similar vein, it has been stated that soap opera can provide 'an opportunity to engage in moral debate' (Buckingham, 1987: 171). The analysis of specific instances in which such debates

have been encouraged by the content of soap operas, and why this content was deemed to be an issue, have not, however, been forthcoming.

Soap Opera as a 'Gendered' Genre

As is evident from the descriptions of the pleasures found in viewing soaps, these are almost exclusively discussed in the context of women audiences. These analyses are more concerned with identifying what soap opera *represents* to viewers rather than addressing how those viewers interact with specific events portrayed in these programmes. David Buckingham's reception study of *EastEnders* (1987) is no exception to this. He does, however, include a broader constituency of audience members in his research (though this is limited due to his interest in young television viewers) than other theorists have. Among Buckingham's 60 young research participants were both male and female respondents of different class and ethnic backgrounds. It was found, in common with most other analyses of soap opera, that gender was the strongest determinant in response. Buckingham does state however that:

while *EastEnders* contained a number of elements which the boys claimed to enjoy, these were fairly limited in scope. Yet ... there may well be significant differences between what boys actually enjoy and what they are prepared to admit enjoying. (1987: 198)

Rightly Buckingham does not overplay the significance of this male response. However, elsewhere this has been used to theorise a clear difference between male and female programme preferences and, therefore, between male and female forms of viewing pleasure (Morley, 1986; Fiske, 1987). It is also argued that women have a special relationship to soap opera because it offers a basis for their interaction, a form of interaction *presumed* not to occur among men. For example, one of Hobson's interests in researching female viewers is:

the way in which soap operas, and indeed, television in general is discussed by women at their workplace and the way they bring the interest of the private sphere into the public domain. (1989: 160)

However, this needs to be considered in relation to what constitutes socially acceptable feminine and masculine discourses. That men, in contrast to women, are resistant to talk about soap opera could well be due to the genre's mediation of emotions and subject matters which are not *regarded* as masculine. But this is not to say that men might not find the emotional catharsis which women gain from soap opera elsewhere.⁸

There was throughout the 1980s a strong tendency to regard soap opera as a 'feminine' genre, the rationality of which has more recently been criticised (Allen, 1989; Tasker, 1991). However, this can be traced back to text-based theories asserting that the classic realist text represented patriarchal discourse (Mulvey, 1975), and that the continuous serial represented a woman-centred narrative featuring a feminine point of view and was expressive of feminine desire (Modleski, 1982). This led to some highly generalised claims about the relationship between genres and gendered reception (e.g. Fiske, 1987). These have to be understood as first influenced by textual theorising and then by feminist reception research which 'has tended to imply that only forms aimed at and focusing on women can be useful/interesting to women and/or feminism' (Tasker, 1991: 95). As Tasker states 'sustained work has yet to be undertaken on women's use of forms which have been defined as male, such as the action or horror film (or forms seen to have an absolutely exclusive address to men, such as pornography)' (1991: 95). On a more general level, however, there also remains a vast scope for research to

⁸ In an innovative paper O'Connor and Boyle theorise the similarities between soap opera and television sports texts. They argue that 'television sports coverage exhibits many of the melodramatic elements which characterise soap opera' (1993: 112). It is proposed that, like soap opera, television sports viewing encourages strong emotions and identifications with players; it has an open-ended text where 'the final score is only a temporary resolution' (1993: 113); and relies on conflict and drama to attract viewers. Yet one difference between the two genres is in it being more socially acceptable for men to talk about sport than about soap opera.

examine how women engage with a wide variety of audio-visual forms defined as neither male or female, and to compare such findings with how women engage with those forms which are *presumed* to incorporate a more feminine-centred address. Further, in order to consider how women's notions of their gender identity may be influenced by the media, or indeed reflected in media texts, researchers need to pay close attention to the way in which texts might 'signify' women, and how female audiences negotiate these representations. What also needs to be assessed to a greater degree is how women's different social, cultural and material experiences might affect their reading and interpretation of texts and representations of their gender in different ways.

Class and Reception

It is somewhat surprising how few reception studies of popular programming have attempted to examine how different audiences might read and interpret programmes differently. One significant lack of research is in the area of how class positioning might impact on how texts and their content are read. Indeed, since David Morley's *The 'Nationwide' Audience* researchers seemed to have shied away from this question. However, both Seiter *et al* and Press conclude that class position does affect the text-audience relationship.

Retaining a gender bias in her research, Press examines how American women of both working-class and middle-class origin judge the characters and content of several highly popular drama series such as *I Love Lucy* and *Alice*. Her findings claim a clear difference in the way women of different classes relate to and interpret programmes:

Working-class women are more likely to notice the middle-class material world which television depicts, and to judge this world to be representative of the real world. Middle-class women, in contrast, are

more likely to identify personally with television characters and their problems, particularly those related to the family and situated in a family context. (1989: 239)

Press's approach is 'intended to help refine the debate over the hegemonic functions of television entertainment' (1991: 9) through the analysis of how television drama series depict women's experiences in relation to work and the family. This could lead to preconceptions about the role which class positioning plays in reception processes (Ang and Hermes, 1991). However, Press's research does demonstrate that women cannot be studied as a homogeneous group. It is also valuable in that it seeks to critique politically 'television's unwillingness to confront, admit and address so many troublesome aspects of women's situation in society' (1991: 49). Therefore, unlike many reception theorists, Press at least attempts to confront fictional television content and audience reception from a critically concerned and evaluative perspective. She does not merely celebrate the interpretative activity of audiences, but analyses the ideological ramifications of how they process television content.

It is necessary, however, to remain cautious of Press's conclusions. It is claimed that:

working-class women are particularly vulnerable to television's presentation of the accoutrements of middle-class life as the definition of what is normal in our society.⁹ (1991: 138)

This contrasts with Seiter *et al*'s findings that:

the experience of working-class women clearly conflicts in substantial ways with the soap opera's representation of women's problems, problems some women identified as upper or middle-class. (1987: 241)

Press and Seiter *et al* were investigating responses to different programmes which might explain their contradictory findings. But this does illustrate that care must be

⁹ It is possible to speculate that Press's findings, which appear to reveal quite individualistic interpretations of television series, might reflect a particularly North American response.

taken in attempting to explain interpretative activity as a determinant effect of class positioning. It also suggests a need to examine reception *across a range of programming* before consistent claims can be made about how audiences' socio-demographic backgrounds affect reception.

Race and Reception

Whilst class has been given little attention by reception analysts, so too has race. Evidence does demonstrate, however, that racial background does indeed affect the reception and interpretation of audio-visual products.

Where race has been considered in media reception the texts featured in the research are often not taken from television (exceptions to this are Schlesinger *et al*, 1992; and Buckingham, 1987). This is indicative of the fact that when researchers have sought to explore how the media portray racial experience *beyond that of the white experience*, they are forced to look outside of mainstream television for their material. This is not to say that television does not portray racially diverse characters in its programmes. However, television does not often represent the specificity of racial experience within racially distinct communities. Instead this experience is portrayed through membership of white communities, of which characters of various racial backgrounds constitute a minority.

One representation of a black community screened in cinemas in recent years was Steven Spielberg's *The Color Purple*. Despite its box office popularity this film was the subject of extensive criticism in the American press and among black activist groups. Criticisms was particularly forthcoming from black male critics (Bobo, 1988). These were mostly directed at the allegedly stereotypical portrayal of black male sexuality and its oppression of women. Condemnation was also extended to the movie's representation of the black community as a whole. Alice Walker's novel on

which the film is based had not been denounced in this way. Indeed, many of the criticisms directed at Spielberg's film centred on his adaptation of the book for the cinema screen.¹⁰

Partly in response to the critical reception of *The Color Purple*, Bobo explores how black female viewers interpret the film. She argues that they use the movie as a means of positively identifying with the experience of the being black and female. This reading is placed within the context of a renaissance in black women's writing, which Bobo describes as 'the creation and maintenance of images of [b]lack women that are based upon [b]lack women's constructions, history and real life experiences' (1988: 93). Her research asserts that her respondents' identifications with women in *The Color Purple* are informed by the progressive attitudes found in black feminist writing and, therefore, by the development of black women's political consciousness. This enabled respondents to subvert what Bobo claims is the film's ideologically preferred white reading, and produce an oppositional reading supporting their own political understanding of what it is to be black and female.

Bobo's analysis is considerably weakened by the fact that it draws on Hall's model of encoding and decoding. Thus her argument concerning a white ideological discourse inscribed within *The Color Purple*, by which it is claimed that the film draws on familiar white cultural stereotypes of black people as savage and 'exotic primitive' in nature. However, as white viewers' interpretations of the film are not investigated, no evidence is provided that these audiences do read *The Color Purple* according to this white ideology. This is highly problematic given the nature of Bobo's theoretical arguments.

10 A comparison of Walker's original novel and its film adaptation is given in Stuart (1988).

In contrast to Bobo, Marie Gillespie (1989) offers a more extensive assessment of how racially distinct portrayals are received and interpreted by viewers. Gillespie's project is not, however, concerned with mainstream audio-visual products, but with those created for a particular (minority) ethnic audience. She was interested in the fact that 'Indian' video films are popular among young Asians living in the Southall area of London 'and yet various manifestations of resistance to its pleasures seemed to signify a great deal more than mere expressions of taste or preference' (1989: 226). This ambivalence toward 'Indian' films forms the focus of Gillespie's reception analysis.

Through interviews conducted with both young male and female Asians between the ages of 15 and 18, Gillespie constructs a typology of the context in which films on video are viewed:

The VCR is used predominantly at the weekend in most families. Viewing 'Indian' films on video is the principal, regular family leisure activity. Weekend family gatherings around the TV set is [sic] a social ritual repeated in many families. The VCR and TV screen become the focus and locus of interaction. Notions of togetherness and communality are stressed. (1989: 228)

Beyond the viewing context, the content of the films was not uncontroversial for Gillespie's interviewees. Although these portrayed a country of which they had little or no experience, respondents were quite capable of expressing opinions about their representation of India. Gender was found to markedly affect these interpretations:

Girls often express their perceptions of India through an exploration of the social and moral values inherent in the films via a 'retelling' of the narratives. In contrast boys seem to be much more concerned with representational issues, particularly 'negative images' and, in many cases, reject Hindu films *per se* on that basis. (1989: 231, original emphasis)

Gillespie argues that this male response is linked to boys' experiences of racism. It is explained that young male Asians are able to spend a greater amount of their leisure time outside of the family home than young females. As a consequence they encounter

more racism than the women. The male rejection of the films therefore constitutes a rejection of those images which depict Asian communities as different from white communities. Male interviewees believed that Indian films widen the cultural distance between themselves and white males of a similar age group.

Both Bobo and Gillespie's analyses demonstrate that viewers' racial identities play an important part in the reception processing of texts. This is so even when they resist identifying with the culture portrayed in media products. That there have been so few analyses of the effects of race on interpretation of televisual products, and particularly mainstream television programmes, is problematic for reception theorising. It results in media studies having very little notion of how viewers - other than white viewers - perceive mainstream television. Further, it promotes little awareness of how television programmes might affect self-perceptions of racial identity. The failure to examine reception in relation to racial background is particularly troubling given that television is viewed and used by a wide diversity of racial groups. In continually foregrounding white experience of television reception, researchers, are responsible for promoting an understanding of white culture over that of other racial groups.¹¹

Television in the Domestic Setting

As has been outlined above, reception analyses of popular programming have generally failed to link audience *interpretation* to specific questions of textual signification. This has resulted in an inability to answer the question 'What is the extent of the determination of meaning exercised by the text itself' (Allen, 1985: 185) and to explain how what is seen on television might affect the way viewers negotiate other 'social

¹¹ It should be recognised that the use of the term 'white' as a racial category is also problematic. To talk of 'white experience' and 'white culture' actually works to conceal many ethnic and cultural differences among white audiences.

texts'. The failure to address such questions has been compounded by theorists who propose that audience reception has to be understood in relation to the domestic context in which television is most commonly watched (Bausinger, 1984; Morley, 1986; Lull, 1990). John Corner argues that:

One of the problems which seems to follow from working within this perspective is that it then becomes difficult if not impossible to research around single text-viewer relations. Indeed, these become conceptually displaced by the more general relationship obtaining between television and home-life. (1991: 279)

Gillespie's analysis of the home viewing context and reception of 'Indian' video films has avoided this problem, though for the most part other researchers have not. However, most theorists working in this perspective are not pretending to even attempt a theorisation of the specific relationship between textual signification and interpretation. Indeed, Morley argues for the need to 'prioritise the understanding of the process of television (the activity itself) over the understanding of particular responses to the types of programme material' (1986: 41).

Research into the domestic viewing situation has added a dimension to the contextual understanding of reception. James Lull's observational studies of the use of television in the home have usefully shown how the television set is used not simply for viewing preferred programmes, but also as a site for power struggles among family members. For example, Lull found that 'television viewing (the programme decision making process or the viewing experience) provides incessant opportunities for argument, provoking possible dominance struggles among family members' (1990: 44). This approach therefore positions reception practices within a broad context of everyday settings as well of those of social relations. However, it is also important that sights are fixed firmly on the texts and the content of those texts with which viewers engage. As Moores argues 'these writings on power struggles in the private sphere can never completely replace research which attends closely to viewers' readings of a particular

text' (1993: 59). Moreover, a very particular problem of moving away from assessing the relationship between texts and viewer reception, *and* maintaining these as two distinct analytical categories is that, unless we 'retain/construct the analytical category of the television text ... we further inhibit the development of a useful television criticism and a television aesthetic' (Brunsdon, 1989: 126).

Concluding Remarks

The problems deriving from the fact that critical textual analyses and studies of the audience are often seen as incompatible disciplines has been illustrated throughout this chapter. Some researchers have recognised this, though mostly only those only who concentrate on reception in relation to factual television output. Indeed, one such example is Corner *et al* who state that:

just as programme analysis without a connection with viewer activity is severely limited in explanatory range, so is a reception study that is not connected back to a detailed engagement with the signifying forms of particular programmes and generic conventions. (1990: 2)

There is then a need to assess the relationship between textual *signification* and audience *interpretation*, and to use this as a means of developing a *critical* analysis of audio-visual products.

What is also lacking in combined textual and reception research is any detailed and sophisticated examination of audio-visual portrayals of violence. There is some immediacy in the need for such research given recent moves in Britain to prevent, for example, the cinema and/or video release of films deemed too violent for public consumption. These moves are based only on assumptions about the 'effects' of viewing, and not on empirical evidence relating to how audiences engage with and relate to screen violence. Research is required which can provide a critical account of such representations, and one supported by empirical investigations of the audience.

There are difficulties in combining textual analysis with studies of reception. However, provided that its belief in the primacy of the text, and its 'universalistic' terminology discarded, a cognitivist approach adapted to a cultural studies perspective does suggest a way forward here. This would entail exploring how the social and cultural contexts in which audio-visual texts are produced, and how the form, style and semiotic strategies of any given product might combine to foreground certain readings of that text. Reception research could then function to identify which readings viewers make of the text. In relation to the audio-visual portrayal of violence, at this point it can be assessed how the text may be contributing to, supporting or challenging certain discourses on violence, and how this affects the ways in which viewers negotiate the *possibility* of violence in their own lives. Indeed, it is these questions which are taken up in this thesis in its examination of how women interpret portrayals of violence committed against their gender, and how these interpretations might be linked to how the violence is 'coded' in the text.

The examination of reception needs to adopt not only a cross-textual approach as Corner *et al* (1990) and Biltereyst (1991) argue, but a broad cross-generic one as well. The distinctions between reception studies of factual and fictional programming are not particularly helpful (Gross, 1989: 131). There is a need to assess what pleasures audiences might find in the viewing of factual programmes, as well as how fictional programmes might contribute to forms of public knowledge. After all, as Schlesinger *et al* state:

Despite the firm line usually drawn between them, there are strong links between fiction and journalism. Contemporary fictions frequently draw on news events for plots while news stories are often presented like fictions. (1988: 72)

The fact that reception theorists have not examined fictional programming from this perspective is particularly surprising given that as far back as 1980 John Caughie was

discussing the more progressive stance of drama compared to that of news and current affairs. He claims that '[d]rama tests, and occasionally extends what it is possible not only to say, but also more perilously to show' (1985: 328). Although the context of this statement was related to 'serious drama', popular fiction programmes also dramatise story-lines which draw on immediate social and political concerns.

Given this call for cross-generic studies of reception, clearly there is a need to identify a focus for research of this kind. Corner *et al's* 'issue' based approach (1990) offers an indication of 'the way in' here. Although their project was confined to an examination of factual programming, there is no reason why this perspective cannot be carried across a broader range of generic forms. Indeed, Schlesinger *et al* (1992) aptly demonstrate the potential of just this. As noted above, that research did not involve a critical analysis of the texts containing portrayals of violence against women. However, in a continuation and development of that project, this research intends to provide that critical analysis along with a re-examination of respondents' reception of the texts in relation to this analysis.

The approach advocated here is a complex one. However, its accomplishment should at least go toward providing a more comprehensive theoretical appreciation of the relationship between audio-visual texts, audiences, social discourses and how all of these are connected to cultural practices beyond, but also at work within, the media.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGIES USED IN RESEARCHING THE MEDIATION AND RECEPTION OF PORTRAYALS OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Introduction

Chapter One presented the theoretical case for combining textual and reception analyses. Yet it was (first) only through the actual practice of conducting field research into women's reception of television and film texts that I clearly perceived a need to attend to the question of how audiences' reading of audio-visual products was affected by textual signification.

This field work had been conducted for the publication *Women Viewing Violence*. The aim of that project was to investigate 'What women *make* of the violence that they see in the media ... to try to probe what representations of violence against women *mean* in their lives' (Schlesinger *et al*, 1992: 3, original emphasis). In examining this the research had concentrated on assessing how the social, cultural and material experiences of fourteen different groups of women [n = 91] affected how they responded to the portrayal of violence against women in four different audio-visual texts. It did not consider how the texts themselves may have encouraged certain interpretations and understandings of that violence.

Having been with these women when they viewed and discussed the texts, it seemed to me that their responses were not only products of their social, cultural and personal backgrounds, but also of *how* the texts mediated the portrayals of violence. For example, the discomfort which these texts, at times, caused women to feel suggested that they induced reactions which the women themselves were not entirely able to

control. Women would also often suggest an understanding of the texts as intended to provoke particular interpretations, demonstrating that they believed that there was 'meaning' to be found in these texts which they had not simply constructed for themselves. Further, some of the women's readings seemed to reveal a careful and close engagement with the text as a signifying system, where they drew on its various signifying practices as a way of making sense of what was being represented. Therefore, whilst *Women Viewing Violence* upheld the notion that audiences take an active role in constructing meaning out of what they view, it did not consider how, and with what implications, interpretation may have been guided by the texts themselves. This resulted in a lack of theorising on how the texts might have promoted certain understandings of violence against women over others, and which discourses they drew on - either intentionally or unintentionally - in presenting this violence.

However, in this continuation of that earlier research, we are now in a position to address these questions by combining a textual analysis of the four audio-visual texts used in *Women Viewing Violence* with a reanalysis of the reception data collected in the course of that project.

In explaining how this second phase of the research has been conducted I first detail how the research team originally selected those texts portraying violence against women on which the reception study in *Women Viewing Violence* was based. I then detail how that reception study was conducted and elaborate on some of the difficulties encountered in carrying it out. This is then followed by explanations of how I have since gone about combining the textual analyses with an analysis of the women's readings of the four texts.

Background to the Research

Women Viewing Violence was commissioned by the Broadcasting Standards Council which sought to report on 'women's different attitudes to the media coverage of domestic violence, sexual violence, and to the portrayal of women generally' (Broadcasting Standards Council, 1990: 2). The only restriction which the BSC placed on this one year study, to which they allocated £38,000, was that it should include responses from both women with actual experience of male violence as well as those with no such experience. It was also requested that the research include the examination of not only television programmes, but a cinematic film as well. Beyond this the BSC left it up to the principal investigator, Professor Philip Schlesinger, the co-investigators Dr Rebecca Dobash and Dr Russell Dobash, and myself, who was recruited to the project as the Research Assistant, to decide how the project would be designed and conducted.

Preliminary Decisions Affecting Research Design

The first decision made when embarking on the *Women Viewing Violence* project concerned how responses to portrayals of violence would be collected. It was considered important to actually screen portrayals for the interviewees. To present the violence in its full narrative context meant showing complete programmes and/or films. The research team also wanted to investigate violent portrayals across a range of textual forms in order to gain a wider impression of how women might respond to various types of audio-visually represented violence.

Considering how to conduct the actual interviews, a semi-structured focus group interview approach was chosen. As MacGregor and Morrison state '[g]roup interviews have become a favoured method among scholars engaged in reception analysis' (1995: 141). However, there are those who object to this. Höijer argues that the effects of group dynamics on response are too great 'to permit taking the group discussion as a

valid basis for audiences' interpretations and reactions' (1990: 34). Some of the problems Buckingham (1991) encountered in his reception research could be taken as proof of just this argument. However, the use of focus groups can assist the understanding of how social interaction might affect the ways in which media messages are understood (Jordin and Brunt, 1988; Kitzinger, 1990).

There are also very good practical reasons for using group interviews. Focus groups are valued for their ability to encourage discussion among interviewees and generate a certain freedom of expression which might not occur in the more formal one-to-one individual interview (Merton *et al*, 1956). Further, as Hedges states:

talking together with other people is *stimulating*. There is more to react to, more food for thought, more diversity of opinion expressed than in a typical individual interview. This often helps people analyse their own attitudes, ideas, beliefs and behaviour more penetratingly and more vividly than they could easily do if just alone with the interviewer. (1985: 73)

Moreover, the focus group method was considered especially valuable in the context of interviewing women with experience of violence, where it might encourage them to feel more at ease knowing that they were with other women who had similar experiences.

In order to provide each interviewee with enough space to contribute to the discussions it was felt necessary to limit the group size to around six interviewees. The research team hoped to include in the region of 100 women in the reception study, a larger sample than is usual for such qualitative research. As time and resources were limited, however, each group could only be interviewed once. Wanting to make the most of this one meeting with the women, it was decided that the sessions would involve respondents spending one day - approximately seven to eight hours - participating in the research. Even so, this meant that only a very limited number of texts could be screened and discussed by each group. Having made these decisions, the research team then moved to consider which texts would be selected for the research.

The Selection of Texts

Choosing the texts to be used in *Women Viewing Violence* involved deciding which types of audio-visual products would be researched, and reflecting on the ethics of exposing interviewees participating in the reception study to portrayals of violence.

A number of criteria were applied to the selection of the texts. Although the study was concerned with examining portrayals of sexual and domestic violence against women, and whilst the BSC's remit is to monitor television broadcasting of sex and violence and standards of taste and decency, the research team did not wish to focus exclusively on violent portrayals which might be *readily recognisable* as potentially offensive and/or indecent. Rather there was a perceived need to examine how images of violence against women were routinely incorporated into a range of programme types across the television schedule, including both factual and fictional presentations, and to assess the extent to which women found these acceptable or unacceptable and what 'effects' they might have on different women. A second criterion placed on the selection of texts was that they should between them show different types of violence against women, in different contexts, and involve different types of female victims and male perpetrators.

The selection process then began with the researchers locating television programmes and films across a range of textual forms which contained images of violence against women. At this point it was also considered how the research might function to confront public concerns about certain forms of television and film, and how it could engage with and advance theoretical insights into women's reception of audio-visual products.

In identifying a factual representation of violence against women it was felt that the genre of crime reporting raised some interesting issues for research. Crime reconstruction programmes have become a regular and highly popular feature of television schedules. Yet concerns have been expressed that these could lead to a

heightened fear of crime and exaggerated notions of its prevalence. Such programmes often feature violent crimes against women and therefore could be considered exploiting these for audience ratings and potentially affecting perceptions of women's vulnerability to violent attack. There were, therefore, very good grounds to examine how women themselves felt about this. An edition of *Crimewatch UK* which featured a reconstruction and reporting of a sexual assault and murder of a young female hitchhiker was therefore selected as a possible candidate for the reception study.

As is detailed in Chapter One, there has been an extensive research interest in women's reception of soap opera. There has however been minimal input into examining how women negotiate, read and relate to specific story-lines included in this popular form of programming. It was of interest then to examine how women responded to the portrayal of male violence against a woman in a soap. The instance which particularly attracted our attention was *EastEnders* which in 1987, had, over a number of months, developed a story-line featuring a married couple of mixed race in which the white husband had battered his wife who was of Afro-Caribbean descent. An episode from the drama which dealt with the latter stages of this violent relationship was selected as a second programme which could be used in the research.

As soap opera deals with open-ended narratives it was felt that the research ought to examine a further fictional portrayal of domestic violence shown within the confines of a closed narrative. The research team also wanted to explore how women responded to a more graphic display of domestic violence than that shown in *EastEnders*. The television play *Closing Ranks* fitted these criteria in including the representation of a marital rape. Additionally, this drama portrays a policeman as the wife batterer and rapist, and thereby provided the opportunity to explore how interviewees responded to a figure of public authority being presented in this light.

As is detailed in *Women Viewing Violence*, the BSC asked that major film releases be included in the research as these are often featured in television schedules (Schlesinger *et al*, 1992: 22). It was suggested that a 'slasher' film might be used, such as *Friday the 13th* (Sean S. Cunningham, 1980). Examples from other film forms, such as in the body horror genre *Nightmare on Elm Street 4: The Dream Master* (Remy Harlin, 1988); in the art film category *Distant Voices, Still Lives* (Terence Davies, 1988) and *Blue Velvet* (David Lynch, 1987); in the thriller genre *The Hitcher* (Robert Harman, 1986); and in courtroom drama, *The Accused* (Jonathan Kaplan, 1989). Of these *Blue Velvet* contained the most graphic and potentially highly disturbing scenes of male violence ranging from rape to battery and including general denigration of women. This film therefore represented an obvious text for research. However, as a result of conducting some preliminary pilot studies, it was found that this film posed considerable problems for the reception study.

Pilot Research

Pilot studies were used as a means of helping judge which texts would be included in the reception study. These also helped assess how the focus group interviews should be conducted and provided indications of the length of time required for a full discussion of each text. They were additionally intended to provide myself, as the researcher who would be moderating the focus group discussions, with an insight into some of the difficulties which might be encountered in running these sessions.

Four groups of women participated in the pilot research; all were students of the University of Stirling with most being students of Film and Media Studies. The size of the groups ranged from between five and ten members, this being dependent on responses to an internal university advertisement inviting women to participate. The first group saw the episode of *EastEnders* and the television drama *Closing Ranks*, both of which included scenes of domestic violence. The second group watched the

edition of *Crimewatch UK* which reconstructed and reported on the events surrounding the sexual assault and murder of the young female hitchhiker. In addition, this group viewed the film *Distant Voices, Still Lives*, a further portrayal of domestic violence. The third group saw *A Nightmare on Elm Street 4: The Dream Master*. The fourth group viewed *Blue Velvet*.

The pilot studies revealed interesting differences in the responses to the various texts between how they elicited discussion of the actual representation of violence, and how interviewees related to and read these representations.

In response to *EastEnders*, *Closing Ranks* and *Crimewatch UK*, there was considerable discussion about the portrayals of violence against women in these programmes, and whether, and on what grounds these depictions were justified. This was not the case with *A Nightmare on Elm Street 4*, a film which was not taken at all seriously by the pilot group. When specifically asked to explain how they felt about its representations of violence against women, the pilot interviewees argued that these should not be distinguished from the film's portrayal of violence against young men.¹ In their view, the gender of the victims was not an issue, as both young men and women were the subject of similar forms of attack by the film's protagonist. Moreover, they considered this film as simply intended to entertain audiences through conventional horror motifs and the portrayed acts of violence contained little meaning beyond these motifs. The group further considered it intended for an adolescent audience, and was not a film which they would have necessarily chosen to watch. Given that the field research would be investigating responses from adult women, it therefore seemed sensible not to use this film, as responses would be gained from quite

¹ It is interesting to note that research into young people's relationship to television found responses similar to this when 19 young people were invited to discuss a portrayal of violence against a woman shown in the television series *Twin Peaks* (see Caughie, 1992: 21).

a different audience than it was marketed for. It was felt that reception research is most productive when it studies responses from viewers who are most likely to actually engage with the text. This view is similar to that subsequently propounded by Schrøder (1994) who argues that reception research should focus on studying those who actually consume certain cultural products, i.e. that product's 'interpretative community'.

Although it was not screened to them, the group who watched *Nightmare on Elm Street 4* were also asked to comment on *Friday the 13th*. The participating women were all familiar with this film. As with the former text, they rejected any suggestion that its depiction of violence against women was a reflection of, or likely to have any impact on, social attitudes towards women. Again they stressed the similarity in the acts of violence committed against both genders. Their view of this film as escapist entertainment does raise interesting questions concerning why violent imagery is considered acceptable when providing for such pleasures. However, when the research team viewed this film (none of us having seen it before) it was rejected as a candidate for the reception study as the final twist in the film's plot reveals the serial killer to be a woman. As stated, the explicit objective of the research was to examine portrayals of male violence against women.

The screening of *Distant Voices, Still Lives*, like *Nightmare on Elm Street 4*, raised questions as to whether it was appropriate to solicit responses to a text from interviewees who would be unlikely to watch this movie outside of the research setting. Even students of film and media participating in the pilot research found this art film difficult to understand because of its unconventional narrative style and the fact that its portrayal of domestic violence was set in the 1930s (Schlesinger *et al*, 1992: 20). Moreover, *Distant Voices, Still Lives* did not portray violence in anything like the graphic detail of other films available for research. Therefore, to have used it would

have missed an opportunity to explore more explicit portrayals of violence, and ones depicted in contemporary settings.

Blue Velvet raised a quite different problem for this research and one worth elaborating on here in light of criticisms of the decision not to use it in the reception analysis. When *Blue Velvet* was shown to the pilot group its violent imagery greatly upset two of the participants, one to the point of tears. Almost all of the group regarded the film as disturbing and tasteless, being particularly offended at how it portrayed violence against women. As Brunt has argued, such reactions do provide valuable insights into the 'effects' of women's viewing of the film. She believes that it is these effects which need to be studied along with 'whose definitions of acceptability and offensiveness predominate in the public sphere' (1994: 158). Whilst not disagreeing with this, the research team considered it highly questionable whether actually inducing women's distress by exposing them to disturbing representations could be ethically justified in the name of research. Of particular concern were the consequences of exposing women with experience of violence to this type of material, given that they could very well still be suffering the traumatic effects of those experiences. The researcher's believed that such ethical considerations could not be set aside, as Brunt seems to argue they should be. It was of paramount importance that taking part in the project should not have a detrimental effect on the well-being of interviewees. This view was very much informed by the extensive experiences of research into battered women brought by two members of the research team - Drs Rebecca and Russell Dobash. Therefore, it was decided that *Blue Velvet* could not be used.

After considerable thought the Hollywood film *The Accused* which includes a portrayal of gang rape was selected. This film's representation of rape is extremely graphic and potentially very disturbing. Promoted as confronting how a rape victim is treated by the judicial system, *The Accused* is also an entertainment film and raises interesting questions about the representation of rape in such a textual form. It was felt that

provided interviewees were warned about its explicit content, the screening of this film would not go beyond the bounds of what could ethically be shown.

Although four texts were selected for research, equal attention could not be given to all of these in the reception study. With each group interview being conducted in one day (7 - 8 hours), there was only time for the screening and discussion of three texts on each occasion. Therefore, it was decided that greater emphasis would be placed on gaining responses to *Crimewatch UK*, *EastEnders* and *The Accused*, and that *Closing Ranks* would be used on a more limited scale. This would then provide at least some indication of how its narrative composition might affect response to the portrayal of domestic violence as compared to that of *EastEnders*, and how interviewees responded to a policeman as a perpetrator of wife battery and rape. Emphasising the focus on the three former texts while still including the fourth also ensured gaining a greater number of responses to a wider range of types of violence against women.

As is stated above, since its publication *Women Viewing Violence* has been criticised for not concentrating on portrayals of violence against women in escapist entertainment and/or what feminists might regard as grossly offensive depictions of male violence against women (Brunt, 1994; Turnbull, 1993). Such criticisms seem to reflect a belief that it is these that the Broadcasting Standards Council should monitor in its remit to regulate the broadcasting of sex and violence and standards of taste and decency. But it equally reflects a belief that the texts finally selected for the research and their portrayals of violence against women exist quite apart from the escapist and/or offensive. This implies that certain representations of violence can be viewed as escapist entertainment or considered offensive, and that the depiction of violence in more realist texts, such as those selected for research, functions to quite different ends.

This was not an assumption made by the research team. Rather, our view was that the reception of portrayals of violence against women should be examined in a variety of

textual forms, so as to assess the possible range of meanings and impacts it might have for women audiences. However, it was perhaps because *Women Viewing Violence* did not address how the texts might have encouraged certain interpretations of the violence, and consider to what extent these were taken up by the reception study participants, that critics have been able to assume that these texts somehow portray violence to quite acceptable ends. Moreover, it could be that because at a manifest level all of the selected texts *seem* to imply some sympathy toward the issue of violence against women that questions have been posed about whether it is such examples which we need to concern ourselves with. However, as my own analysis of the four texts argues, there is a need to be cautious in believing that such evident sympathy explains why the violence was featured in the texts. This is specially so in a culture where it may not be in the dominant male interest to promote feminist discourses on why men commit acts of sexual and domestic violence against women.

The Reception Study: Design and Implementation

As has been stated above, one of the first criteria applied to the reception study of the texts portraying violence against women was that both women with experience of violence would be involved in the research as well as women with no experience of violence. Previous research has shown that when audiences have experienced situations which are mediated in audio-visual texts, this can have a direct impact on their interpretations of those texts (Richardson and Corner: 1986).

It is a matter of dispute as to whether it can be claimed that some women have never experienced male violence (for example, see Brunt, 1994), as some might classify violence in degrees starting from being treated as of lesser worth than men, to verbal denigration, sexual intimidation and harassment. Such forms of abuse may, in many cases, have as significant an impact and affect on women as physical violence, and there is clearly a fine line between mental and physical abuse. Yet this in turn raises the

question whether this unacceptably stretches the concept of 'violence' and makes it too all-embracing. For the purposes of the research it was felt particularly valuable to examine how experience of forms of *physical* violence, like those portrayed in the texts, could affect reactions to and interpretations of those texts. Selecting women along such lines therefore reduced the problem of definitional debate on what constitutes 'violence' in the recruitment of interviewees. This also facilitated the examination of how certain women felt about how television and film depicted the types of violence which *they* had been subjected to, and to compare their responses with those of women who had not suffered such physical violence. In doing this, however, we were not treating women with physical experience of violence as a control group paradigm as Brunt has argued (1994: 158). On the contrary, we at no time referred to nor implied the use of a control group as though some scientific experiment were being conducted. It was quite clearly recognised that 'women with experience of violence' included a variety of cases. Further, great care was taken not to represent these women as 'victims', which would have meant using negative connotations in their categorisation. However, no matter how groups of individuals are described, all terms of 'categorisation' are open to criticism. Therefore there are both costs and benefits to using such a method. The aim of the research was simply to provide different women with an opportunity to express how they felt about the ways male violence against women features in the audio-visual media.

The reception study was designed so as to take account of further differences among women beyond that of the experience - non experience of violence criteria. There was a possibility that nationality might also affect response. Therefore, it was felt necessary to conduct interviews in both Scotland and England. We then decided that groups would be differentiated according to working-class and middle-class backgrounds and according to ethnicity where responses from white, Asian and Afro-Caribbean women could be compared. Afro-Caribbean women were not to be interviewed in Scotland however. This was because only a very small percentage of the population in that

country is Afro-Caribbean and had they been included in the Scottish study this would have mis-represented the country's general populace. It would have also made recruitment extremely difficult.

As a limited number of groups could be interviewed, the class division in interviewee selection was only to be applied to white groups. Known likely difficulties in locating middle-class women with experience of violence also affected our decision not to try to recruit these women along class lines.² Most of the women with experience of violence who took part in the reception study were working-class, though some middle-class women with this experience did participate. All these factors resulted in the following groups being sought for the reception study:

In Scotland

Scottish white working-class women with no experience of violence

Scottish white middle-class women with no experience of violence

Scottish Asian women with no experience of violence

Scottish white women with experience of violence

Scottish white women with experience of violence³

Scottish Asian women with experience of violence

2 This is not because middle-class women are any less likely to experience male violence than working-class women. Rather, middle-class women are more unlikely to admit publicly to being victims of, especially, domestic violence, or seek help from victim support organisations such as Women's Aid which we used in recruiting women with experience of violence.

3 Two groups of white women with experience of violence were interviewed in both Scotland and England. This was because we wanted the same number of groups of women with experience of violence to participate in the research as women with no experience of violence.

In England

English white working-class women with no experience of violence

English white middle-class women with no experience of violence

English Asian women with no experience of violence

English Afro-Caribbean women with no experience of violence

English white women with experience of violence

English white women with experience of violence

English Asian women with experience of violence

English Afro-Caribbean women with experience of violence

The Recruitment of Interviewees

Recruiting women to take part in the research study involved a great deal of organisation and consultation with a variety of different agencies. Women with no experience of violence were recruited through a different means than those with experience of violence.

Women with no experience of violence

Women with no experience of violence were recruited through street interviews by the London based market research company Fusion Research. The Broadcasting Standards Council paid for the services of this company⁴, which was informed of the various criteria according to which each group should be recruited. They were also asked to select women from a broad age range. So as to eliminate any women who had experienced violence from these groups, during the street interview interviewees were asked to respond to cards identifying whether they had ever experienced forms of male physical violence (rape, assault, battery or incest). In order not to cause offence to

⁴ This payment was additional to the £38,000 grant for the research.

women who might have experienced such violent acts and who were not to be recruited, this card also included a range of other experiences women may have encountered (robbery, drunk driving charge, arrest, dog attack, sacking/redundancy)

Women interviewed by the street recruiters who fitted the selection criteria were asked if they would participate in a group discussion about television. Those who responded positively were told that this would address issues of violence on television, but also representations of women, men, family life and crime. It was essential not to make interviewees too sensitive to the aims of the research - though they were warned that taking part would involve viewing portrayals of violence.

Fusion Research took on the responsibility of ensuring that the correct number of women attended each group discussion, making efforts to recruit the targeted six interviewees. However, on three occasions in England only five women finally attended. Two of these groups consisted of white women and the third of Asian women.

The recruitment of Asian and Afro-Caribbean women with no experience of violence proved particularly difficult, as they were often reluctant to participate in the street interviews. This may well have been due to the fact that the female street recruiters were white. For the Scottish Asian group with no experience of violence it was necessary to recruit women who were all related to one another, though some of them only distantly. These women were wary about taking part in activities outside of their own community. Hence, they were only willing to participate if they could do so with other family members. Making up the numbers for the group of English Asian women with no experience of violence necessitated approaching Birmingham City Council who directed us to the Birmingham Indian Ladies Club. From there two further interviewees were located. In the recruitment of the group of English Afro-Caribbean

women with no experience of violence three women willing to attend were invited to bring a female friend or acquaintance with them.

Women with experience of violence

Recruiting women with experience necessitated contacting victim support organisations who might have been able to help locate such women in the numbers required for the research. The research team was very concerned about how women might be affected by viewing and discussing the portrayals of violence and therefore considered it necessary to consult with trained counsellors and project workers throughout the research process. In Scotland this was made considerably easier due to the fact that Drs Rebecca and Russell Dobash had a history of research involvement with Women's Aid groups. Therefore it was these groups which we approached in the first instance.

Because Women's Aid concentrates on supporting women with experience of domestic violence, we also approached Rape Crisis thinking that they might be able to provide contact with women who had been attacked by male strangers. However, Rape Crisis groups work on the basis of absolute anonymity and, as was explained to us, for them to have provided direct contact with rape victims would have breached that policy. It was therefore predominantly from Women's Aid groups that interviewees were recruited in Scotland. However, women from other victim support agencies and women's action groups with whom Women's Aid workers had close links did also participate in the group interviews.

In England the recruitment of women with experience of violence was more difficult as none of the research team held previously established contacts with organisations which might assist in recruitment. For this reason a greater degree of suspicion of the research for its seeking to interview women with experience of violence was encountered. Here women who eventually attended the group interviews came from a

broader range of organisations. These included Women's Aid groups, but also women's hostels, women's community groups and organisations specifically set up to help Asian and Afro-Caribbean women who experienced male violence.

The greater proportion of women with experience of violence who took part in the research had experienced domestic violence which included battery, rape, assault and incest. Some of these women had *also* suffered violence such as rape and assault committed against them by male strangers. A smaller proportion of the women interviewees had experiences of violence committed against them solely by men unknown to them.

As women with experience of violence were recruited through groups specifically created to help women who had suffered at the hands of men, it was likely that many of these women would have encountered feminist political discourses from within these organisations. It was appreciated that this could affect their attitudes toward the audio-visual texts in such a way as to further differentiate their responses from women with no experience of violence. However, it was a matter of research interest as to whether this was the case or not.

The Setting for the Focus Group Discussions

Given that the focus group interview method was to be used, this demanded that these interviews be conducted in locations able to accommodate the viewing and discussion of the selected texts. This ruled out conducting the field research in domestic settings. To do so would have been highly problematic given that many women with experience of violence might have still been living with men who had committed the violence against them. We also wished to use similar locations for all the group interviews and therefore intended that they be held in university rooms. However, this was not always possible as some women with experience of violence preferred to take part in the

research in environments already known to them. With the Scottish Asian women with experience of violence and one group of English white women with experience of violence, this resulted in the group interviews being conducted in community centres. The second group of English white women with experience of violence were interviewed in the headquarters of the local Women's Aid organisation. At all the interview locations comfortable seating and refreshments were provided as well as crèches organised for those women with children. All of the women who took part in the group discussions were paid a fee of £20.00. Any travel costs they incurred in travelling to and from the interview were also paid from the research budget.

The Interview Procedure

When interviewees arrived at the interview venue, they were introduced to each other, to a female technical assistant responsible for the audio-tape recording of the group discussions, and to myself as the moderator of the focus group discussion. They were then told about how the day's session would progress: that they would be watching two television programmes and one film (or three television programmes), and asked to discuss each after it had been screened. They were informed that these all contained portrayals of violence and that should they not wish to view these scenes there was no obligation for them to do so: they could move to adjoining accommodation if they wished where they would be tended to by the technical assistant and/or counsellors. They were also told of the various food and refreshment facilities being laid on. It was important to stress to each group that nothing extraordinary was being expected of them, and that the research was simply concerned with collecting their responses to and views of the material screened.

For the *Women Viewing Violence* reception study quantitative data was also gathered. This consisted of a lengthy personal questionnaire and questionnaires relating to the programmes/film. This quantitative data has not been drawn on in this second analysis

of the reception data. This is because the type of questions asked in the questionnaires related very specifically to the aims and objectives of the original study and reveal very little about how the interviewees went about reading and constructing interpretations of the texts. Additionally, the results of the quantitative research were presented and analysed in detail in *Women Viewing Violence*, and I do not wish to duplicate those findings here. Moreover, at this stage the primary concern has been to concentrate on the question of how qualitative approaches to the study of both texts and audiences can be combined.

The group discussions of each programme were guided by me acting as the moderator of the semi-structured interview. The interview approach was standardised throughout all of the focus groups and as far as possible across the discussion of all the television programmes and the film.

In all of the sessions the screening and discussion of the selected texts was conducted in the same order. *Crimewatch UK* was screened first. Responses were then sought to that before moving on to the screening and discussion of *EastEnders*. *The Accused* or *Closing Ranks* was screened last and after a break for lunch. Showing the programmes in this order was thought necessary as, had the more graphic portrayals of violence been shown first, then there might have been a carry-over of reaction to these in the discussion of the other programmes.

The discussion of each text was opened by inviting each individual group member to give an account of their general responses to that text. This provided an early impression of the perspectives through which the interviewees read and engaged with it. As the interview progressed, respondents were then asked to present their views on specific characters (or in the case of *Crimewatch*, the presenters and victims and perpetrators of crimes shown in the programme's reconstructions). The groups were then asked to explain how they understood and responded to particular scenes in the

programmes. With *Crimewatch* the main focus of interest was the reconstruction of the last hours of the young female hitchhiker's life before she was sexually assaulted and murdered. In the case of *EastEnders*, discussion was focused on those scenes showing the couple involved in the domestic violence, though scenes involving other story-lines were also discussed. In *Closing Ranks* it was also the scenes portraying the violent relationship which were concentrated on, but again, not exclusively. With *The Accused* it was scenes which included the film's main character, the rape victim, which were of particular interest, and particularly those leading up to and including her rape.

Although the focus group discussions were guided by the semi-structured interview, groups were generally given a free reign to frame the discussions according to their own agendas. At times respondents strayed well away from a focus on the texts which necessitated my pulling the discussion back to these. However, I was careful not to limit the range of discussion too much, as digressions often proved valuable in illustrating the very broad frames of reference which interviewees brought to their understanding of each text.

Difficulties Encountered in Conducting the Group Interviews

This research was designed to examine responses to a particularly sensitive subject matter. That women were required to view programmes containing portrayals of violence against women meant that many of them encountered material which they found unpleasant, upsetting and, in some cases, shocking. That half of the respondents had suffered violent acts of a sexual and/or domestic nature, frequently resulted in their memories of that violence being evoked by the research. Due to a variety of factors, then, taking part in this study was for many interviewees a difficult task. That this could be the case, as stated above, had been a major contributory factor in the decision to draw on focus group interviews in conducting the research.

Despite having attempted to gain an insight into some of the difficulties which the reception study might involve through pilot research, this actually provided very little indication of the problems that would arise. In retrospect there seemed a number of reasons for this. Firstly the students participating in the pilot studies were all quite familiar with group work having encountered this in the course of their studies, and were conscious of the need to allow each group member to contribute to the discussion. Therefore, few problems were experienced in either having to restrain pilot interviewees who might have tended toward domination of the discussion, or to persuade others of the need to express their opinions. Secondly the pilot groups viewed only either one or two texts, making the sessions considerably shorter than in the field where three were viewed. We were, then, unaware of just how demanding participation in the field research would be. Thirdly, as the pilot interviewees were not recruited according to any specific class or ethnic background, or whether they had experience of violence or not, no insights were offered as to how different groups would respond to and be affected by the research process. Finally, the students' reactions to the portrayals of violence were often less intense than those of the women in the field who tended to be far more disturbed by these. This was especially so in the case of *Closing Ranks* and *The Accused*, but also occasionally in the case of *EastEnders*. This could well have been because many of the students were studying film and media and were more inclined to an analytical interpretation of the texts. This therefore gives further credence to the decision not to include *Blue Velvet* in the reception study. Whilst some of the students were disturbed by this film, it seems highly probable that a great many of the women in the research groups would have been deeply distressed by it.

The first focus group interview conducted with Scottish white working-class women with no experience of violence provided an indication of how group dynamics could affect the reception research. There, two women tried to dominate the group discussions, resulting in several other respondents finding it difficult to present their

opinions. A strategy was therefore developed which would prevent domination of the interview by some members and withdrawal on the part of others. This consisted of laying down ground rules at the outset of the interview explaining the importance of every respondent being given the chance to respond to questions and express their views. It was also suggested that initially interviewees should take it in turn to respond. This meant that if any member did tend toward domination, it was easy to remind her of the arrangements established at the outset of the day. This strategy worked well with all groups. It additionally controlled the discussions in such a way that most usually only one interviewee spoke at a time. This served to make the later transcription of the interviews a somewhat easier task.

Interviewing Women with Experience of Violence

For many women, taking part in this research was a traumatic and emotional experience - especially for those who had suffered violence of a sexual and/or domestic nature. These women were informed that whilst they were recruited for the research because of their experiences, at no time would they be *asked* to divulge details about these in the interview. Many women did in fact discuss their experiences in relation to the audio-visual texts. Such discussion was initiated by the respondents themselves and not by questions put to them.

Many women with experience of violence did not find it easy to watch the programmes/film because of the violence contained in them. Consequently, on several occasions, situations arose where women were in tears or numbed by the arousal of memories of the violence which they had experienced. When interviewees became upset their involvement in the discussion was maintained and they were not marginalised. Indeed, enabling respondents to explain why they were crying or finding the discussion difficult served as a means of helping them to express their emotional reactions to the programmes. It was not always easy for women to explain these, yet

patience and sympathetic support from not only myself but other interviewees helped to negate some of the embarrassment they felt in being emotional. It was vital that interviewees did not feel that their emotions were out of place in the research context, as they did represent a very direct response to the programmes viewed.

It was worrying that requiring women to take part in this research could cause them distress. Being aware of the likely upset that the interview sessions might evoke, I always stressed from the outset that interviewees were free to leave the interview if they found it too disturbing. When interviewees did show signs of being upset, all priority was placed on ensuring that they felt able to continue with the interview. If they did not wish to continue they were able to leave the group and move to nearby locations where staff were on hand to provide comfort and any necessary counselling. No interviewee took this option, and although in two different groups one respondent left the interview for a short period, both returned to the discussions later. These interviewees explained that they would rather discuss their distress within the interview where it would add to the research data, than letting their feelings go unrecorded.

Interviewing Asian and Afro-Caribbean Women

Interviews with Asian and Afro-Caribbean women caused problems unique to these groups. Most of the Asian women who took part in the research could speak some English. However, within two of the four Asian groups language difficulties made it such that elaborate responses to the programmes could not be gained. Interpreters were not used in the research, and for this reason it was stressed during recruitment that Asian women would need to be able to speak English. That approximately half of the respondents in these groups did not speak fluent English resulted in it being difficult to establish any flow in the discussion. This language barrier, frustrating for both the interviewees and myself, necessitated constant clarification of responses. Patient handling of these difficulties was required, particularly given that for many Asian

women discussing issues of television and portrayals of sexual and domestic violence with individuals outside of the Asian community was an especially unusual occurrence.

Asian women were very aware that their responses to the texts were affected by their particular cultural beliefs and that these would likely differ from those of a native British woman such as myself. It was very important to explore these responses. That I was a white researcher with a limited knowledge of Asian culture provided a useful platform from which to ask for explanations of the women's reactions to the programmes. The women, feeling that it was important to justify their responses did so with elaborate and explicit reference to their cultural influences. At times this was accomplished through the women criticising what they termed 'western culture', and specifically directing this criticism at myself and the female technical assistant by asserting how they believed we would be likely to behave in both public and private environments. These criticisms were, however, presented with a sympathetic and often humorous understanding of the differences in the cultural beliefs and attitudes that the interviewees perceived to exist between themselves and the technical assistant and myself.

As with the Asian women, Afro-Caribbean women's cultural experiences were of a different nature to my own, leading to their having explicitly to refer to the experience of being black in a white society as an explanation for their responses to the programmes. However, one group of English Afro-Caribbean women with experience of violence found the interview particularly difficult because of my being white. This group were extremely sensitive to the racial prejudices of white society and were uneasy about discussing these matters with a white woman. At one extreme this led to anger and a belief that this research was not sympathetic to the politics of racial prejudice because it assumed a white woman could understand the experiences of black women living in Britain.

The sense of deep bitterness and resentment of white culture and its treatment of black members of society was expressed by all the women in this one group. This expression took the form of a reluctance to participate in the interview; at one point one respondent refused to discuss the programmes further, so angered was she by what she perceived to be a racist discourse in the *Crimewatch* programme. Others in the group followed suit and, as a consequence, the interview began to collapse. There was no alternative but to stop the interview whilst these tensions were talked through. Informing the women that the research was concerned with gaining their reactions to the programmes and that if they felt that these were racially prejudiced then they should say so, alleviated the situation to a degree. They were also told that the research would sympathetically present their views and would not misrepresent their opinions in any way. I additionally asked them to state openly whether they felt that my handling of the discussion was contributing to their discomfort. There was no doubt in my mind that if the women felt this to be the case then they would have said so. Although the interview had shown every sign of breaking down, being honest with the group about the difficulties we were experiencing did result in their being more willing to trust the research study.

Using the Reception Data from *Women Viewing Violence* in this Second Analysis

Although difficulties were encountered in conducting the group interviews for *Women Viewing Violence*, these were not so great as to prevent collecting sufficient quality data for that project. Also, how that data was collected has not caused any problems in my drawing on it in this further assessment of how the texts were read and interpreted by the interview groups. I continue to believe that the methods used in the original study provide a valuable insight into reception processes, and particularly so when investigating the emotive subject of violence on television and in film. Additionally, as the research placed an emphasis on not only inviting interviewees to explain how they

reacted to the violent portrayals, but also how they engaged with, for example, characters and certain scenes, the resulting data was of the type needed to enable me now to assess the relationship between textual signification and interpretation. It was always the case that I would return to this data for the purposes of writing a thesis. Therefore, care was taken not to constrain the range of questions asked in the interview sessions according to the specific issues being addressed in *Women Viewing Violence*.

Analytical Methods Used in the Combining of Textual and Reception Research

Women Viewing Violence has then provided two sets of texts which I have continued to research for this thesis: the three British television programmes and the Hollywood film; and the transcripts of the 14 interview group discussions responding to those audio-visual products. Here, however, we are moving to examine how the audio-visual texts might foreground certain readings and interpretations of their portrayals of violence against women. Using the reception data collected previously, we can then consider whether the groups of women did indeed adopt these readings, and how this might contribute to their understanding of how and why women are subjected to male violence. Yet the research also offers the opportunity to assess to what extent the respondents' interpretations may represent a combination of what they brought to the viewing of the programmes/film, and what the texts mediated to them.

Conducting this subsequent research has involved adopting different approaches to the analysis of the focus group discussions from that conducted for *Women Viewing Violence*. Effectively my approach has consisted of a re-interpretation of that data. This has not resulted in my contradicting or contesting previous claims made about the responses to the texts. At least that has not been my intention, though it is the case that the findings of this second phase of the research shed a new light on the conclusions drawn in the original study.

The research for this thesis has involved looking at one text at a time, theorising the range of readings available of its portrayal of violence through textual analysis, and only then turning to assess how the reception data upholds, challenges or extends the findings of that textual analysis.

It might be argued that having been involved in conducting the reception study for *Women Viewing Violence*, and having once already analysed that audience data, I could have pre-empted the findings of this present research. Particularly in respect of my conducting the textual analyses of the four audio-visual texts, questions could be raised concerning whether these analyses are really independent, and not produced to accommodate the range of interpretations which I already knew the groups of women gave in response to the texts. However, combining each textual analysis with the study of its reception has necessitated adopting quite a different approach from that taken in the *Women Viewing Violence* project. It has involved engaging with a broad range of theoretical arguments about how texts are constructed to be read and how this might affect their interpretative meaning potential. I have then, in reanalysing the reception data, had to examine the responses to the texts in relation to my own arguments about how these can be read in relation to certain social and/or cultural contexts, textual conventions and narrative strategies. This has necessitated looking at those responses from a variety of different perspectives than were used in *Women Viewing Violence*.

How the Textual Analyses are Conducted

The approach which I have taken in analysing each of the audio-visual texts is a multi-focused one which examines the variety of ways in which the texts could be understood: as cultural products; as products of particular media organisations; as drawing on certain formulaic methods of storytelling; and as having to present their contents within a structured narrative. With regard to the specifics of their content, it

seems most fruitful to examine how characterisation and plot affect the ways in which it is possible to interpret each text. Here I am primarily concerned with assessing how the texts might imply certain understandings of the characters and events associated with the acts of violence against women.

Textual analysis of this multi-focused type is less common than perhaps might be expected. Often textual research of audio-visual products will concentrate on one aspect of the text, its production, generic type, or how it represents gender, for example. One particular exception to this which was influential in how I carried out my textual research was Annette Kuhn's *Women's Pictures* (1982). I found that the arguments presented there concerning the need to assess how texts work as systems of signification from a variety of approaches offered a very useful framework from which to conduct the analyses.

Before detailing the findings of the textual analysis of each of the audio-visual products, I have presented a synopsis of the contents of the programme/film. The intention behind this is to provide an early and succinct impression of the material mediated in that text. I thought this a useful means by which my readers could quickly attain a sense of what is being researched given that they may not be familiar with or have viewed these texts.

Analysis of the Production and Marketing Contexts

The first part of each textual analysis considers why the text was produced and why it included the representations of violence against women. In doing this the research brings together *contextual* analyses and textual analyses. This meant examining on what grounds those companies responsible for the programme/film might seek to justify its production, both in terms of their own needs and the perceived needs of the audience. Yet it was also necessary to consider how social and cultural factors may

have also played a part in instigating or supporting the production. Therefore, I have attempted to establish what relationship may have existed between the subject matter of each text and trends in political, social and/or cultural discourses prevalent at the time of their making.

It was quite difficult to construct an analysis of the context of production of each text given that this required retrospective analysis. Gaining an insight into the many decisions behind the production process was therefore extremely difficult. However, in the case of both *Crimewatch* and *EastEnders*, key individuals involved in the making of these programmes have published books detailing how and why they went into production, and what factors affected their design and content. Additionally, I have been able to draw on investigations into the production of these two programmes conducted by other academics. These provided a more critical analysis than the public relations type reportage offered by individuals working within or for the broadcasting organisations.

Source material relating to the production of *Closing Ranks* and *The Accused* was less readily available. However, it was possible to gather facts about key figures involved in the making of these texts. From these I was able to construct an impression of how their artistic, political and/or cultural interests may have fed into and influenced the production. With regard to *Closing Ranks*, I additionally gained access to the play's director and co-writer who I interviewed at his home and asked about why he had wanted to make the drama and what he hoped audiences might take from it.

As the interests of the companies responsible for the commissioning of a given text have to be examined as well as those of individuals working on them, theories of Hollywood film in the case of *The Accused*, and the position of single dramas in British television broadcasting in the case of *Closing Ranks* are considered. With

Crimewatch and *EastEnders*, I have likewise considered the functions to which crime reconstruction programmes and soap operas are put in television scheduling.

In examining each text's conditions of production, I have also assessed how they were marketed. This involved examining the grounds on which they were designed to attract viewers through the promise of providing, for example, forms of entertainment or information. The material drawn on here included television listings, publicity materials and journalistic previews and reviews. I have also addressed how the violence in each text might have featured in this marketing and how this might affect audiences' suppositions concerning how this violence was intended to be read and interpreted.

Textual Form and Genre

Having examined the context of production, each analysis then moves to consider how textual form and/or genre plays a part in structuring the reading and meaning potential of the text. The aim here was to assess how audience appreciation of the ways in which each text draws on certain established narrative formulas or conventions (television crime reporting, soap opera, the single play and popular Hollywood film), could lead to expectations about the discursive positions which would be privileged in the narrative.

In deciding to conduct this type of analysis of each text, I had imagined that generic conventions would function to explain a great deal about how these were constructed according to certain established formulas of storytelling. However, such genre analyses in fact proved quite difficult and attempts to substantiate claims that either *Crimewatch*, *The Accused* or *Closing Ranks* belonged to any one particular genre were difficult to uphold. Genre was found to be a far more illusive concept than some textual theory is prone to imply when it suggests strict divisions between one genre and

another, and how genre impacts on the ways in which textual content can be understood (Feuer, 1987; Kerr, 1981 for examples).⁵

It was found that, apart from in the case of the soap opera *EastEnders* (though even in that case the theorising was complicated by the fact that this was not just a soap, but a British realist soap), it was more appropriate to speculate on how textual form might work to focus audience expectations of what type of discursive material they would encounter. This was because, in the case of *Crimewatch* a number of different generic conventions figured in this production from the reporting of crime by presenters straight to camera, to a type of real-life crime who-done-it suspense mystery and audience participation programming. *The Accused* could be considered a mixed genre film, incorporating the conventions of courtroom drama and rape revenge stories, but it could also be viewed more generally as a popular Hollywood entertainment film. Whilst *Closing Ranks* is primarily a television play, which is not a genre in itself, it can be considered documentary drama, though there is nothing which *forces* the audience to read it as such. There was then, clearly a need to be cautious in claiming just how influential any singular generic convention was in governing how each text could be interpreted.

Narrative Structure

The narrative structure of each text is assessed in terms of the type of conventions to which it complies, whether these be that of a classic realist composition or of a more open ended form where questions posed by the narrative remain unresolved. The research considers how this structure might affect the relationship between the material contained in the text and audiences' reception of it and narrative structure might be used to certain effect.

⁵ For a discussion of the problems encountered by genre criticism in film theory see Kuhn (1990).

In assessing how narrative structure impacts on reading and interpretation, of particular interest was to examine how the portrayal of violence against women was positioned in that structure. It is perhaps coincidental, but none the less worthy of note, that in all four of the texts the physical abuse of the woman is depicted in the final stages of the narrative presentation. It seemed pertinent to assess why, in each individual case, this was so, both in terms of whether it might serve some strategic need to maintain audiences, and how it might affect the range of meanings which it was possible to attribute to the violence.

Examining the relationship between narrative structure and the portrayals of violence was somewhat simpler with regards to *The Accused*, *Closing Ranks* and *Crimewatch*, as all are self contained narratives. *Crimewatch* did however require some extended analytical attention, as both the structure of the entire programme edition as well as that of the specific reconstruction concerning the sexual assault and murder of the female hitchhiker had to be examined. The analysis of the episode of *EastEnders*, however, was far more complex, as the violence portrayed in that belonged to a story-line which had been developed over many episodes. Examining how this evolving story-line may have affected the possible ways in which the violence could be interpreted necessitated examining other episodes which were not actually screened in the reception study. This task was made somewhat easier as the *EastEnders* production team provided access to script outlines going back some four months prior to the episode used in the research. From these it was possible to provide a detailed account and analysis of the domestic violence plot. Then, looking at the particular episode featured in the research, I consider how the presentations of the violent relationship is structured in to that episode, and how it incorporates the narrative conventions of soap opera.

The Close Textual Analyses

The last and most detailed section of each textual analysis consists of an extensive examination of the interpretative potential of the content of that text. Here a semiological approach is used to discuss how meaning can be attributed to the portrayal of characters and plot events. The breadth of this close analysis was, as stated above, constrained in order to emphasise the focus on those characters and events associated with the violence against women.

Focusing on the characters involved in the violent portrayals, I assessed how the text might foreground or offer certain explanations as to why, in the woman's case, she became a victim of male violence, and in the perpetrators' case, why he committed the violence. It is examined for example, how the characterisations might embody certain stereotypical qualities, and whether these imply that particular types of individuals are more likely to become victims and/or perpetrators of sexual and domestic violence. Differences between the victims and perpetrators and other characters not directly involved in the violent acts are also assessed. This meant considering how such differences might again affect the potential for interpretative explanations as to why particular characters were involved in the violence and not others.

Regarding how the actual violent event was portrayed, or in the case of *Crimewatch*, verbally detailed, I address how the audience is invited to engage with and understand this act in relation to the plot(s) which surrounded it. It is also examined how the camera positions the viewer in relation to the violent representation, as an 'observer' or as somehow 'involved' in the act through the point of view of the victim or perpetrator, and whose position one is invited to engage with through this. This necessitated considering the 'meaning' of the spectator's position as a viewer of the violence, and what the effect of that positioning might be.

So as to illustrate the basis on which certain conclusions are drawn about the interpretative possibilities of textual content, scene-by-scene breakdowns are presented in tabulated form. In the case of *EastEnders* it was possible to present the whole of the episode used in the research in this form. With *Crimewatch*, as it was the reconstruction of the murder of the female hitchhiker which was of central concern to the research, only this reconstruction is presented in this way. For *Closing Ranks* and *The Accused*, scene breakdowns of those sections of the text which appeared especially significant to the reading of the violence are presented.

These tables provide details of the lengths of each scene, the characters involved in them and a summary of the dialogue and action. In the case of *Crimewatch* these also include details a summary of certain images presented. Whilst such imagery is equally accounted for in breakdowns of the other three texts, this required specific mention in the case of *Crimewatch* as the reconstruction was narrated through a presenter's voice-over and included the use of still photographs. Thus, these identify at a manifest level what is encountered in viewing the text, and, as far as is possible describe, how it is depicted on the screen. They are also useful in providing a sense of the rhythm of the narrative and the temporal significance given to specific scenes in that narrative.

Analysing Women's Readings of the Texts

In conducting the analysis of the women's reception of each text my objectives were as follows:

- (i) To ascertain the extent to which the texts, as systems of signification, were capable of encouraging the women respondents to adopt, in the short term at least, particular understandings of male sexual and domestic violence against women. To assess whether any of the groups of women were more or less likely to adopt particular readings over others.

- (ii) To compare the conclusions drawn through the textual research about the ways in which each text could be interpreted with the responses given in the group interviews. Thus, to empirically test the validity of the methods used in the textual analysis.
- (iii) To examine how textual signification and the social, cultural and material experiences of the women involved in the reception study joined together - if at all - in the production of interpretative meaning.

The analysis of the interview transcripts began with the systematic categorisation of the women's responses using the computerised qualitative data analysis package *Hypersoft*.⁶ To facilitate comparison between these responses with how the textual research had theorised the interpretative potential of the text, the category headings comprised the following: production context; textual form/genre; narrative structure; characterisation; explanations for violence.⁷

Conducting the categorisation of the interview transcripts necessitated putting to one side my own theoretical conclusions about how the texts worked as 'systems of meaning' which constructed and constrained interpretation. However, that the categories used in the analysis of the interview transcripts were derived from the textual research certainly limits the claim that my own theoretical judgements were not carried over into this analysis. Therefore a further category was also applied to the

⁶ This package is based on Apple Macintosh Hypercard software and was developed by Ian Dey at the Department of Social Sciences, Edinburgh University.

⁷ The interview transcripts had been previously put through a categorisation process for the *Women Viewing Violence* project. However, because this research seeks to specifically explore the nature of the relationship between texts and their reception a *reanalysis* of the transcripts was necessary.

classification process, one headed 'Other explanations for reading/interpretation'. To this very broad category were assigned any data which could not be easily accommodated by other headings. Most often it was those interpretations which were quite specific to the social, cultural and material experiences of interviewees which were located here. It is also worth explaining how data was assigned to the other categories.

The production and marketing context category

Under this heading were classified responses which in any way referred to the text as a 'product'. If interviewees talked of the text as originating from the media industries, or a specific broadcast/film company, the statements were classified here. So were responses which suggested a belief that it might have been made with any particular intentions in mind, whether that be to provide, for example, entertainment or some public service, to make money, or make a particular kind of discursive statement. References to figures involved in the making of the programme/film, and assumptions about their motivations and/or production priorities were equally placed under this heading.

I also classified under this heading any responses which linked the making of the text and/or the concerns of its content to current trends in social, political and/or cultural thinking. Generally, however, it was only in the case of *Closing Ranks* that the reception study generated data of this kind, where interviewees remarked on the relationship between the portrayal of the police in this play and corruption in the British police force.

The textual form/genre category

Data was assigned to this category which in any way included references to either the form or genre of the text. This included responses which *defined* the text as of a particular form or genre; which provided indications of how the interviewees related to it as such (whether this form was one they enjoyed or not, for example); and responses which either explicitly or implicitly suggested that form/genre had some impact on how the textual content was viewed.

The narrative structure category

Sorting the data which was placed in this category was quite a complex task. At times interviewees did refer to the narrative structure of the text and how it affected their understanding of and views of that text and their reading of its content. However, this was not always the case. Therefore, it had to be assessed to what extent it was possible to illustrate how narrative structure had impacted on the women's viewing, and what effect it could be argued this had on their interpretations. Having conducted the textual analysis and there considered how the narrative structure affected the range of meanings in the text, categorising responses meant looking for data which might provide empirical support for my earlier arguments as well as that which might have represented a challenge to those arguments.

The characterisation category

This category was one divided into a number of subheadings, each given the title of one or a number of characters. These titles were obviously dependent on which text's reception data were being dealt with. In all cases, however, the main characters in the text, or in the example of *Crimewatch* those in the reconstruction concerning the death of the female hitchhiker, formed a sub-category. For each of text I created sub-categories for data concerning the female victim of violence, the male perpetrator(s),

any friends or relatives of these characters, and any other figures playing a major role in the depicted story. For more minor characters the category 'Other characters' was formed. The reception data which included references to characters - be it views on how they were portrayed, why they were portrayed in this way' what they represented, how interviewees felt toward these characters (what they did and how this was interpreted) - were accordingly assigned under that character's heading.

The explanations for violence category

How interviewees read and interpreted the characters involved in the acts of violence against women offered a very significant insight into how they made sense of the violence portrayed. However, this category was one which served to accommodate data which contained *explicit* references to why interviewees believed the violence occurred against the woman. As well as mention of the motivations of those characters involved in the violence, for example, the data placed here could have been that which indicated a broader social and/or cultural interpretation of why men commit violence against women; how women come to be victims of the form of violence depicted in the text; how interviewees believed the text was implying the violence should be understood and/or whether they agreed with what was being mediated about the violence. The use of this category enabled me to focus on any specific 'meanings' about violence against women which the interviewees might have brought into when engaging with the text.

Assigning data to multiple categories

At times the responses to each text would be classified under more than one category heading. This was necessary when, for example, interviewees suggested links between genre and forms of characterisation, or when it was evident that the narrative structure of the text had affected the reading of a particular character or event in that

text. Cross referencing responses in this way was essential in order to understand the complex means by which interpretations were arrived at.

The Analysis of the Categorised Data

Once the categorisation process was completed, it was then assessed how the readings of each text both within and across the interview groups revealed any similarities or differences in interpretation. At this stage it was also necessary to consider to what extent these similarities and differences could be explained by either the social, cultural or material experiences of the interviewees or by the social processes and dynamics operating within each focus group interview.

Having examined the range of interpretations of the text forthcoming from the interviewees, these were then compared with the findings of my own analysis of the text. Where interviewees presented readings which had not been anticipated by the textual analysis, it was necessary to consider whether these pointed to weaknesses in that research, or whether they revealed some inherent limitations of textual analysis per se.

The Presentation of Findings of the Reception Study

In presenting the findings of the reception study, I have drawn on the same structure which was used in presenting the textual research. Thus, any responses relating to the text's context of production and marketing are discussed first. These are followed by those relating to the genre/form of the text and so on until finally interviewees' readings of the violence are documented. In addressing this last question, I have tended to focus predominantly on how the interviewees responded and related to the characters directly associated with the violence, as it was this aspect of the textual signification which proved especially pertinent to how that violence was understood.

The findings of the reception study are illustrated with support of quotations from the focus group discussions. It was impossible to quote all interviewees' statements which reveal the adoption of particular reading positions. Therefore one, two, or sometimes three interviewees are quoted as examples of those positions, and it is explained how common or uncommon and in which groups these were found. At times the discussion between a number of interviewees is quoted so as to illustrate a particular group's interpretative perspective or the debate of that perspective.

Throughout the presentation of the findings of the reception analysis, I cross-reference these findings with those of the textual research. Thus, it is possible to gather an understanding of the relationship between the audio-visual text and the readings interviewees made of it and its portrayal of violence. Where this relationship appears somewhat tenuous, I speculate on how this impacts on the ability to theorise the audio-visual mediation of violence against women from the point of view of textual analysis, and what implications it might have for research of this kind.

Concluding Remarks

Conducting this research has necessitated developing my own theories concerning the relationship between audio-visual texts and audience reception, and about how it is possible to understand how the women involved in the reception study interpreted the four texts. This follows a deep and intensive involvement with the *Women Viewing Violence* project which had already drawn conclusions about the reception of these texts. However, even during the course of working on that project I had encountered problems of detaching myself from one mode of address and progressing to another. This was when moving from conducting the field interviews and going into the analysis phase. I had there found it extremely difficult to distance myself from what had become, in an extremely short space of time, a personal attachment to and association

with the women respondents. This made me feel very protective towards these women and how the data they produced was critically analysed. Even when involved in this second phase of the research I have at times found it difficult to relate to the reception data as anything other than intimately owned by the women themselves. Yet it has been vital to go through this detachment process so as to be able to comment on and theorise the discourses which surround the issue of violence against women.

Carrying out the textual research contained in this thesis also brought its difficulties. Each analysis constantly required ensuring that my own personal views on and feelings toward the particular programme/film being examined were not interfering with the conclusions I drew as to how it mediated violence against women. However, it cannot be denied that textual analyses are always somehow informed by the predispositions of the researcher, as such analyses are themselves a form of interpretation (Moore, 1993). Yet, the advantage in combining textual and reception research is that unsubstantiated claims made by the textual analyst are very likely to be exposed through the reception data. This of course does require that we be honest and highlight where mistakes have been made, and not be tempted to suppress those audience responses which contradict our textual theory.

Having carried out this research one might ask whether it could have been conducted differently. Research such as this could be enhanced in one very particular respect. It would have been invaluable to have been able to study the decisions involved in the making of the four texts featured in this research, and especially those decisions surrounding the portrayals of violence. This would have permitted a far more extensive insight into the production processes than the sketch which I have been able to provide in the contextual analysis of each text. However, such research requires knowledge of when programmes/films are to be produced which contain material of interest to our research objectives. The four texts used here had already been made some time before the research was embarked on.

Though it might have been possible to enhance the findings of this thesis, this type of research is very new and, as yet, few precedents have been set concerning how textual and reception research can be combined. Therefore, at this stage at least, it is important to test the methods drawn on here and to assess exactly what they might reveal about the audio-visual mediation and reception of sexual and domestic violence against women.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE ACCUSED: GANG RAPE IN A HOLLYWOOD FILM

Introduction

This chapter examines one of the most graphic and explicit representations of violence against a woman found in the mainstream audio-visual media: the gang rape depicted in the Hollywood film *The Accused*.

The Accused has already been the subject of textual analysis (see Clover, 1992: 146-151; Riggs and Willoquet, 1989), critical review (Cook, 1989; Malcolm, 1989; Mars-Jones, 1989; Moore, 1989; Simpson, 1989; Tyre, 1989, for example) and more general discussion. With only a few exceptions the film has been accepted as taking up and treating the issue of rape with considerable sympathy. Its makers' claim that they sought to promote an understanding of rape from its victim's point of view has generally been applauded.

There have, however, been some criticisms of *The Accused*. It does raise the question as to whether the attempt to promote social understandings of rape necessarily required the depiction of the violent act.¹ Its characterisation of a rape victim as 'the kind of figure constructed by those who would explain rape as the result of sexual provocation by women' (Riggs and Willoquet, 1989: 216), is also problematic. It can be argued that the film uses such a stereotype so as to demonstrate that no matter how a woman behaves, nothing justifies her rape. This research finds, however, that in terms of how

1 For a discussion of this debate see Lapping (1980: ch 6). Interestingly an Australian film dealing with the issue of rape and released in Britain in the same year as *The Accused*, *Shame* (Steve Jodrell, 1987), did not include a portrayal of the rape attack.

it is received by women interviewees, the former interpretation takes considerable precedence over the latter.

Through a textual analysis of *The Accused*, this chapter examines how the film mediates rape. This assesses why the Hollywood movie industry might consider rape worthy of blockbuster billing, and how its being a Hollywood product might affect its reception. It is also examined how generic form and narrative structure affect the range of ways in which the film can be read. The analysis then offers a detailed consideration of the film's plot and characterisation and how these offer means by which the rape can be comprehended. Particular emphasis is placed on scenes of major importance to the plot progression, with key sections being analysed with the support of scene-by-scene breakdowns. The reception analysis then compares the readings identified in the textual research with those found in the viewing groups. The concern here is to examine the range of ways in which the women interviewees engaged with the film. This explores how they perceived it as a film featuring rape, and how the meanings they took from this film and its presentation of rape were affected by aspects of textual signification as well as their own social and personal experiences.

Synopsis of the Film

The Accused was released in Britain in February 1989 under an 18 certificate. It was first broadcast on BSkyB's movie channel in April 1991. The BBC screened the film in January 1992 and again in May 1993, but with significant cuts to the rape scene.

The film opens with the reporting of a multiple rape attack occurring in a roadside bar 'The Mill'. In a telephone booth outside the bar Kenneth Joyce anonymously tells the emergency services that this involves several men and a cheering crowd. However, the rape allegation is complicated by its victim, Sarah Tobias, having been drunk, high on marijuana and flirting with two of her attackers prior to the attack. Consequently, the

charge of rape against three men is reduced to reckless endangerment. They are imprisoned for between two and five years. Sarah expresses her fury at this to her legal representative, Deputy District Attorney, Katheryn Murphy. Katheryn claims she did all she could given the nature of the case.

Sarah is hospitalised following a frantic attempt to escape from a man, Cliff Albrecht, who had witnessed her rape and who, on recognising her in a shop, terrorises her with sexual innuendo. When Katheryn visits Sarah in hospital she realises her failure to provide justice for her client. Returning to the case, Katheryn charges three men who encouraged the rape to occur, one of these being Cliff Albrecht, with criminal solicitation.

The District Attorney threatens to fire Katheryn if she pursues the criminal solicitation case. Undeterred, she locates a crucial prosecution witness, Kenneth Joyce, who had originally reported the rape to the emergency services. Kenneth's court testimony, portrayed through a flashback showing events leading up to and including Sarah's rape, secures the conviction of the three defendants.

The film closes with the written statement 'In the United States a rape is reported every six minutes. One out of every four rape victims is attacked by two or more assailants'.

The Production and Marketing Contexts

The Accused is, of course, not the first Hollywood film to feature rape. As Clover states 'Rape - real, threatened or implied - has been a staple of American cinema more or less from the beginning' (1992: 137). *The Accused* however not only features rape, but makes it of central concern to its narrative. Though previous films have also done this, none have managed to capture quite as much attention and stimulate as much discussion as this. Also highly significant is that when *The Accused* was released, its

marketing concentrated on the fact that it included the graphic and explicit depiction of rape.

The Accused was produced some years after many Western industrialized countries had amended their legal definitions of rape and passed legislation concerning how rape victims should be handled both by the police and courts. Some of these changes resulted from revelations about how women have suffered as a consequence of rape and their treatment by the judicial system (Temkin, 1994: 276). Even with such changes it remains controversial how rape victims are cross-examined in court and made to recount details of their sexual histories (see, for example, Jury, 1993; Lees, 1993; Wolf, 1991). *The Accused* does then engage with a very particular and unresolved social issue. Indeed, it was trailed as 'reopening the debate on rape in the 80s' (quoted in Cook, 1989: 35).

Hollywood is hardly known for producing films out of altruism. The industry is 'first and foremost a business' (Izod, 1988: ix) and as 'profits are the measure of success, one cannot assume any motivation or social goal but that of financial gain. This is not to say that there are no other motives operating, but that they are incidental to the system of economic rewards' (Green, 1982: 37). *The Accused* was therefore produced and internationally distributed on the grounds that it would make money. In including a graphic and lengthy depiction of rape, it was also likely to make more money than if it had not.

Derek Malcolm, film critic for *The Guardian*, describes *The Accused* as 'made with great professionalism and undoubted sincerity within the context of its commercial aspirations' (1989). But it has been attacked for 'exploiting sex and violence under the guise of condemning them' (Goodman, 1989). Indeed, this is a movie which caters for both audiences who might want to engage with a drama about the *issue* of rape, as well as those purely interested in it as 'violent entertainment'. Thus, as is very common

within Hollywood (Izod, 1988: 183), it is marketed with a broad appeal to attract maximum audiences whilst also offering something for those viewers with more specific and narrower interests.

That *The Accused* was made by the producers of *Fatal Attraction*, Stanley Jaffe and Sherry Lansing, has raised some doubts about its integrity (see, for example, Faludi, 169-170; Mather, 1989; Simpson, 1989). *Fatal Attraction* caused considerable controversy, especially among feminists, for its portrayal of a career woman turning psychotic and evil when rejected by her married lover. Nevertheless, *The Accused* was publicised as 'From the makers of *Fatal Attraction*', a marketing strategy clearly intended to capitalise on the enormous box-office success of the earlier film.

Whilst Jaffe and Lansing's association with *The Accused* raised concerns in some quarters, the fact that it was directed by Jonathan Kaplan acted as a counterbalance to such concerns. Only those with considerable knowledge of the film industry would, however, be familiar with the career history of this director. In the 1970s Kaplan had worked for Roger Corman's production company New World Pictures. Though making low-budget exploitation pictures with the primary aim being to cash in on the market for sex and violence, the pictures produced by this company often reflected contemporary political issues and particularly women's issues. *The Accused* is cited as having 'clear roots in movies he [Kaplan] made for Corman in the early 1970s, such as *Night Call Nurses*, in which a rape was sympathetically handled' (Cook, 1994: xvii).

Through media interviews those involved in the production of cinematic texts can attempt to limit the range of meanings available from their work (Kuhn 1982: 16). Given her starring role and its involving acting out a rape scene, considerable media interest was invested in documenting Jodie Foster's views of *The Accused* at the time of its release (see, for instance, Goodman, 1989; Mather, 1989b; Simpson, 1989). Foster, not surprisingly, supported the integrity of the film, claiming that it was sincere

in its attempt to address the issue of rape. She denied any suggestion that it was made purely for box-office gain with, for example, 'I find that kind of criticism really odd. ... But then this is a film which provokes people into asking a lot of questions' (quoted in Simpson, 1989). The Hollywood film industry indirectly expressed its support for *The Accused* in awarding Jodie Foster the 1989 Academy Award for Best Actress for her performance as Sarah Tobias.

The Genre

The Accused does not strictly adhere to the formulations of any one particular genre. It does draw on the conventions of some investigative genres and particularly those of courtroom drama, a genre with which its writer Tom Topor is connected through his scripting of *Nuts* (Martin Ritt, 1987). Clover argues that whilst *The Accused* is courtroom drama, it owes its existence to a 'lowlife ancestry' of rape revenge films from the horror genre (1992: 151). Yet the conventions of that genre meet with those of courtroom and investigative genres in creating an expectation of justice being waged against those guilty of the rape. Generic understanding is not a *prerequisite* of this expectation. Broader narrative conventions of popular Hollywood fiction film tend to ensure the provision of a happy ending and that 'good' will triumph over 'evil'.

The presentation of statistics on rape at the close of *The Accused* provide a slightly different generic inflection to the film. These, though something of an add-on to the film, allow for consideration of what has just been viewed - an explicit and horrific rape - in documentary terms. Riggs and Willoquet claim these are intended to 'convince us that we have just seen is justified by its relation to compelling facts, and that we are being launched from the theatre armed with facts and impressions that make us soldiers in a moral crusade' (1989: 215). Riggs and Willoquet view the statistics as providing an educational masquerade for *The Accused*. They regard the motives behind them to be purely salacious.

The Accused is frequently cited as based on an actual gang rape of a woman in a bar in New Bedford, Massachusetts (Clover, 1992: 147; Faludi, 1992: 170; Goodman, 1989; Rich, 1994: 56). This could prompt a documentary drama reading of the film. However, such a reading is less likely to be encountered outside of the USA as it was only there that the New Bedford rape case was widely reported. Though marketed as about 'The case that challenged the system and shocked a nation', the narrative of *The Accused* makes no reference to this factual grounding, and its end credits contain the familiar disclaimer to the effect that any similarity to factual characters and events is purely coincidental.

Narrative Structure

The Accused is comprised a circular narrative structure where the flashback to the rape at the end of the movie returns the audience to the beginning of its story. This structure allows for ambiguous perceptions of the rape victim. Until the rape is shown it is not known whether Sarah Tobias is telling the truth about her attack. Indeed the text allows a belief that she might have 'provoked' it. Therefore, popular prejudices concerning how some women come to be raped can be brought to the reading of the film. The flashback, however, then seems intended to undermine the credibility of such judgements in exposing the failure to consider the horrific violent nature of rape.

The circular structure of *The Accused* could also function to encourage a desire to see the rape. Riggs and Willoquet state 'we have been maneuvered into wanting the rape to "happen"' (1989: 219). In narrative terms the rape represents the crucial missing link in the crime story. Viewers cannot help but know that this event has been 'concealed' from them, and yet they have been encouraged to hypothesise about its nature. Further, until it is shown, the audience has less knowledge about the rape than those characters involved in it. This balancing of knowledge in the favour of character(s) is

often put to strategic use in classic realist narratives. Hitchcock, for example, used it as a means of shocking audiences (Branigan, 1992: 75). Indeed, when the rape is shown, its length and explicit graphic nature is more than would conventionally be expected of a mainstream film. This could go a considerable way to compound the viewer's sense of horror at this attack.

Through its narrative structure, *The Accused* plays with both filmic convention (the narrative structured by desire) and popular social discourses on rape victims (about their culpability in the rape). Where viewers do read *The Accused* in this way, the film might cause self-conscious reflection on the desire to see the rape and the failure to believe the victim's version of this attack. With this it is no longer the rape victim's character which is in question, but the viewer's. As regards those who are drawn to the cinema in the knowledge that *The Accused* contains a rape, it seems possible that, as Cook argues, they are condemned 'for the impulse which brought them to the cinema in the first place' (1989: 36).

The verdict in the criminal solicitation trial provides the narrative resolution to *The Accused* and a pleasurable conclusion to its suspense plot. This presents the audience with the conventional Hollywood happy ending, though perhaps not one capable of entirely out-weighing the shock of seeing the rape portrayal.

The Close Textual Analysis

Genre and narrative conventions apply some guides as to how to engage with *The Accused*. The film's plot and its characterisation play an important part in structuring ways of reading its content. Yet it depends on what meanings are taken from the coding of these as to which readings will result. In analysing the textual signification in relation to plot and characterisation, and in paying particular attention to those scenes

which appear of key importance to viewer perception of the rape, the range of readings which this text seems to allow will now be examined.

Establishing the Plot and its Characters

The first 12 scenes of *The Accused* introduce the film's plot as revolving around a multiple rape allegation. The scene-by-scene breakdown below details how this plot is established.

| Scene | Length | Characters Featured | Summary of Action and Dialogue |
|-------|------------------|--|--|
| 1 | 1 min 40 secs | | Slow string and wind instrumental. LS of a roadside bar, 'The Mill', in daylight. Opening credits. Scene turns to night. Heavy slow percussion beat. A figure runs from the building. |
| 2 | 45 secs | Sarah, Kenneth | A screaming woman bursts from 'The Mill', her clothes in disarray. In a nearby telephone booth a young man anonymously reports a rape involving 'three or four guys'. The woman frantically flags down a pick-up truck and clambers in. It drives away. |
| 3 | 1 min 32 secs | Sarah, 2 nurses, rape counsellor | In hospital Sarah Tobias's wounds are photographed by a female nurse while another requests details of her recent sexual history. |
| 4 | 2 mins 5 secs | As above plus Katheryn | Sarah undergoes a vaginal examination. Katheryn Murphy enters and when Sarah exits for a shower remarks 'A lot of alcohol.' 'Legally drunk' replies the rape counsellor. Katheryn: 'And grass too. What else?' The counsellor indicates annoyance at Katheryn. |
| 5 | 9 secs | Detective | In the busy hospital a detective asks for Katheryn. |
| 6 | 42 secs | Sarah, Katheryn, detective | Sitting dazed and smoking, Sarah states 'I heard somebody screaming and it was me.' The detective enters. Katheryn says they should go to 'The Mill' to identify the rapists. |
| 7 | 36 secs | Sarah, Katheryn, policemen | LS of 'The Mill' at night. Heavy slow percussion beat. A police car and two other cars drive into the parking lot. Katheryn notices a red parked car. The camera pans across its back plate reading 'SXY SADI'. |

| Scene | Length | Characters Featured | Summary of Action and Dialogue |
|-------|-------------------|--|--|
| 8 | 1 min 40 secs | As above plus, Kurt, Danny & Polito | In the bar Sarah identifies two of her attackers, Danny and Kurt. Danny looks at Sarah nodding his head. The Detective recognises a man, Polito, sitting at the bar. |
| 9 | 2 mins 22 secs | Sarah, Katheryn | Katheryn drives Sarah home. Sarah says one rapist, a college student Bob, was not in the bar. She says her mother was married for 10 years, but her father left when she was born. Sarah offers to do Katheryn's astrological chart. Leaving the car, Sarah walks toward a static caravan. |
| 10 | 1 min 3 secs | Larry, Sarah | Larry, Sarah's boyfriend, doesn't know what to say to Sarah. He suggests taking a drive. Sarah declines. Larry leaves. Sarah sits on the bed stroking a dog. |
| 11 | 1 min 49 secs | Sarah | Sarah phones her mother, but doesn't mention the rape. The stilted conversation ends as her mother wants to sleep. Slow music on the sound track. |
| 12 | 47 secs | Bob, Sarah, Katheryn, Kenneth, policemen | The music continues. A group of students exit a large Tudor building. Sarah identifies Bob. As he is arrested Bob tells a friend to call his father. Kenneth watches the scene from a window above. |

These first scenes offer important guides to the reading of the film's plot. In scene 1, as the lighting changes to night, 'The Mill' takes on something of a menacing aura. This is emphasised by the heavy drum percussion beat on the sound-track. Scene 2 confirms such a reading with the woman running from the building screaming, the cause of which is explained by the telephone call reporting a multiple rape.

Scenes 3 and 4 portray a very matter of fact and routine handling of Sarah in the hospital. Given the viewer's understanding that Sarah has been raped, which is confirmed through her wounds, and with the medical examination being shot predominantly from her and the nurses' points of view, the scenes have a certain brutal and raw quality about them. However, scene 4 provides an opportunity to hypothesise that Sarah might not be an entirely innocent victim. The revelation that she was intoxicated with alcohol and narcotics when attacked suggests a possible complicity in

the offence. Two positions are characterised in relation to this. Katheryn, the prosecution lawyer, represents a legal position where any indication of provocation could overthrow the rape allegation. The rape counsellor characterises the view that no matter how a woman behaves nothing excuses her rape. Viewers could identify with either of these positions or even find both understandable. Yet it is clear that these contradictory views are of central importance in motivating the plot.

Scene 6 invites a sympathetic view of Sarah, as she is quite obviously traumatised. However, scene 7, with the camera's focusing on the plates of what can be assumed to be her car, reading SXY SADI, suggests that she hardly evades attracting sexual attention. It is plausible to speculate that this might be a contributory factor to her rape.

In scene 8 the audience is presented with an impression of 'The Mill' as frequented by lower-class men, and, with the detective recognising Polito, criminal types as well. This could, then, be considered not a place where any self-respecting woman would go without concern for her reputation and possibly even safety. Such a reading poses the question of why Sarah went to this bar, and what form of entertainment and/or attention she was seeking.

Scenes 9 to 11 function to develop Sarah's characterisation. These imply that she originates from a deprived and difficult background, lives in very poor circumstances with an entirely unsympathetic boyfriend, Larry, and that her approach to life is somewhat irrational given her interest in astrology. This characterisation is not an unsympathetic one and the melancholy music in the sound-track of scenes 11 and 12 does provide stimulus to identify with Sarah's emotional state. However, as the audience is engaged with a plot involving a rape allegation, associations might be made between Sarah's background and lifestyle and this attack.

With scene 12 involving the arrest of the third rapist, Bob, the first sub-plot is established. The characterisation of Bob as a well-heeled college student takes the alleged rape beyond the confines of an act committed solely by the working-class types portrayed in scene 8. Scene 12 also identifies Kenneth, the young man who anonymously reported the rape to the emergency services, as an associate of Bob's. With Kenneth's second appearance there is clear reason to hypothesise that he will play further part in the narrative.

The sub-plot involving the three men accused of rape runs its course through scenes 13 to 28. These scenes continue to allow ambiguous readings of the crime and its victim. During a television report on the case, Bob's lawyer claims proof that there was no rape and that the 'so-called victim consented enthusiastically to all the acts.' This can be considered reflective of the lawyer's obvious partisan position, especially as this man exudes few endearing qualities. Yet, such a statement could again raise viewers' doubts about Sarah's allegations given the suggestion that her case can be so easily undermined.

Preventing the audience from supposing that Sarah's accusations are totally without foundation is Bob's response to his lawyer's televised statement. In a college common room Bob and his friends cheer at the television report. As Bob then stands and bows, he is met with a silent stare from Kenneth Joyce. He immediately stops smiling. Thus, it is plausible to assume that Kenneth will present a version of the rape which conflicts with Bob's.

Further insight into Sarah's character and lifestyle is provided when Katheryn visits her to discuss the trial. Sarah is portrayed as a heavy drinker, a regular smoker of marijuana and as having a criminal record for drugs possession. It is difficult not to view this as likely to prejudice a rape trial as is indeed explained to Sarah by Katheryn. However, Katheryn does agree with Sarah, thereby inviting the audience to do so too,

that it is extremely unfair that she will be forced to reveal humiliating and personal information in court.

Whilst attending an ice-hockey match with the District Attorney, Katheryn states that Sarah's case is unwinnable. This ice-hockey match is particularly violent, a fact both encouraged and applauded by the male District Attorney. Riggs and Willoquet claim this invites audiences 'to see male bluster and insecurity, loud voices, sport and group violence as all encoded together in "typical" male behaviour' (1989: 216). This, they argue, suggests an analogy between Sarah's rape and male sport. Clover (1992) reaches similar conclusions. Whether viewers can be expected to make this analogy is, however, another matter. Katheryn is not an active spectator of the ice-hockey match. Yet her attendance at the game and the statements she makes about the rape case could be viewed as implying an active association with a culture where male power and violence is both privileged and celebrated.

Katheryn's plea-bargaining with the defence lawyers leads to the rape charge being reduced to reckless endangerment. In fighting to maintain the original charge Katheryn is here characterised as neither weak nor unsympathetic toward Sarah's cause. But she can be viewed as holding certain class prejudices, as it is Bob's lawyer who, in stating that the student's future would be irreparably damaged if he pleaded guilty to a sexual crime, persuades Katheryn to accept a charge of reckless endangerment.

A television news report stating that the three defendants were imprisoned for between two and five years brings the sub-plot involving the case against the alleged rapists to its close. However, a new sub-plot is immediately established with Sarah's entering Katheryn's home, interrupting a party, and verbally attacking her for selling out on the rape case. Here, for the first time Sarah provides insight into the violence and humiliation she has suffered, suggesting that indeed Katheryn has failed to uncover, for both the court and the film audience, what Sarah was subjected to during the rape.

Sarah's Character Change and the Second Sub-Plot

The scenes which follow depict the consequences of Sarah's being denied justice for her rape. Her cropping of her long hair can be read as an act of self-mutilation, though it can also be seen as signifying the construction of a new identity from which she will actively fight for justice (Riggs and Willoquet, 1989: 221). Throwing Larry out of her house following his annoyance at Sarah's refusal to have sex, whilst portraying Larry as utterly failing to understand how the rape has affected his girlfriend, can also be viewed as symbolising Sarah's embarking on vengeance against those who fail to recognise the traumatic violence she has experienced

Scenes 28 to 34 involve a significant turn in the narrative plot where Katheryn realises the effects of her not providing Sarah with proper and adequate legal representation.

| Scene | Length | Characters Featured | Summary of Action and Dialogue |
|-------|-------------------|--------------------------------------|--|
| 28 | 1 min 9 secs | Sarah, Cliff Albrecht | Sarah shops in a record store. A man, Cliff Albrecht, claims to recognise her. He tries to chat her up. Sarah attempts to shake him off. |
| 29 | 1 min 57 secs | As above | Sarah leaves the store pursued by Cliff. Remembering her from 'The Mill', he taunts her with sexual gesticulations. Getting in her car Sarah frantically locks the doors and attempts to drive from the parking lot. Cliff reverses his pick-up truck blocking her exit. Slamming on her brakes, Sarah's head smashes on the steering wheel. Cliff continues his abuse. Sarah reverses, then speeds toward the truck and smashes into it. She repeats this again. The image turns black. |
| 30 | 2 mins 28 secs | Cliff & wife, Katheryn, Sarah, nurse | In hospital Cliff argues with a woman over medical costs. Katheryn watches from a distance, then enters a room where Sarah lies in bed. Katheryn asks 'What happened?' Slow melancholy music plays as Sarah recounts Cliff's harassment and blames Katheryn for encouraging people to see her as 'a piece of shit'. |

| Scene | Length | Characters Featured | Summary of Action and Dialogue |
|-------|---------|---------------------------|--|
| 31 | 57 secs | Cliff & wife, Katheryn | Cliff struts from the hospital, his wife goes to get their car. Katheryn chases him asking if he knows Sarah; he replies 'She's a whore' who put on a great sex show. He denies Sarah was raped saying 'She loved it. She had an audience. She did the show of her life.' He gets into his car and speeds off. |
| 32 | 28 secs | Sarah, Katheryn | Sarah sleeping in hospital. Katheryn sits beside her. Slow melancholy music plays. |
| 33 | 1 min | Katheryn | In her office at night, Katheryn repeatedly plays a tape recording of the anonymous call to the emergency services reporting the rape at 'The Mill'. |
| 34 | 45 secs | Katheryn | Katheryn pulls reference books from the shelves in a large room. The scene is edited to indicate lapses in time and Katheryn's working till morning. |

In scene 29, the audience is invited to identify with the terrorism Sarah is subjected to, and her anger, as most of the scene is shot from her point of view. Scenes 30 through to 34, then present Katheryn discovering how she has effectively condoned Sarah's rape in refusing Sarah the chance to bear witness to that attack. Her recognition of this, and the dedication to Sarah's cause it brings about are portrayed in scenes 33 and 34. Music accompanying these scenes further supports an interpretation of Katheryn's recognition of her guilt for doubting Sarah, and seemingly invite the audience emotionally to celebrate her new alliance to the quest for justice.

When Katheryn's attempt to prosecute the cheering witnesses of the rape for criminal solicitation are threatened by the District Attorney, it is possible to read this threat as based on a male agenda which denies the seriousness of male violence against women. In these terms Katheryn could be regarded as now representing something of a feminist point of view. Yet the conflict between these two characters could alternatively be interpreted as a simple differing of professional beliefs, Katheryn characterising a view

that justice has to be done, the District Attorney a (mistaken) belief that Sarah's case has been dealt with and that Katheryn's personal feelings are affecting her work.

Katheryn's seeking to recruit Sally, a friend of Sarah's, as a witness in the new case resurrects questions concerning Sarah's complicity in the rape. Sally reveals that prior to the attack Sarah had said she would like to take Bob home and 'fuck his brains out' in front of Larry. Though a joke, this could be viewed as a comment which a more 'self-respecting' woman would be unlikely to make. On the other hand, the fact that this joke could damage Sarah's case might be interpreted as indicative of how rape victims have to prove their own innocence before being able to prove the offence against them.

Katheryn's investigation of the criminal solicitation case takes her again to 'The Mill'. Here she clearly feels uncomfortable. This may be regarded as caused by Sarah's having been raped in this bar. But the textual symbolism suggests it is the working-class male culture of 'The Mill' which poses a dangerous threat to Katheryn. This threat could, however, be read without any class implications with Katheryn simply feeling vulnerable in a room full of leering men.

In the games room of 'The Mill' Katheryn finds a pin-ball machine entitled 'Slam Dunk'. The camera's slow pan up this machine's score-board depicting a cartoon of a half-clad young woman 'dunked' in a basketball net, allows associations to be made between this imagery and the rape: both represent male debasement and abuse of women and their 'slam dunking' as a game.

With Katheryn then recruiting Kenneth Joyce as a witness for the prosecution the reading of it being men who are preventing Sarah's gaining justice could be undermined. However, Kenneth is characterised as very different from all other men in the film. Compared to their typical macho and aggressive characterisation, Kenneth has

the appearance of angelic innocence. If considered as a more 'feminine' male, this might create a perception of his existing outside of the type of male culture associated with rape.

The Rape Trial and Further Character Development

Perhaps not surprisingly given court formalities, as the criminal solicitation case opens Sarah is respectably dressed in a blue suit. However, this could suggest a change in Sarah's character as up until this point she has shown no inclination to dress 'decently'.

There is no suggestion that Sarah's lengthy and explicit account of her rape given in court should be disbelieved. Her distress when detailing the attack and when facing two manipulative male defence attorneys' attempts to undermine her testimony, provides considerable impulse for viewers to sympathise with her. Yet the narrative has indicated that the case hinges on Kenneth's testimony. Whilst there is no reason to question Sarah's story, it does not represent the 'objective' and independent truth about the rape which both the court and the cinema audience are seeking. Further, the publicity surrounding the depiction of rape in *The Accused* obviously leads viewers to expect more than Sarah's account provides. However, the fulfilment of this expectation is temporarily thwarted by Kenneth attempting to withdraw as a witness. Acting to delay to the narrative 'climax', this holds the audience in suspense as to when, or indeed how, the rape will be shown.

Kenneth visits Bob, his college friend imprisoned for reckless endangerment. Here Bob seeks to persuade Kenneth not to testify saying what he witnessed in 'The Mill' was not a rape. This could be viewed as an appeal to Kenneth's loyalty as a college friend and/or as a man as, should he break that loyalty, Bob could be condemned as a rapist. The interaction which then follows between Sarah and Kenneth in Kathryn's office, where Kenneth appears with the District Attorney to report his withdrawal of

testimony, supports either of these interpretations. Sarah tells Kenneth he's just as bad as the rapists for believing she provoked their attack and criticises his friendship with Bob. But Kenneth's denial that he is 'just like all the rest of them' brings the opportunity to consider Kenneth as neither loyal to a male cultural imperative, nor as part of that imperative himself: he confirms that he is different from other men.

Scenes 48 to 54 all centre on Kenneth's court testimony, with his verbal account being inter-cut with the flashback portraying events at 'The Mill' leading up to and including the rape.

| Scene | Length | Characters Featured | Summary of Action and Dialogue |
|--------------|----------------|---|---|
| 48 | 55 secs | Kenneth, Katheryn | Kenneth takes the witness stand. He states that he and Bob went to 'The Mill' after 'the game'. |
| 49 | 35 secs | Sarah, Cliff, Danny | Sarah enters the bar in a short skirt and jacket. Cliff enters behind her gleefully rubbing his hands. Sarah walks past the bar. Danny looks her up and down. |
| 50 | 10 secs | Kenneth | Kenneth states that Sarah had been talking to her friend when Danny sent the bar-tender over with some drinks. |
| 51 | 2 mins 11 secs | Sally, Sarah, Bob, Kenneth, Danny, bar-tender | Sally and Sarah sit laughing. Bob walks by, flirtatiously meeting Sarah's eye. Sarah remarks 'He's cute. Maybe I should just take him home and fuck his brains out right in front of Larry.' Sally laughs. Glancing at Bob, Sarah seductively removes her jacket. Danny watches and soon joins Sarah and Sally. He persuades Sarah to go into the games room. |
| 52 | 8 secs | Kenneth | Kenneth states 'Then she got up and followed him into the game room. Pretty soon they were playing pin-ball with Bob and getting pretty loaded.' |

| Scene | Length | Characters Featured | Summary of Action and Dialogue |
|-------|-------------------|--|--|
| 53 | 9 mins 19 secs | Sarah, Bob, Danny, Angela Cliff, Kenneth, Kurt, Matt, Stuart | Sarah excitedly plays pin-ball with Danny and Bob. Another woman, Angela, directs snide comments at Sarah. Sarah shares a joint with Danny. Kenneth plays a video game. Sarah dances to the juke-box. Angela exits. The bar's television screens a boxing match. The straps of Sarah's low cut vest fall down. She gestures for Danny to join her dancing. Cliff watches grinning. Danny and Sarah kiss, then she says she must leave. Men watch the couple. Cliff whoops 'Come on'. Danny hoists Sarah onto the pin-ball machine as they kiss. She pushes him back saying 'wait a minute' but Danny forces her down, his hand over her mouth. Cliff shouts 'He's gonna fuck her right there!' The camera rapidly cuts between Sarah and Danny's point of view. Kurt holds Sarah down. Spectators cheer and chant. Danny pulls his trousers down and penetrates Sarah. Sarah is then raped by Bob and Kurt. This is shot from various points of view: Sarah's, the rapists', and the spectators', being shown in part in slow motion. As Kurt reaches orgasm, Sarah bites his thumb. He yells. Sarah falls to the floor and runs from the bar screaming. |
| 54 | 30 secs | Kenneth, Katheryn | Katheryn asks Kenneth if he believes Sarah instigated the rape. He replies 'No I don't.' |

Scenes 49, 51 and the early part of 53 do characterise Sarah as behaving 'provocatively' toward Danny and Bob. Yet her flirtation could equally be viewed simply as an expression of her sexuality. Further, even though Sarah does attract the men's sexual attentions, she is clearly heard telling Danny to stop mauling her. Sarah does not then consent to sex, and the viewer is clearly encouraged against believing that she 'asked' to be subjected to the horrific violence of the rape.

The camera angles in scene 53 frequently align the position of the viewer with the spectators to the rape. This could cause a self-conscious identification with those spectators' voyeuristic activity and their encouragement of the rape. At other times the camera adopts the point of view of the rapists and Sarah. This invites identification with both those guilty of this crime and its victim. Combining such identifications with

those watching and egging on the attack, viewers might feel excluded from any comfortable, objective and safe distance from which to watch the rape portrayal. However, it cannot be assumed that this totally prevents the possibility of finding the scene pleasurable and dramatically exciting.

In negating the supposition that Sarah *caused* the rape, a reading reinforced by Kenneth's words in scene 54, the flashback shifts the responsibility onto the male rapists and spectators. The event can then be perceived as motivated by a particularly macho situation where the attackers sought to prove their virility. Such a reading is explicitly encouraged with the spectators mocking the size of Kurt's penis when he shows a reluctance to rape Sarah. With Danny and Bob vying for Sarah's attention in scenes 51 and 53, an element of male competition and sport could be brought to the reading. Such associations seem intentionally solicited by the additional screening of a boxing match on the bar's television monitor. It is only Kenneth who, though initially mesmerised by the rape, fails to participate in this sport and its active spectatorship. This suggests that he has little understanding of and/or sympathy with this masculine 'game'. When he does recognise what is occurring he appears horrified and exits.

As Katheryn and Sarah wait to be called back into court for the jury's verdict, there are again indications to suggest that Sarah is now a changed character. Sarah reveres the qualities of ambition and intelligence she finds in an astrological chart she has compiled for Katheryn. She can then be viewed as developing a respect for those types of characteristics valued by the middle-classes. Combined with her more 'respectable' appearance, this can be viewed as suggesting that Sarah is adopting a middle-class identity. Moreover, she no longer appears typical of a woman who would walk into a bar and behave in the manner she did prior to her rape. This does not necessarily change the understanding of that rape. Yet with Sarah seemingly recognising a more socially acceptable means of personal presentation and of gaining others' attention, she could be read as engaging in a critical reflection of her former self. Such a reading

would conform to some old and well established conventions given Kuhn's point that 'structurally and thematically the classic Hollywood narrative attempts to recuperate woman to a "proper place"' (1982: 35). However, from a different perspective Sarah's change could be understood as the result of her finally getting to present her testimony of the rape.

The Narrative Resolution

Sarah's changed characterisation continues as the film reaches its close and the anticipated guilty verdict against the men accused of criminal solicitation is given. As this is read out Sarah and Katheryn look at one another and then at Kenneth. Here Sarah's candid, silent and appreciative expression is unlike any other she has presented throughout the entire film. Previously she had been largely depicted as a hostile young woman who found it difficult to relate to people beyond of her own social milieu. She then comments to a mass of reporters surrounding her as she leaves court that she just wants to go home and play with her dog. This could be again viewed as indicative of a change in attitude as it illustrates that she now prefers to stay at home rather than go out in search of entertainment - an activity which can be clearly associated with her earlier rape. From a different point of view, however, the audience could speculate on whether earlier possible negative perceptions of this character were entirely fair. The film could be viewed as having strategically permitted a critical interpretation of her as a means of establishing certain doubts about the nature of her rape, and as a means of playing on those discourses which place a burden of responsibility on victims of rape for their attack.

Summary of Possible Reading Positions

As a mainstream entertainment product viewers are invited to find pleasure in viewing *The Accused*. Indeed its conventional Hollywood narrative structure, in posing the rape as an enigma and working this through to a resolution, clearly caters for such pleasure. Thus the film is produced according to a financial imperative where box-office takings, as well as video rentals and television sales, seek to capitalise on a market for narrative entertainment. There is little doubting that *The Accused* also seeks to profit from a perceived cultural appetite for audio-visual products containing sexually explicit and violent imagery.

However, the film can also be viewed within a cultural context of a growing social acceptance of women's issues which include concerns about rape. Though this does not eliminate the potential to regard the film as an example of Hollywood making a 'commodity out of concern' (Moore, 1989: 16).

Although *The Accused* can be interpreted according to the conventions of courtroom, investigative and rape-revenge genres, its wider classic narrative conventions are equally significant to its reading. Through these conventions audiences can clearly anticipate a happy ending to the film.

The circular narrative structure also plays a significant role in allowing for certain reading activities. This leaves open to hypothesis the validity of the rape allegation. By the end of the film this doubt is undermined. The narrative structure also seems to encourage a desire on the part of the viewer to see the rape, which, in being shown at the end of the film, maintains viewer interest and suspense.

There are a number of ways in which the rape of Sarah Tobias can be interpreted. It can be viewed as caused by a social denigration of women, where male virility and power is both culturally privileged and celebrated. This also accounts for one reason as

to why the legal system is so unwilling to recognise rape and provide justice for its victim. However, there is also room to read the rape as to some extent attributable to the working-class context in which it occurred.

Sarah's change in personality offers another means of interpreting the rape. As she moves away from a character who openly displays her sexuality, there is a sense that perhaps she finally sees something wrong in such behaviour herself. She equally moves away, in personal appearance at least, from a lower-class way of life. This could again affect such a way of life being associated with acts of violence against women. The fact that a middle-class character was involved in the rape, does, however, make it difficult to entirely substantiate such a reading.

The Reception Analysis

The reception study of *The Accused* is based on ten focus group discussions of this film. Four groups were from Scotland: one group of white middle-class and one group of Asian women with no experience of violence, one group of white and one group of Asian women with experience of violence. The six English groups consisted of one group of white working-class, one group of Asian and one group of Afro-Caribbean women with no experience of violence, one group of white, one of Asian and one of Afro-Caribbean women with experience of violence.

Impact of the Film's Production Context on Reading

A feature of responses to *The Accused* was how often interviewees made reference to the film as a commercial vehicle. Because of its sexually explicit and violent content a number of interviewees questioned the motives behind this production. In four groups beliefs were expressed that *The Accused* was a profit making venture. For example:

- Respondent 1: They make these films all the time. They're nothing to them. It is a business for them. They're making money out of these types of films.
- Respondent 2: Yes. Of course it is [for] the money.
[Scottish Asian women, with no experience of violence]

These films, they're obviously making them hoping it's going to be a box-office hit. ... People ... go and see films with lots of violence in them and lots of sex.

[Scottish white middle-class woman, with no experience of violence]

It isn't going to do women any good. It wasn't for education. It was just for money. It's useless trying to find any other reason why they made it.

[English Afro-Caribbean woman, with experience of violence]

This is a money spinner this film.

[English white woman, with experience of violence]

Such responses came from both women with experience of violence and those with no experience. English Afro-Caribbean women with experience of violence were particularly critical of the film in this respect.

Only a small minority of respondents stated that they actively engaged with *The Accused* as an entertainment film. All were women with no experience of violence.

For example:

I thoroughly enjoyed it. I thought it was entertaining and I really thought it was an excellent film. It was good acting and you have the good guys and the bad guys and I thought it was very very realistic.

[English white working-class woman, with no experience of violence]

When you watch a film it's a bit of escapism. ... That's the way I watch a film, to entertain me.

[Scottish white middle-class woman, with no experience of violence]

These statements suggest an aesthetic appreciation of *The Accused*, where the pleasure it provides is of greater significance than the subject matter it handles. Nevertheless, as is discussed below, this film clearly did tap into social discourses around the issue of rape, and in this respect succeeded in having something akin to an educational impact.

It might be considered surprising how few interviewees expressed an enjoyment of this film. But it is possible that women may have preferred not to admit to such enjoyment given the group context of the reception research.

Beyond the issue of the motives behind the making of *The Accused*, other aspects of its production had little bearing on its reception. For example, none of the respondents indicated any knowledge of the film's coming from the same stable as *Fatal Attraction*. Equally, though hardly surprisingly, no mention was made of its director, Jonathan Kaplan. Jodie Foster was the one individual associated with the film whom interviewees were familiar with. However, beyond her name being used interchangeably in discussions with that of her character Sarah Tobias, there was no evidence to indicate how Foster's association with the film may have impacted on its reading.

Genre and Reception

Very few interviewees referred to *The Accused* in generic terms. Those who did were the same few interviewees who unreservedly expressed an entertainment engagement with the film. This suggests some connection between reading the film according to generic conventions and an ability to enjoy it. For example:

I quite enjoyed the film. [It was like] films that you see on television: if there's a crime, you see a bit of it at the start and then you see the lawyer chasing round after people. And there's always the court scene and nine times out of ten the accused (and everybody knows right from the beginning he's guilty) is found guilty.

[Scottish white middle-class woman, with no experience of violence]

The joy of the build-up. A proper courtroom drama wasn't it? I was really glad that they were found guilty...

[English Afro-Caribbean woman, with no experience of violence]

Such responses were rare. However, what is evident in the reception of *The Accused* is that it was, at times, regarded as something akin to a documentary drama. In only one case was this reading cited as connected to the statistics on rape presented at the film's end. An Asian woman with no experience of violence used these to claim that the film's portrayal of a multiple rape must have been realistic. This supports the argument in the textual analysis that these statistics were likely only to marginally impact on the film's reception. None of the responses were influenced by notions of the film's being based on the New Bedford rape. Therefore, whereas American audiences might view it as 'based on fact', the film did not achieve this reading from these British interviewees.

What did appear to influence a *type* of documentary reading of *The Accused* was its portrayal of a very real form of violence. In this respect it was found that a number of interviewees engaged with the film in didactic terms. Particularly notable is that some women credited the film as extending their understanding of rape and/or as having the potential to have such an educational impact on others. For example:

You don't actually realise how violent, how horrible the thing really is until you see it.
[English white woman, with experience of violence]

Respondent 1: It happened in a crowd. You can't imagine that it could happen in a room full of men.

Respondent 2: It's really repulsive isn't it? It is going to [happen] if you are alone or just one person is there. ... Not in a room full of men. Nobody knows that.
[Scottish Asian women, with experience of violence]

It put over that 'No, women don't enjoy rape.' There is still this myth that in the end women enjoy rape. I thought the rape scene was horrifying, but hopefully it might make a few men sit up and take notice.
[English Afro-Caribbean woman, with experience of violence]

Other responses indicate that the film was viewed, by some (and these were most usually women with no experience of violence), as providing an insight in to the male mind:

You know that some men are like that. But I didn't realise that once they got in the gang, you hear about these rape cases it's usually one man attacking some woman. [But] all of them in the bar just watching and screaming and shouting. I was surprised that men could be like that, especially like gang wise. [English Afro-Caribbean woman, with no experience of violence]

What it basically shows is that men know nothing about women, they don't know how we feel or how we function. [English white working-class woman, with no experience of violence]

This suggests that *The Accused* was often viewed not just as a fiction, but as having some factual significance, thereby supporting the argument in Chapter Two that fictional texts should be examined in relation to how they might contribute to forms of public knowledge. This film illustrates an instance of a fictional text supporting, and even helping to construct, understandings of the nature and reality of women's rape

The group of middle-class women with no experience of violence were far less likely than were other groups to suggest a blurring of fact and fiction in their reception of *The Accused*. Because of its form, they primarily considered the film as intended for entertainment use.

If I want facts, I watch a current affairs programme, whereas you watch a film to be entertained. [Scottish white middle-class woman, with no experience of violence]

This indicates a firm line being drawn between fact and fiction where textual form is regarded as cuing the appropriate 'intended' reading. Another middle-class woman rejected a documentary reading of *The Accused* on the grounds that it was intended to induce an emotional response rather than to extend boundaries of knowledge:

There's a lot of films come on television ... disaster movies [like] *Airport* and what have you. Films that are obviously twisted to be unpleasant. I just don't see any point in watching them. Maybe I haven't lived through a rape, but I know a rape is unpleasant. ... It hasn't told me anything I didn't feel or think about rape before.

[Scottish white middle-class woman, with no experience of violence]

For a number of Scottish white middle-class women with no experience of violence the form of *The Accused* called for a strictly defined fictional reading. For some this allowed pleasure to be taken from the entertainment offered by a Hollywood drama. For others that pleasure was negated by the intensity of the emotional engagement demanded by the film.

Narrative Structure and Reception

The circular narrative of *The Accused* did play an important part in interviewees' reading of the film. Responses support the argument that this structure allowed for, and encouraged, ambivalent perceptions of the rape victim before undermining these through the portrayal of the rape.

Some people might have got the impression that she maybe wasn't wholly telling the truth: that she may not have been raped. You didn't know the full story at the beginning. And you didn't get an idea of how bad these people and the things they'd done really were. At the end I felt how she really felt.

[Scottish Asian woman, with experience of violence]

We said 'she was asking for it'. And then we said 'well you don't ask for rape'.

[Scottish white middle-class woman, with no experience of violence]

To start off with I didn't like her that much to be honest. But as it went on I felt sympathetic towards her.

[English Afro-Caribbean woman, with no experience of violence]

Other responses demonstrate that viewers are by no means forced to adopt this ambivalent reading of Sarah Tobias. This interviewee illustrates the possibility of sympathising with this character from the outset of the film:

It was disturbing the fact that she had to keep plugging away to [prove] what had happened to her, when really in the beginning it was quite obvious that she had gone through that.
[English white working-class woman, with no experience of violence]

Early sympathetic perceptions of Sarah were less common than might be expected, especially given that half of the interviewees were women with experience of violence. However, as is detailed below, a considerable number of such respondents believed the film did not intend such a reading. They were particularly aggrieved by this. Additionally, complicating a sympathetic view of Sarah is the fact that many women saw her as acting irresponsibly prior to her rape (this is discussed further below). Therefore, by the film's end they found cause to distance themselves from her, rather than empathise with her. This reveals that cultural perceptions of appropriate behaviour for women had a greater impact on the reception of this text than did its encoded invitation to finally empathise with the rape victim.

The Desire to See the Rape

Some interviewees consciously recognised that the narrative structure of *The Accused* created a desire to see the rape. One Asian woman with no experience of violence articulated how this positioned her as a viewer:

As the viewer I was thinking 'I want to know more'. ... They're leading you along so much into thinking certain things and then you want the conclusion to it. You want to have the whole picture because it is a film. In real life I don't expect to see the event happen again. ... But in the film, I was expecting to have more evidence. ... It's wrong of me to be wanting more evidence. But till I saw the rape scene

I was still hanging on to some sort of doubt about her. ... I wanted to know ... everything that happened rather than just being told about it. Maybe it's that bit about wanting to see the gory details as well.

[English Asian woman, with no experience of violence]

Scottish white middle-class and English Afro-Caribbean women with no experience of violence considered the narrative constructed so as to maintain viewer interest and attention:

The rape in my opinion ... was put at the very end to build you up to the excitement of the rape scene. ... You think 'Oh this is a good part'.

[English Afro-Caribbean woman, with no experience of violence]

If they'd have shown that at the beginning, the film wouldn't have held people's attention so much.

[Scottish white middle-class woman, with no experience of violence]

Interestingly it is again women with no experience of violence who commented on such formal characteristics of the film's construction. This could be indicative of their being more detached from the subject matter of the film than were women with experience of violence, and, therefore, more able to reflect on how its formal qualities played a part in their reading.

The Happy Ending

The narrative resolution of *The Accused* provided interviewees with considerable relief and pleasure. Many women explained how, without this happy ending, they would have been left greatly disturbed:

Respondent 1: If the verdict had been not guilty I'd have walked out of this room boiling.

Respondent 2: ... It would've been an unfair result for us.
[Scottish white women, with experience of violence]

Respondent 1: Yes. More satisfying being a woman yourself.
Researcher: How would it have made you feel if they were found not guilty?

Respondent 2: I would have been really nauseated. I'd probably be really suicidal. You know, the first man you see give him a dirty look and think 'Arghh'. Really - 'Arghh' - ripping your hair out I think.
[English Afro-Caribbean women, with no experience of violence]

There were, however, concerns expressed by some about the messages which this ending mediated to audiences. A number of English white women with experience of violence felt that this falsely represented the more typical outcome of rape allegations:

It seems to have like this happy ending where everybody's brought to justice and everything. But I cannot imagine that sentence of soliciting ... would actually happen. ... Isn't it fairly common knowledge that lots of rape cases don't even get to court in America? And a large percentage that do are quashed?
[English white woman, with experience of violence]

From the same group came the argument that the resolution of *The Accused* would pacify women's outrage at how rape victims are treated in reality:

Maybe it would actually be a better thing for women if they'd lost the case because I would've felt so angry about it. I think many more women watching would feel more angry about it because we can now think 'Oh that was good. The case was won'.
[English white woman, with experience of violence]

Another interviewee from this group criticised the film for its highly romanticised portrayal of justice. In the group of Scottish white women with experience of violence it was argued that a greater realism and educational impact would have been achieved through a 'not guilty' verdict. Afro-Caribbean women with experience of violence also questioned the realism of the film's ending. One interviewee attributed this ending to narrative convention where 'the baddies' had to be got rid of.

Textual Coding in the Reception of Characters and the Rape

Interpretations of the Rape Victim

Without exception *The Accused* was understood as concerned with a complicated rape case where the victim's supposed culpability posed considerable problems for a legal prosecution. However, women with experience of violence and those with no experience of violence differed in how they interpreted the character of this victim. It was only women with no experience of violence who made any causal connections between Sarah's upbringing, background, lifestyle and her rape.

Scottish white middle-class women with no experience of violence were often critical of Sarah's lifestyle and behaviour, considering this perhaps not entirely the cause, but certainly a contributory factor in her rape. For example:

I'm not condemning her but if she chooses to go to seedy looking bars with drunken men, being drunk and high on pot herself ... - a decent girl shouldn't be doing that sort of thing.
[Scottish white middle-class woman, with no experience of violence]

Similar criticisms of Sarah were found in other groups with no experience of violence:

She appeared to be a bit loose and fancy free didn't she? ... She didn't seem to have much of an upbringing or anything did she?
[English white working-class woman, with no experience of violence]

Respondent 1: She was a bit of a tart.
Respondent 2: A bit of a lowlife.
Respondent 1: The way she carried herself.
[English Afro-Caribbean women, with no experience of violence]

However, it was never suggested by women with no experience of violence that Sarah's background and lifestyle somehow *justified* her rape. Indeed, a few such respondents viewed the film as stressing that a victim's background should play no part in the judgment of a rape allegation. For example:

They portrayed her as a kind of deviant: she came from a broken family background, she was a heavy drinker, smoked pot, uneducated and the way she dressed and the situation she lived in. She was kind of deviant, out of the norm. ... But then as the film progresses, it's like just because you're that kind of person, rape is still rape, no matter who it happens to. It's not like you're going to be let off raping her because she's that kind of person.
 [English Asian woman, with no experience of violence]

Most women with experience of violence made little mention of Sarah's background and lifestyle, though the Afro-Caribbean group did. They expressed considerable anger at the portrayal, believing, like Riggs and Willoquet (1989), that it promoted a stereotype of rape victims:

If [the film makers] wanted to make people understand what rape is about, then they shouldn't have picked out a victim who's going to have all these bad things put against her. Like she was done for cocaine and she had a criminal record and all those kind of things. It makes out that rape only happens to certain types of people.
 [English Afro-Caribbean woman, with experience of violence]

Comparison of this statement with the Asian woman's response immediately above shows that even though viewers might take identical meanings from textual coding, the assumptions they make about the *intentions* of that coding can be completely contradictory.

Beyond indications of how Sarah's background was perceived and how interviewees viewed her portrayal in the rape flashback (these are discussed below), there is little indication of how other aspects of textual signification affect interpretations of this character. For example, no interviewees referred to the plates carried on Sarah's car, none remarked on her interest in astrology, and few mentioned her cutting off her hair, throwing her boyfriend out of their home, or the meeting with Cliff Albrecht which caused her hospitalisation. This is not to say that these aspects of the plot might not

have been contributed to the reading of Sarah's character. Rather, there is a lack of evidence concerning how interviewees engaged with them.

Some interviewees, all women with no experience of violence, did view Sarah as a changed character by the close of the film. English white working-class women with no experience of violence found great significance in how Sarah presented herself in the final stages of *The Accused*:

Respondent 1: You know the pathetic creature you saw running out at the beginning to the young lady that came down the steps at the end? I think it was a fight, not only for her character, but for her inner soul as well. Because she [was no longer] treated like a nothing, she was treated as somebody that mattered.

Respondent 2: I wonder if she'd got the clothes that she was in court with from her own wardrobe. They didn't say. Or whether the lawyer had told her to dress like that? Because she was smart wasn't she?
[English white working-class women, with no experience of violence]

This suggests a reading of Sarah as going through a form of redeeming experience. It is as though, with the support of others' eventual respect, she had been purged of her tendencies to act in a manner 'unbecoming' of a woman. Similar readings were given by a number of Afro-Caribbean and Asian women with no experience of violence. For example:

She was more mature. You could tell that by the way she dressed, she was covered wasn't she?
[English Asian woman, with no experience of violence]

Respondent 1: She felt within herself she was a bit of a failure. A drop out in society. When no one was taking her seriously she thought 'Well, I've got to get my act together. I've got to start dressing and look respectable and go out and prove my case.' And that's what she did.

Respondent 2: In the beginning she came across as being really cocky and smart and 'No one can sort of tell me anything'.
[English Afro-Caribbean women, with no experience of violence]

Given these readings, for women with no experience of violence it was not simply the fact that Sarah was allowed the opportunity to testify that caused her character to change. In classic cinema convention she had indeed been 'recuperated'.

Interpretations of the Lawyer Katheryn Murphy

Given her substantial role in *The Accused*, it is surprising how little interviewees mentioned the character of Katheryn Murphy. This goes against Clover's analytical claim that this film shifts the focus of concern away from the rape victim by placing it on the lawyer (1992: 147). Moreover, how the character of Katheryn Murphy was viewed was closely linked to how interviewees interpreted the rape allegation and the issues posed by that allegation.

In only two groups did interviewees interpret Katheryn as having adopted and applied male judgments to her initial handling of Sarah's rape claim. It had been argued in the textual analysis that this could have been used as a causal explanation for her initial attitude toward the rape case.

She was in the same ways as the bloke at the top. She didn't see it from the girl's point of view. To her she was asking for it herself. She wasn't sympathetic towards the girl. It was when the girl told her off that she thought about what she must have gone through.

[English Afro-Caribbean woman, with no experience of violence]

I think to begin with she was portrayed and probably quite realistically so as a woman in a man's world who'd taken on their values and their evaluations of the situation.

[English white woman, with experience of violence]

In the two groups of Scottish women with no experience of violence perceptions of Katheryn were instead linked to the view that the rape allegation was complicated by the victim's questionable character. This clearly helped reinforce these respondents' initial doubts about the rape:

- Researcher: Why do you think she didn't take her seriously to start with?
- Respondent: Because she wouldn't have won that rape case. ... They would say she was asking for it. ... She [Katheryn] listened. She heard her [Sarah's] view and she couldn't say she'd win the case of rape. [Scottish Asian woman, with no experience of violence]
- I thought she was a bit cold with [Sarah] at first because she wasn't sure whether or not she had consented to having sex with them or whether in fact it was rape. [Scottish white middle-class woman, with no experience of violence]

Whilst English white working-class women with no experience of violence understood that Katheryn considered Sarah's case a complicated one, they believed she still supported Sarah's cause. Though it was Katheryn who initially suggested that the rape allegation would be difficult to substantiate this was not considered a personal expression of Katheryn's beliefs, but a criticism of the values prevalent in the criminal justice system.

Interpretations of why Katheryn changed her attitude toward the rape case follow those outlined in the textual analysis. She was viewed by some interviewees as overcome with guilt about how she had initially handled the case. Others read her as coming to see the rape from a woman's perspective and therefore recognising the need to fight for justice. There was no significant relationship between which interviewees adopted which readings. However, English Afro-Caribbean women with experience of violence adopted a highly unsympathetic view of Katheryn. This drew on the encoding of Katheryn as middle-class and as feeling guilty about her original handling of Sarah's case. But the depth of criticism found here was not anticipated by the textual analysis:

- Respondent 1: She's a middle-class bitch with a chip on her shoulder.
- Respondent 2: Wracked with guilt.
- Respondent 1: Yes. She was just middle-class and she had this big chip on her shoulder about making a deal without consulting her client. She felt so guilty she had to go

back and prove a point; and she proved everybody wrong and she won the case.

Respondent 2: At the beginning, for her to sit in a room with the boys and to strike up a deal and not actually talk to the victim, that is pure arrogance.
[English Afro-Caribbean women, with experience of violence]

Such unsympathetic and critical readings of Katheryn were not found in any other group. This is clearly a class-based interpretation, one which could well be compounded by the fact that Katheryn was middle-class *and* white. This also illustrates the potential for class identification to have a much stronger effect on reception than any notion of commonality in gender between the viewers and characters in the text.

Views of Kenneth Joyce

The textual analysis identified Kenneth Joyce as characterised very differently from other men in *The Accused*. All of the English interviewees recognised this difference, though the meanings they took from it varied.

English white working-class women with no experience of violence regarded Kenneth as characterising a female form of response to the rape. For them this explained why he did not partake in that rape. For example:

He was quite a feminine character really. He was portrayed as a real effeminate bloke wasn't he? ... Compared with everybody else in that bar, they were bawdy and loud and you looked at him in his neat little jacket and his sweet little face, standing there with absolute shock and horror.
[English white working-class woman, with no experience of violence]

A similar perception of Kenneth was found among English Asian women with no experience of violence, but here Kenneth becomes an 'angel' characterising a certain strength of choice:

They had one angel in there who was the one who ran to the phone. ... He still had the potential to be one of them joining in. The fact that he didn't was trying to show that men have got the choice not to.
[English Asian woman, with no experience of violence]

Afro-Caribbean women read Kenneth from a very different direction:

I think he was a bit weak. ... He obviously did agree with the raping because he just sort of stood there. In fact, he was mesmerised.
[English Afro-Caribbean woman, with no experience of violence]

This is typical of the less than positive interpretations of Kenneth found among the two groups of Afro-Caribbean women. An indication of why they were critical of Kenneth when others were not is perhaps provided by those with experience of violence. There Kenneth's difference from other men made him wholly undesirable.

- Respondent 1: He was a little wimp who'd gone squealing on the rest of the men.
Respondent 2: Just think if they never found them guilty. He would've got his arse busted.
Respondent 3: He'd of probably got his head busted if it was in real life.
Respondent 4: And he's probably the sort of guy who hasn't got a girlfriend and has no hope of getting one. That's what makes it worse because even as he was telling the story you could tell that he just found this behaviour really weird. He wouldn't know the first line to chat up a woman with.
[English Afro-Caribbean women, with experience of violence]

Afro-Caribbean women's views of Kenneth seem then to be shaped by strong attachments to notions of the archetypal desirable masculine male. Assuming that *The Accused* sought to offer a critical examination of male culture and masculinity, here masculine attributes are so revered that the film's discourse is not so much rejected as inverted.

Unlike the English groups, Scottish women made little of the differences between Kenneth and other male characters. Scottish white middle-class women with no experience of violence simply saw Kenneth as being more respectable than those

involved in Sarah's rape. One interviewee here also implies that drink may have been the cause of the rape:

- Respondent 1: He just was totally disgusted by it. You saw him standing back.
 Respondent 2: Perhaps he had a sense of decency.
 Respondent 1: Because maybe he wasn't quite so drunk.
 [Scottish white middle-class women, with no experience of violence]

The other Scottish groups discussed Kenneth's position in the film from quite a different point of view. They concentrated on trying to understand why he failed to prevent the rape occurring and was later reluctant to support Sarah's court case. In these groups no reference was made to his masculine attributes or lack of them.²

Some English white and Afro-Caribbean women were critical at the narrative function Kenneth performed in *The Accused*. Interviewees felt this character was assigned the role of the hero and/or that his account of the rape, being presented in the flashback, was credited as more worthy of attention than Sarah's.

I think that was a sort of vindication of men. Because there has to be this good guy and he actually is the hero in the end and makes it all right because he gets up on the witness stand even though he didn't do it in the beginning.
 [English white woman, with experience of violence]

When the girl was telling the other lady [Katheryn] about when she was raped, why wasn't it sort of flashed back as her story rather than waiting to the trial and let another witness [tell the story].
 [English Afro-Caribbean woman, with no experience of violence]

2 It cannot be assumed that this necessarily reveals any difference between Scottish and English women's reception of the film. It is important to note that in relation to *The Accused* the only group of middle-class women in the study were from Scotland. All of the English groups were working-class, and here Afro-Caribbean groups were recruited where they were not in Scotland.

These were very unusual responses and suggest a certain sophisticated feminist reaction to the film. Indeed, quite similar arguments are put forward in Carol Clover's analysis of *The Accused* (1992: 149-50).

Why did the Rape Happen?

A considerable proportion of the group discussions of *The Accused* were devoted to the question of why Sarah was raped. A number of factors were used to explain this. Some indicate engagements with readings identified in the textual analysis, others challenge arguments contained in that analysis.

In all of the interview groups there was strong condemnation for the rapists who attacked Sarah. Most frequently respondents viewed these men as using the rape as a means of making assertions about their masculine power, a reading which the textual analysis had highlighted.

I don't even think they thought of it as a crime. ... They probably saw it as though she's asking for it so she's going to get it. It just boosts them. It's some sort of male ego and anyone that didn't take part is a wimp. That's the way they look at it.
[English Afro-Caribbean woman, with no experience of violence]

Respondent 1: I just think that they're men that have a low esteem of women ...

Respondent 2: But a high esteem of themselves.

Respondent 1: ...'One of the boys.' Macho. Sometimes I think that they don't even think what they're doing is wrong.

Respondent 3: They sometimes think that it's their right to do that to women. It's the power thing again. Power over women.

[Scottish white women, with experience of violence]

Such forms of response were found in *all* the interview groups. In Schlesinger *et al* (1992: 156-61) it is detailed at length how *The Accused* mobilised discussions about male culture. Therefore, this film can be considered quite significant in terms of how it provokes thought about gender. However, as will be seen below, whilst the film

seemed to be viewed as highlighting some very unpleasant aspects of masculinity and its effects on women, ultimately many respondents expressed a belief that it is women's responsibility to censor their desires so as to protect themselves from the violent desires of men.

There is some evidence to support the argument that *The Accused* promotes an understanding of rape as a form of male sport, competition or game:

For the guys it was like an easy game, because of her condition.

[Scottish Asian woman, with experience of violence]

It was like a machine that was holding a jackpot or something

[Scottish Asian woman, with no experience of violence]

Like a drinking competition in the pub. One swills down a pint, the rest of them have got to do it. Even if it makes them sick. And if it makes them sick they cheer even more.

[English white working-class woman, with no experience of violence]

Though this sporting analogy is applied to the rape, there was no evidence to suggest that interviewees made any associational links between the rape and those legitimate forms of male sport depicted in the film of ice-hockey and boxing. Therefore, arguments put forward by Riggs and Willoquet (1987) and Clover (1992) to the affect that this is what the film discursively mediates are somewhat overstated, and it is clear that those arguments involve empirically unsubstantiated assumptions about how textual coding *will* impact on reception.

The effects of male culture on men themselves also featured in interpretations. It was universally agreed, suggesting an unequivocal success in the text's prompting of this reading, that the third rapist, Kurt, was coerced into raping Sarah because his masculine identity was under threat. For example:

Because if he didn't do it they'd think he was gay or whatever. And to rape her was to prove that obviously he's a man. And that's one reason why he did it really. But I think under normal circumstances he probably wouldn't have bothered.
[English Afro-Caribbean woman, with no experience of violence]

However, Scottish middle-class and English working-class white women with no experience of violence argued that the college student, Bob, was similarly coerced to rape by the crowd hysteria. This is a surprising interpretation given that the film offers no means by which it can be justified: Bob is depicted as a highly enthusiastic participant in the rape. It is as though there was a wish on the part of some respondents to salvage this aspiring young man from responsibility for his actions, finding it impossible to condemn a supposedly respectable student.

An English Asian woman with no experience of violence responded quite differently to the student's role in the rape. She believed the film makers used Bob to diminish the class bias in the characterisation of the rapists:

You still have a display of 'some men don't' though. You don't see no upper-class blokes there where the scene actually took place. It was still down town. ... I think the college kid was in just to soften the stereotype.
[English Asian woman, with no experience of violence]

This criticism of the portrayal of stereotypical rapists was found in a second group, where, whilst it was condemned, it was understood as functioning to heighten the realism effect:

For rapists they used stereotypes of so called rapists. If there was a group of them in suits with a briefcase and a bowler hat or something, it would be really hard to believe that they're actually capable of that. But the real macho, rough neck type of men - it really played up to that stereotype.
[English Afro-Caribbean woman, with experience of violence]

Though there was some room to interpret the rape as a working-class act, none of the interviewees explicitly followed this reading. Yet here the imagery of 'The Mill' comes into play, which indeed, as the textual analysis argued was possible, lead to associations being drawn between the rape and 'low-class culture':

That was a particularly seedy horrible dingy dive wasn't it?

[Scottish white middle-class woman, with no experience of violence]

The type of bar she went to, it probably was one of these rough type ... where certain type of people hang out. ... I think it's just the type of bar she went into.

[English Afro-Caribbean woman, with no experience of violence]

Only women with no experience of violence made a causal connection between 'The Mill' as a certain type of establishment and Sarah's rape. This placed a considerable burden of responsibility on Sarah for going to this bar. However, in one form or another Sarah was criticised in all groups for not doing all she could have done to prevent the attack against her.

A significant number of Asian interviewees, both with and with no experience of violence, upon seeing the rape scene, read this as revealing Sarah's culpability in the attack.

When we first saw that lady [Sarah] ... we were sympathetic with [her]. We didn't see the other side of it. So when we saw the other side of it we changed our opinion.

[English Asian woman, with experience of violence]

She shouldn't have gone out dressed like that. She shouldn't be behaving like that. We're saying she should know what the risks are.

[English Asian woman, with no experience of violence]

I thought she was asking for it to be honest. The way she was dressed, that was pathetic. And the way she was carrying on and the way she was dancing that was number one that she was asking for it.

[Scottish Asian woman, with no experience of violence]

She was leading them on. She had too much to drink and the way she was dancing. Her clothes as well - her top, her skirt.

[Scottish Asian woman, with experience of violence]

These responses illustrate that many Asian interviewees' perceptions of appropriate behaviour for women were extremely influential in their reception of the rape. The structure of the text, in contrast to what *seems* intended, was, in relation to these respondents, unable to eliminate Sarah as causally associated with the rape, and the rhetorical point that women do not solicit rape is completely denied. Though *not all* Asian women read the rape in this way, such responses were a very common feature of discussions in these groups.

However, whilst other interview groups did not indicate a perception of Sarah as provoking the rape, the vast majority of respondents did regard her as effectively setting herself up for an attack. For example:

She was silly, careless to be caught like that. A bit daft I would say.

[Scottish white woman, with experience of violence]

Respondent 1: She definitely was flirting in a very provocative way which would lead men to think she was wanting more than a drink

Respondent 2: Yes, I agree. She was drunk, she was smoking the funny tobacco, flirting, she had fallen out with her boyfriend and there was a couple of eligible men in the bar and she was going to have one of them that night.

[Scottish white middle-class women, with no experience of violence]

It's not as if they went out of their way and grabbed her. She was enjoying herself and showing off and flirting and everything. I don't think she'd do that again.

[English Afro-Caribbean woman, with no experience of violence]

- Respondent 1: She should've stopped it before it got as far as it did.
 Respondent 2: I don't think she quite knew what she was doing.
 [English white women, with experience of violence]

Only Afro-Caribbean women with experience of violence did not view Sarah as taking considerable risks prior to her rape. Instead they condemned the film for allowing this reading, equating it with a suggestion of provocation.

The extensive emphasis on Sarah's 'risk taking' behaviour in interviewees' accounts of the rape poses an obvious problem for the textual analysis of this film and (assuming their intentions were to challenge cultural assumptions about the culpability of rape victims) for the film's producers. The textual analysis had argued that this film worked to undermine the mythical stereotype of the provocative rape victim. However, interviewees' responses show that this stereotype is not so easily discarded, as it is not considered simply a myth, but a reality.

Watching the Rape

Responses to the portrayal of the rape support the argument that this scene was constructed in such a way as to make it uncomfortable to watch (for many of these female interviewees at least). However women with experience of violence were more likely to remark on this than were women with no experience of violence. For example:

When we came to the rape scene I felt quite ill - sick with it going on and on and on. It went on for far too long.
 [Scottish white woman, with experience of violence]

- Respondent 1: I felt personally totally violated. I didn't like it at all.
 Respondent 2: I found it very uncomfortable.
 [English white women, with experience of violence]

Scottish white middle-class women also disliked viewing the rape. Yet they indicated a certain detachment from the characters involved in it.

I think it's disturbing from the fact that the female has been raped. She's been violated. I'm trying to feel what she must be feeling being taken against her will. That can't be very pleasant.
[Scottish white middle-class woman, with no experience of violence]

Those interviewees who *did* reveal a sense of involvement in the rape were more usually women with experience of violence. They were also more likely to self-consciously reflect on their position as viewers of the rape, where some women with no experience of violence would simply reject the right of the film makers to present this scene. This contrast is illustrated in the following two responses:

When I first watched it I felt really bad. I came out and thought 'God should I have sat through that scene?' It makes you feel as if you're involved yourself because as that guy was saying they were all there watching.
[English Afro-Caribbean woman, with experience of violence]

Respondent 1: I don't see why I want to bring that into my living room.

Respondent 2: I just didn't like seeing that. I just didn't like it.
[Scottish white middle-class women, with no experience of violence]

The first of the above responses from a woman with experience of violence suggests an identification with the voyeurism of the spectators. Such identification was also expressed by another English Afro-Caribbean woman with experience of violence. Interestingly both this interviewee and the one above speak of how this came about when they viewed *The Accused* in a cinema.

I came out of there and was extremely angry. Angry with myself, angry at myself for not having first - it was sensationalised - it was sort of hyped up by the media, and I thought 'So what? I'll go along and I'll see that.'
[English Afro-Caribbean woman, with experience of violence]

A Scottish white middle-class woman with no experience of violence also told how, in response to the considerable publicity surrounding *The Accused*, she went to see the

film at the cinema. Here the response reveals how the rape portrayal went beyond any of her expectations:

I must admit when I went to go and see it, it was the big thing: 'Oh, there's this rape scene in it. Everyone's got to go and see it'. But I especially wanted to see it just to see what it was like. I thought it was going to be about a couple of seconds, just guys cheering it on - I didn't expect it to be anything like that.
[Scottish white middle-class woman, with no experience of violence]

The length and explicitness of the rape did indeed then go beyond what was conventionally anticipated. Also of significance is that fact that when interviewees responded to publicity and viewed this material in the cinema, they found themselves reflecting on their motives for wanting to see the film. However, this only ever led to criticism of the film. None of the interviewees considered the film as actually seeking to induce such reflections.

Asian women were the least likely to respond adversely to the rape scene. This could be linked to the fact that many such interviewees believed that the victim provoked this attack and that the film could therefore serve to educate women about the consequences of 'inappropriate' behaviour. It was in an Asian group that one of the most unusual responses to the rape was found when an interviewee with no experience of violence stated 'I was surprised that besides being sickened, I was excited by the rape'. This is not to suggest either that other Asian woman might have viewed the rape in this way, or that women in other groups might not have. Again, given the context of the research women may have found it difficult to admit to such arousal. But what this does indicate is that it is indeed possible for women to enjoy the rape in *The Accused*.

Concluding Remarks

This analysis of *The Accused* raises a number of issues about the capability of a commercial audio-visual fictional narrative to represent rape in such a way as to deny complicity on the part of the rape victim. This is revealing of a cultural belief that rape is by no means a clear-cut crime where responsibility lies unquestionably with the rapist. The very fact that *The Accused* was produced bears witness to this fact. It is also a film intended to make capital out of this issue.

As a product of Hollywood, as has been illustrated, some women, unlike many professional film reviewers, found it difficult to view *The Accused* as sincerely intended to address misunderstandings about rape. A variety of women, both with and with no experience of violence, believed that this was another example of Hollywood exploiting sexual violence for financial gain. However, generally the film did succeed in encouraging women to think about rape and what its victims are subjected to, even when they are cynical of its motives.

The Accused was very often viewed as providing an insight into, and explanations for, rape attacks on women. How these explanations were engaged with and read depended on experience of violence or non-experience, and the cultural background of interviewees. Among women with no experience of violence there was an increased likelihood of their reading the film in terms of formal aesthetic convention. Many of these women tended to draw quite heavily on the associative meanings they took from the textual coding in making sense of the rape. Consequently they were more inclined to follow indications that Sarah may have 'provoked' the attack before revising this reading to one critical of male culture. Women with experience of violence were more inclined to adopt a sympathetic reading of the rape victim from the outset. They were very often critical of the film's initially allowing for the blame to be placed on the rape victim and/or a certain 'lowlife' culture. Afro-Caribbean women with experience of violence were particularly angered by the availability of this reading. Many women

with experience of violence were additionally concerned about the narrative resolution. In their minds this worked to pacify audiences' outrage toward the rape and the criminal justice system's handling of that crime.

Many Asian women, both with and with no experience of violence provided an aberrant reading of the rape. They largely perceived this attack to have been caused by its victim's sexually provocative behaviour, a reading which runs counter to the claim made in the textual analysis that the film is encoded and structured in such a way as to undermine this very reading. A knowledge of Asian culture could have perhaps anticipated this form of reception. However, this illustrates an instance of certain cultural beliefs having a stronger power of determination in how a text is received than textual signification has in being able to constrain the interpretative potential of that text.

Though a considerable number of Asian respondents viewed the rape victim in *The Accused* as causally responsible for her own rape, many other interviewees, both with and with no experience of violence, also perceived this woman's 'risk-taking' behaviour to be a significant factor in that attack. Even though the textual analysis identified a highly critical discourse on male power in *The Accused*, one certainly taken on board by interviewees, their readings do not reveal a belief that this power can necessarily be eliminated. Rather it becomes the woman's responsibility to avoid behaving in such a manner as to become vulnerable to its ultimate violence. Moore's concerns that *The Accused* does nothing to undermine 'the myth of "uncontrollable" male sexuality' (1989: 17) is then, very much supported by this reception analysis. Moreover this serves as an illustration of how 'the masculine-male derives power from the censure of all other sex/gender identities, and that (the fear of) rape and sexual assault are important factors in the management of that hegemony' (Roberts, 1993: 174).

Schlesinger *et al*'s original analysis of these respondents' reactions to *The Accused* stated that this film 'touched the emotional core of virtually all women present. What was particularly striking ... was the *universal* identification with the situation of the rape victim' (1992: 163, original emphasis). Given the almost universal reading of that character having, in one way or another, set herself up for attack, it is evident that the women respondents both live in fear of rape and, because of its causal associations, in fear of openly and publicly expressing any sexual desires they might have for men with whom they are not already involved. In effect such female desires are regarded as highly dangerous, as they in turn provoke violent, uncontrollable desires in men. The claim that '*The Accused* challenges ... a society in which male desires not only impose themselves on female desire, but depend on cancelling female desire out' (Moore, 1989: 17) is unsubstantiated by this reception analysis. It is found that most women *actually* view the film as illustrating the horrifying consequences of not censoring female desire. Moreover, for a number of women with no experience of violence, the film itself enabled a reading of Sarah as eventually adopting a more 'respectable' identity. It endorsed the cultural belief that it is more appropriate for women not to persist in displaying their sexuality, but to censure that sexuality because it ultimately attracts trouble.

CHAPTER FIVE

EASTENDERS: DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN A SOAP OPERA

Introduction

Soap operas raise some problems for both textual and reception research. Allen states that 'In the case of soap opera, we have a text that is not only ungraspable as a whole at any one moment but is also a "whole" only by reference to a given moment' (1985: 76). For this reason some writers have argued against conducting research on individual episodes of soaps (Paterson and Stewart, 1981: 81; Seiter *et al*, 1989: 232). However, there is good cause to look at how a programme from this genre portrays a case of male violence against a woman.

Soap opera is the most popular of all television broadcast forms and in recent years two British soaps, *EastEnders* and *Brookside*, have contained a number of story-lines featuring violence against women. At the time of writing both continue to foreground plots associated with domestic violence. In *EastEnders*, Grant Mitchell and his wife Sharon, the publicans of the *Queen Vic*, are encountering marriage difficulties relating back to a time when Grant physically abused Sharon, for which he was imprisoned. In *Brookside* the Jordache family (the mother Mandy and daughters Beth and Rachael) lived for some period of time in a house where Trevor Jordache, murdered by Mandy and Beth, was buried under the garden patio. This killing followed Trevor's repeatedly beating Mandy and sexually abusing his two daughters. Currently, following the discovery of Trevor's body, Mandy and Beth are being tried in court for his murder. Channel 4 has been criticised for the amount of violence depicted in this story-line, particularly following the broadcast on 2 October 1994 of a *Brookside Special - The*

Jordache Story.¹ Representatives from Women's Aid have, however, applauded *Brookside*'s attempts to raise awareness of domestic violence (see Sinclair, 1993).

The soap opera portrayal of violence examined in this chapter depicts domestic violence in a mixed-race marriage. It comes from episode 458 of *EastEnders* broadcast on 13th July 1989 at 7.30pm. The violence shown in this episode is not the first to have occurred in this marriage. The white husband had hit his black wife three times before in a plot running over some months. However, in episode 458 the violence is at its most extreme. A synopsis of this episode is presented below.

The textual analysis of this portrayal of domestic violence first examines the production and marketing contexts of *EastEnders* and assesses how this might affect perceptions of the programme. Then, in considering the soap opera as a genre, it is explored how generic conventions can guide audience reception, and how these could impact on how the representation of domestic violence is read. There then follows an analysis of the narrative structure of the soap, with it being expanded on why this causes some problems for textual research and how this investigation attempts to overcome some of these problems.

To examine how the domestic violence story-line was developed in *EastEnders*, a brief analysis of its treatment over a four-month period is conducted. This is followed by a close analysis of episode 458 which was screened in the reception research. This assesses the range of readings of the domestic violence available from the single episode, as well as how an intra-textual knowledge of the story could impact on its reception.

¹ The programme makers were called to defend this broadcast on Channel 4's *Right to Reply* (8/10/1994).

Synopsis of *EastEnders* Episode 458

This synopsis draws on a script outline of episode 458 provided by the *EastEnders* production department to which some minor contextual information has been added. This does not detail how the action cuts between story-lines, though that is to be examined in the close analysis of the episode below.

The cooker which the Gas Board refused to remove from Dot's front garden when fitting a new appliance has appeared on the roof of Frank Butcher's portakabin.

Pat tells Frank she will let his youngest daughter come to stay with them. They tell the rest of the family who are all pleased - except Diane, Frank's eldest daughter, who will have to share her room.

Dr David Samuels has told Pauline she is overdoing things. Arthur, her husband, takes her to the *Queen Vic* pub to hand in her notice. Pat and Frank, the publicans, decide to offer Sharon a full time job.

Rod has got a job looking after the new amusement arcade while the machines are installed, but does not want it. He tries unsuccessfully to get hold of another market stall.

Pat has been watching Cindy and confronts her with the fact that she knows she is pregnant. Cindy denies it and then flies off the handle at Sharon.

Frank brings Janine round for tea; Pat is very nervous but the whole thing goes off well.

Trevor finishes the building work for Mr Karim, but as he prods the ceiling to show how solid it is, the whole thing falls in.

Matthew, trying to make amends with Carmel has made a special meal for her and the children. Everything goes smoothly until Junior unfortunately lets slip about Carmel cooking the doctor a meal when Matthew was away. Matthew immediately jumps to the wrong conclusion and hits the roof while Junior tries to protect a petrified Carmel. The next thing we see is an ambulance pulling up outside the flat.

The Production and Marketing Contexts

Although broadcast on BBC1 *EastEnders* does have a need to attract viewers. In 1983, when the idea for the soap was floated, Margaret Thatcher was contemplating commercialising the BBC. She considered the corporation highly inefficient and many Conservatives disliked how it represented their party and its policies. Broadcasting heads believed the organisation and its funding structure could be saved if it proved itself as capable as ITV in attracting audiences (Horrie and Clarke, 1994: 23). However, the decision to produce a soap to compete with ITV was not uncontroversial. As Buckingham points out, this posed a number of questions in the context of the BBC's public service broadcasting remit:

To what extent is mass popularity compatible with 'quality' in broadcasting? How can the drive for ratings be reconciled with the notion of 'responsibility' which is central to the public service? In what ways can we regard a programme like *EastEnders* as being of benefit to the public at all?
(1987: 7)

EastEnders has been defended by its makers as a quality programme aware of its responsibilities which, from its beginnings, tackled difficult and sensitive social issues. Commissioning producer Julia Smith and script editor Tony Holland to develop the serial, the BBC drew on two reputable figures in the production of highly regarded

popular drama. Smith and Holland claim a 'passionate interest in scripts, and new writers, and a need to confront "issues" head on, to show things as they are and not how people would like them to be' (1987: 4).

The style of *EastEnders* however is indebted to ITV's *Coronation Street*, which was used as a model for its production and which constituted its direct rival in the ratings battle, and *Brookside*, Channel 4's soap which 'set itself the task of using the vehicle of television serial drama to explore a range of social issues in frank and often challenging ways' (Kilborn, 1992: 34). As is the convention for British soaps, *Coronation Street*, *Brookside* and *EastEnders* all pursue a realist aesthetic (Geraghty, 1991: 33) and base their drama in a specific regional locality. Viewers are invited to regard *EastEnders* as representing the everyday problems of London's East End community. However, because soaps are 'traditionally associated with the domestic and personal' (Geraghty, 1991: 51) it is predominantly domestic issues which are the focus of attention. This means that as soaps, like most other fictional genres, are character centred, social issues are represented 'through the medium of the intimate or personal' (Livingstone, 1990: 91).

The Genre

Generically soap opera is defined in relation to a resistance to narrative closure. Kilborn states 'The fact that soaps consist of unfolding narratives where individual story-lines are carried over from one episode to the next is the key feature which most clearly separates them from other types of broadcast drama' (1992: 36). However, the fact that so many different television programmes are classified under the rubric of soap opera is not unproblematic. As Allen (1989) argues generic classification cannot explain how viewers experience different soaps.

Because of their concentration on domestic issues soap operas have often been denigrated. They are also often defined as a 'woman's genre' (Modleski, 1992; Hobson, 1982; Kuhn, 1984) because, like melodrama, they foreground female characters and deal with emotions more usually associated with the feminine. Geraghty claims that 'soap operas, not always, not continuously, but at key points, offer an understanding from the woman's view point and that affects the judgements that the viewer is invited to make' (1991: 47). However, as Geraghty and Root (1986) argue, in recent years the soap genre has undergone a process of 'defeminisation'. With broadcasters seeking to attract male and teenage audiences, they have brought stronger male characters into these programmes. Indeed, *EastEnders* is cited as produced with 'every intention of challenging the assumption that soaps were a secure and safe place for women viewers' (Geraghty, 1991: 173). It cannot then be presumed that *EastEnders* privileges a female and/or feminine reading of its content.

EastEnders requires viewers to bring an understanding of the conventions of its genre to their reading. But reading a soap also 'demands wider cultural competence, especially in the codes of conduct in personal and family life' (Kuhn, 1984: 26). This constitutes the normative territory of the genre, at the centre of which are 'those values, attitudes, and behaviours believed by soap opera producers to be most clearly held by the "average" viewer' (Allen, 1985: 173). The fact that the domestic violence in *EastEnders* was portrayed in a mixed-race marriage and committed against a career woman is significant in relation to this normative territory.

Until comparatively recently it was unusual to find black characters in soap operas as programme makers believed it difficult to incorporate these into story-lines (Allen, 1985: 75). In *EastEnders* black characters are rarely cast as fully part of the programme's community. They very often remain 'outsiders' (Geraghty, 1991). There has also been considerable reluctance to embrace inter-racial marriages in soaps

(Allen, 1985: 75 and 171). Such marriages are not then 'normal' within the conventions of this genre. Therefore, audiences might feel a certain impetus to interpret difficulties in an inter-racial marriage as caused by racial difference.

The fact that the portrayal of domestic violence in *EastEnders* discussed in this chapter involves the depiction of a career woman as the victim of violence is also of significance in relation to the 'normative territory' of soaps. Conventionally, in British soaps, career women suffer a great deal:

Dilemmas such as child care, the attitudes of the husband, sexual harassment and discrimination are inserted into the stories as if to demonstrate the sheer weight of the problems career women must face. While accepting the woman's right to a career, the British soaps quite markedly stress the pains not the pleasures, the defeat not the victory, the tiredness not the elation. (Geraghty, 1991: 139)

Further, as Kreizenbeck states "'Good" soap characters are family-orientated. Their careers are secondary to the needs of spouse and children' (1983: 176). Viewers are thus provided with considerable inducement to perceive the domestic violence as related to its victim being a career woman.

The Narrative Structure

Because of their open ended narrative structure soap operas create problems when attempting to identify the possible range of readings of a particular story-line. In terms of relations of cause and effect or motivation, for example,

the text might initiate ... movement across portions of the text already read by a reference to an earlier event, but it cannot specify what will be recalled. The text provides the reference, but the viewer provides the context in which the recalled event is embedded. In soap operas, this reservoir of relationship possibilities is more extensive than in any other narrative form. (Allen, 1985: 72)

In relation to the reception analysis of the domestic violence in *EastEnders* some reception study interviewees may have a very limited knowledge of this story-line. Indeed, some may not be viewers of the serial at all. Others, if regular viewers, will be able to reflect back on the histories of the characters and events linked to that story-line. Such factors have then to be taken into consideration in the textual analysis of the portrayal of domestic violence.

Despite their resistance to narrative closure, soaps do draw on classic Hollywood narrative codes which work to prompt certain reading strategies (Allen, 1985: 166). As structured narratives they promote relations of cause and effect and motivation, and use space, time and location, characterisation and camera techniques to enable viewers to make coherent sense of their content. They also create an expectation of a narrative cliff-hanger which functions to entice viewers to watch the next episode.

Soap operas, unlike other narrative forms, include a number of different story-lines within each episode broadcast. Though these may be read as quite separate they can also invite comparisons between different characters' situations. As Geraghty states 'the audience learns to be aware of the rhythms of the narrative. The device of interviewing stories draws attention to the process of narration, disrupting the cause and effect chain of one story with parallel scenes from another' (1991: 19). For this reason, the close analysis of the episode of particular interest to this research examines how, in relation to the portrayal of domestic violence, other story-lines surrounding it could affect its reading.

The Portrayal of a Case of Domestic Violence

The Background Story-Line

Script outlines of *EastEnders* provided by the programme makers going back 17 weeks (38 episodes) prior to episode 458, detail how the domestic violence story-line was developed. Though these offer only thumbnail sketches of what was actually screened, they provide some basis from which to analyse the range of readings of the violent relationship available to regular viewers of the programme.

Involved in this story-line are Matthew, a white employee of a record store, and Carmel his British born Afro-Caribbean wife. Carmel works as a health visitor. The two characters married after a brief but happy romance. Their wedding day marked the beginning of problems in the relationship, though it was not until some time later that Matthew revealed a tendency to violence. Carmel's family refused to attend the wedding because Matthew was white. Of even greater impact was Carmel's secretly inviting Matthew's estranged mother to the celebrations. When she arrived at the reception Matthew stormed off in a rage. Exactly why Matthew did this was never revealed. Though Matthew and Carmel were reconciled, Matthew would not discuss his relationship with his mother, apart from to say that his hatred for her stemmed from childhood experiences.

The script outlines detail events unconnected to the wedding giving rise to Matthew's violence toward Carmel. Though neither the racial difference between the couple nor Matthew's relationship with his mother superficially appear of significance in this behaviour, these cannot be discounted as providing possible causal explanations for what then follows. In detailing how the story-line then continued, it is explained below in which episodes the married couple appear and how, with some use of quotations from the script outlines, their relationship is characterised.

Matthew and Carmel's marriage took a turn for the worse when Carmel took into their home, against Matthew's wishes, her young nephew Junior and his sister Aisha. Carmel did this as the alternative was that the children would go into care (their father absconded leaving them in the charge of his elderly parents, one of whom subsequently died). Through episodes 420 to 441 the story concerning Matthew's violence toward his wife revolves round the presence of these children.

Though Carmel accepted Junior and Aisha's needs, Matthew is largely left to look after them because of Carmel's demanding job. Soon Matthew proves inadequate in this task and when Carmel accuses him of behaving like a 'jealous, sulky child' he hits her in the face (episode 424). Matthew's violence is without justification. However, the narrative presented Matthew as never wanting the domestic arrangements imposed on him by Carmel. Therefore, viewers could regard Carmel as having created a situation with which Matthew could not cope and which caused him to lose control. Alternatively, they could sympathise with Carmel and regard Matthew as totally inconsiderate in not wanting to help the children, and, as Carmel does, consider him jealous of their taking her attention away from him.

In episode 425 Carmel tells people that her bruises resulted from a fall. Matthew apologises and buys her flowers, and though Carmel is initially unforgiving, with his swearing to never hit her again 'they seem to have made amends.' Carmel's covering up for Matthew's violence, and her acceptance of his promises not to again hurt her, could be read in several ways. It might be seen as stereotypical of how a battered wife would behave - not wishing to admit publicly that she is abused, and wanting to believe it will not occur again. However, if the viewer is cynical of Matthew's promises, they might expect Carmel to be so too. This could lead to a reading of Carmel as being naive and even stupid for not leaving Matthew before he hits her again, especially given

that as a health visitor she would presumably have a professional knowledge of the patterns of domestic violence.

As audiences might have hypothesised, difficulties in the relationship continue, as does Matthew's violence. Carmel is reprimanded for poor attendance at work caused by looking after the children (episode 427). This may be read as demonstrating that a career and (surrogate) motherhood are incompatible. Carmel then has to persuade Junior that Matthew does not hate him (episode 428). In episode 430 Carmel is angered by Matthew forgetting to collect Aisha from nursery. Meanwhile, Junior truants from school and turns to petty thieving, which Matthew, aware of, does nothing to prevent. Eventually the police become involved and Carmel discovers what Junior has been doing. She confronts Matthew about this in public where he brushes her off, but in the privacy of their home he later batters her (episode 432).

Up to this point Matthew has been characterised as uncaring about Junior and Aisha's welfare, as providing very little support for his wife, and as even resorting to being violent toward her whenever she is critical of his behaviour. Why he has a tendency to violence, apart from being caused by his domestic unhappiness is not explained. Viewers might speculate that the problems with his mother are a contributory factor, that he simply wants Carmel to himself and/or that he is attempting to assert an authority over her through pain and fear.

The story is then continued in episodes 438 to 441. Though the children's presence remains an issue, Matthew's violence now appears to be a direct reaction against Carmel. In episode 439, when Carmel teases Matthew over attempts to repair a toy of Aisha's the script outline states 'she misreads his mood and he explodes and hurls her across the room, and kicks and beats her.' Matthew's behaviour could now then be read as caused by a belief that Carmel belittles everything he does. It could also be

viewed as an excuse which Matthew uses to abuse Carmel. Yet another interpretation could consider his behaviour as caused by a reversal of traditional male and female roles, where Carmel, being the primary breadwinner and the one dedicated to a career, affects Matthew's masculinity which he tries to reaffirm through violence.

Episodes 440 and 441, involve Junior, now aware of Matthew's violence, informing the local black community of Carmel's plight. Carmel tells Matthew of her being offered protection. Matthew then threatens Junior. For a month the story-line is then dropped but returns with a new plot in episode 454. Carmel is approached by the new doctor in the Square, Doctor Samuels, about his plans for the local surgery. Matthew does not feature in this episode. However, Carmel's suggestion that the doctor discuss his ideas over dinner invites viewer speculation on Matthew's likely reaction to this. With episode 455 the story-line continues thus: 'Matthew, impatiently waiting for Carmel at the pub at lunchtime, goes to the surgery to get her - where he finds her chatting with David about his plans to modernise the surgery. He makes a big scene and eventually drags Carmel out when David threatens to call the police if he doesn't leave. ... he frogmarches her back to the flat.' After detailing other story-lines, the script outline states: 'Carmel tries to talk to Matthew, saying that if he can't trust her, they may as well call it a day. At this Matthew is horrified and tells her he couldn't stand the thought of her with another man.'

While Matthew's childhood background, his being forced into a position of being a surrogate father, his unequal status in relation to Carmel all serve as possible causal explanations for his violent behaviour, with episode 455 jealousy becomes an additional factor. Though Carmel could be perceived as an entirely innocent victim, she could alternatively be viewed as neglecting Matthew in favour for her work colleagues and provoking a conflict. It is in episode 458 that this story-line then reaches its most violent.

The Close Analysis of Episode 458

Drawing on scene-by-scene breakdowns of episode 458 - that screened in the reception research - it will now be examined how the domestic violence story-line is portrayed, structured into that episode and juxtaposed with other unconnected stories. From this the range of possible readings of the violence are assessed, as are those which could result from an intra-textual knowledge of the story.

In this episode Matthew, Carmel, Junior and Aisha first appear in scene 2. Outwith knowledge of the story-line, it can only be known that Junior's school report and his possible association in a prank involving a local resident's cooker might arise. For regular viewers this scene invites speculation as to whether Matthew and Carmel's marriage will stabilize. However, it is not until some 10 minutes into the episode that Matthew and Carmel again appear together. The table below illustrates what viewers encounter in these initial ten minutes.

| Scene | Length | Characters Featured | Summary of Action and Dialogue |
|-------|---------------|------------------------------------|---|
| 1 | 11 secs | Mo | Albert Square. ELS of the cooker on the portakabin roof. Mo looks aghast at the sight. |
| 2 | 23 secs | Matthew, Carmel, Junior, Aisha, Mo | The family leave their house entering Albert Square. Mo snaps at Matthew about the cooker. Junior worries about his school report due today. Carmel warns him that he had better not be involved with the cooker. |
| 3 | 15 secs | Mo, Frank | In Albert Square Mo shouts up to Frank's window above the <i>Queen Vic</i> about the cooker |
| 4 | 1 min 37 secs | Pat, Frank, Ricky, Diane, Mo | In the kitchen of the <i>Queen Vic</i> flat Pat tells Frank that Janine can live with them, but they must not rush things. Ricky, Diane and Mo are told. Frank wants to see the children's reports that evening. |
| 5 | 31 secs | Mr Karim, Trevor | Outside his house Mr Karim warns Trevor about the shoddy state of his building work. |
| 6 | 51 secs | Dr Legg, Ethel, Pauline | In Albert Square Dr Legg meets Ethel. Pauline appears. Dr Legg asks after her health. Pauline retorts that that is her business and walks on. |

| Scene | Length | Characters Featured | Summary of Action and Dialogue |
|-------|--------------|--------------------------------|---|
| 7 | 16 secs | Pauline, Arthur, Simon | Arthur persuades Pauline to stop working at the <i>Queen Vic</i> and, leaving Simon by his market stall, takes her to see Frank and Pat. |
| 8 | 59 secs | Rod, Dot | In the launderette Dot is pleased at Rod's being offered work in the arcade. Rod is unenthusiastic. |
| 9 | 1 min 8 secs | Pauline, Arthur, Frank, Pat | In the <i>Queen Vic</i> Pauline tells Frank and Pat she can no longer work in the pub. Frank tells Pat not to 'work herself to a frazzle like Pauline'. |
| 10 | 1 min | Dot, Mo | Mo grumbles to Dot about the cooker prank. |
| 12 | 53 secs | Frank, Simon, Carmel | Outside the car lot Simon and Frank chat about Janine. Simon goes as Carmel arrives. Frank asks if he's on her list for a blanket bath. Carmel has a message for Ali. As she leaves Frank asks if she will give him a massage or a 'little back rub'. She says she could put him into care. Frank whoops. |
| 13 | 25 secs | Dr Legg, Carmel | In Albert Square Carmel criticises Dr Legg for interfering with Dr Samuels' patient Pauline. She leaves to catch up on work over lunch. |
| 14 | 18 secs | Mr Karim, Trevor | Mr Karim is still concerned about Trevor's work. |
| 15 | 52 secs | Simon, Sharon, Carmel, Matthew | In Albert Square Simon and Sharon talk about working together in the pub. Carmel spots Matthew finding he has taken the day off work. Matthew says he is checking to see if she was behaving herself. Carmel looks hurt. Matthew says he is joking and bluntly kisses her. He puts his arm round her as they walk away. |

For the most part these first 15 scenes establish the various plot scenarios for the rest of the episode. In scene four, a major change in the Butcher household is signalled with Pat's willingness to take on the parenting of her husband's youngest daughter Janine. Scenes 7 and 9 also suggest a likely change in the local community with Arthur persuading Pauline to stop working at the *Queen Vic* due to her poor health, which she is clearly sensitive about given her rebuttal of Dr Legg in scene 6.

In scene 12 when Carmel appears in her capacity as the health visitor, Frank's remarks contain obvious sexual undertones with his comments about a blanket bath. Frank could be viewed as patronising and belittling Carmel here. However, Carmel, in stating that she could put him in care, demonstrates both an ability to join in the joke and considerable prowess in subverting Frank's assumptions of gendered power relations between them. However, the scene could equally be read as illustrative of the difficulties which Carmel faces in others' perceptions of her and her job, and/or the jocular nature of her relationship with members of the local community.

Scene 13 also features Carmel and makes her presence of increasing significance in the episode. She is quite abrupt with Dr Legg when he criticises Dr Samuels for showing Pauline her medical records. Viewers might consider Carmel right here in telling Dr Legg not to interfere in Dr Samuels' work. Alternatively she could be perceived as harsh toward Dr Legg who is nervous about his approaching retirement, a fact made known to Ethel in scene 6. Yet another reading might speculate on why Carmel is so quick to defend Dr Samuels (especially given Matthew's reactions to her associating with the doctor in episode 455).

The narrative again returns to Matthew and Carmel with scene 15. This begins by portraying an apparently blossoming relationship between Sharon and Simon. Without a scene break Matthew and Carmel then become the focus of attention. A tension between the couple is immediately established through their surprise and mutual suspicion at the unplanned meeting. Catching sight of Matthew, Carmel, in a tone resembling that of a parent stumbling upon a truanting child, asks 'What are you doing back?' Matthew, with his back to her and hands aloft, states 'Caught me. I took the day off work'. He neither smiles nor looks happy at being discovered. Carmel's statement 'You're sneaking home for a kip are you?' is open to either an interpretation as a nervous attempt to humour Matthew or an accusation. Matthew's response, 'I

thought I'd check up to make sure you're behaving yourself' clearly indicates a resentment towards Carmel. Even those unfamiliar with the story-line could interpret this as insinuating that Carmel's fidelity cannot be trusted. The camera's cutting between Matthew and Carmel in medium close up, and not showing both within a single frame as had been the case with Sharon and Simon, enhances a sense of opposition between the couple. This tension is reduced to a degree as they walk away together, Matthew's arm around Carmel, in medium long shot. Nevertheless, the audience is invited to hypothesise about the significance of this encounter, and speculate on whether their conflicts will develop further.

Scene Juxtapositions and More Conflict Between Matthew and Carmel

As the episode moves into its second half it is lunchtime in Albert Square. Here the juxtaposition of scenes 16 and 17 allow comparison between the domestic arrangements in the Fowler household with those of Matthew and Carmel. Showing Pauline preparing lunch for Arthur and herself, scene 16 portrays this couple in traditional gendered roles. Here Arthur also consoles Pauline about giving up her job. In scene 17 Matthew takes on the role of preparing lunch while Carmel studies for work and enormous tensions between the two result from Carmel's career objectives. The table below documents these scenes and provides a breakdown of events taking the audience into the latter stages of the episode.

| Scene | Length | Characters Featured | Summary of Action and Dialogue |
|-------|----------------|---|---|
| 16 | 26 secs | Pauline, Arthur | Pauline prepares lunch, still unhappy about leaving her job. Arthur suggests their forthcoming holiday will cheer her up. |
| 17 | 2 mins 45 secs | Carmel, Matthew | In their home Matthew hands Carmel a sandwich as she studies. When asked, she says she is studying in case she decides to change career direction. Matthew, moving from embracing her as she sits to standing above her and picking up the books, is annoyed that she hasn't discussed this. Instigated by a book title Matthew raises the issue of violence against wives. He aggressively accuses Carmel of discussing her home life with Dr Samuels. Carmel insists the book is for professional use. Lying on the sofa, Matthew reads it, mockingly applying its theories to himself. When Carmel protests he claims to be testing her knowledge. Matthew throws the book at her asking where it says male violence is provoked by a woman's lying and cheating. Carmel is nervous and close to tears. Matthew stalks around behind her. As Carmel gathers her things together, he sarcastically asks if 'Dr David' gave her the books. Carmel claims not to remember. Matthew says he will collect Aisha from school and cook tea, this being why he took the day off work - because Carmel needs looking after. |
| 18 | 59 secs | Dr Legg, Ethel, Sharon, Mo, Pat, Arthur | At the <i>Queen Vic</i> Dr Legg discuss his retirement with Ethel. Sharon starts working behind the bar. Mo asks where Cindy is. |
| 19 | 51 secs | Cindy, Pat, Sharon | Pat, finding Cindy sitting on the private stairs behind the bar, asks 'when is it due?' Cindy, denying all, expresses anger at Sharon's working in the pub. Pat defends Sharon. |
| 20 | 1 min 6 secs | Rod, Arthur, Dr Legg, Ethel | In the <i>Queen Vic</i> Rod talks to Arthur about setting up a market stall. Dr Legg, talking to Ethel, criticizes Dr Samuels' work. |
| 21 | 2 mins 25 secs | Arthur, Rod, Dot, Pauline, Cindy | In the launderette Arthur asks Dot to go easy on Pauline who is late for work. He leaves. Rod is annoyed at Dot wanting him to take the job in the arcade. Dot leaves upset. Pauline enters. Cindy ignores Pauline's greeting. Rod sits with Cindy. |
| 22 | 1 min 3 secs | Matthew, Junior | Matthew cooks the tea at home. Junior is wary of him. Matthew asks about his report which is not good. Matthew mocks Junior and sends him to buy flowers. Junior, questions this. Matthew says they should show Carmel they care. |

| Scene | Length | Characters Featured | Summary of Action and Dialogue |
|-------|------------------|---|---|
| 23 | 1 min 19 secs | Pat, Ricky, Diane, Frank Janine, Mo | In the kitchen above the <i>Queen Vic</i> Pat prepares Janine's tea party. Frank enters with Janine. Janine goes to the bathroom. Frank tells everyone to act as normal. Mo enters. |
| 24 | 26 secs | Trevor, Mr Karim | Mr Karim again questions Trevor's work. Saying the ceiling is 'solid as a rock', Trevor hits it with a broom and it collapses. |

Matthew's annoyance at Carmel's not discussing a possible change in her career in scene 17 could be perceived as quite uncalled for, though it is also possible to view Carmel as selfish in failing to talk about her plans. The audience is then invited to speculate on whether the books she has on the table about domestic violence are for professional or personal reference, and whether she has told Dr Samuels about Matthew's violence. It could well be assumed that the books are for personal use, despite Carmel's insistence to the contrary and given Matthew's statement that he is not so stupid to believe they are for work. Regular viewers might also recall Matthew's previously treating Carmel badly in front of the doctor. What then follows might be read as giving clues to why Matthew is violent. Lying on the sofa with his eyes closed and the domestic violence book held against his chest he asks 'I've beaten my wife doctor. Not a lot, just now and then. Now what is it that makes me do it?' Viewers familiar with the story would likely recognise the self-referential nature of this question. This may be lost on non-regular viewers, though Matthew's looking aggressively at Carmel as he stops talking does invite an interpretation of his making reference to their own relationship. Matthew then reads from the book that male violence could be caused by a child's upbringing, a child seeing his father beat his mother, and/or from a child's being rejected by his mother. Carmel agrees it could be caused by any of these. This provides the audience with hypotheses as to the cause of Matthew's violence, with the last theory perhaps being particularly pertinent for those familiar with his estrangement from his mother. Matthew's suggesting that Carmel's infidelities are the

cause of his behaviour does offer an alternative reading of the basis for their conflicts. However, his belief that a man is justified in beating an unfaithful wife has to be considered in the context of whether this is generally socially acceptable behaviour.

As the table above illustrates, following scene 17 attention shifts to other story-lines. After some five minutes there is a return to Matthew and Carmel. In scene 22 Matthew is again preparing a meal, evidently trying to make amends for his earlier aggression. Junior's wariness of Matthew in this scene does, however, provide viewers with a position from which to remain sceptical about his rapid behavioural change.

The juxtaposing of scenes 22 and 23 again offers comparisons between Matthew and Carmel's domestic arrangements and those of other families. In scene 23, Pat goes to considerable lengths to welcome Janine and create a happy and united family. Like Carmel she has adopted the role of surrogate mother. But unlike Carmel she stays at home and caters for her family. Again this could provide grounds to interpret Carmel's problems as associated with her putting her career before the needs of her husband and the children. From another perspective though, it is possible to perceive Matthew and Carmel's situation as contrasting with that of the Butcher family because of their different racial backgrounds. As the only characters in the local community involved in an inter-racial marriage generic conventions might cause viewers to expect their marriage to fail.

The Portrayal of Matthew's Violence and the Narrative cliff hanger

The table below documents what is shown in the last third of the episode and how it ends.

| Scene | Length | Characters Featured | Summary of Action and Dialogue |
|-------|------------------|---|---|
| 25 | 1 min 15 secs | Matthew, Carmel, Junior, Aisha | Seemingly in happy spirits the family sits down to dinner. Matthew tries to prevent Carmel seeing Junior's report. They mock wrestle and Carmel grabs it. She reads that Junior doesn't apply himself to his studies. Matthew tells him to prepare for a lecture, but Carmel drops the issue. |
| 26 | 45 secs | Pat, Frank, Ricky, Diane, Janine, Mo | The family enjoy a tea party with Janine. Frank reminds Ricky to discuss his school report. The children go into the lounge. Pat is praised for accommodating Janine. |
| 28 | 45 secs | Rod, Dot | Dot thinks Rod is annoyed with her, but he consoles her as they drink together in the pub. |
| 29 | 1 min 56 secs | Carmel, Matthew, Junior, Aisha | Carmel praises Matthew's cooking. She wishes she were pensioned off like Dr Legg. Matthew and Junior would like this too, as she could then cook. Matthew, sitting, holds Carmel who stands by him. Junior suggests she make some pepper stew as she did for Dr Samuels. Matthew orders Junior to repeat this. Carmel sends Aisha to her bedroom saying she cooked for the doctor as they were both exhausted. Matthew stands up and pushes Carmel around exclaiming that only one thing exhausts her. Carmel says the children were present. He shouts 'That's never stopped you before darling.' Carmel says nothing is going on and she did not mention the meal as Matthew doesn't like her talking about work. Pushing Carmel backwards Matthew argues that cooking for Dr Samuels is not work. He asks what they did after the meal, whether they discussed him, and if this is how she has books on domestic violence. Carmel simply replies 'No'. Matthew throws a chair over accusing her of winding him up. Junior tells Matthew to leave Carmel alone. Matthew tells him to shut up. Jabbing his hands at Carmel's face Matthew yells 'What happened?' Carmel screams 'I swear to God our relationship is purely professional.' Matthew throws a punch at her. The scene cuts just before it makes impact. |

| Scene | Length | Characters Featured | Summary of Action and Dialogue |
|-------|---------|----------------------------------|--|
| 30 | 36 secs | Pat, Frank, Diane, Janine, Ricky | Pat and Frank find the children watching television in the lounge. Hearing an ambulance outside Ricky moves to the window. |
| 31 | 10 secs | | From the window an ambulance is seen driving into Albert Square. The percussion beat of the theme tune sounds. |

With Matthew and Carmel again appearing in scene 25, it is not difficult to see this as the story foregrounded in the episode and likely to feature in the narrative cliff-hanger. But gaining almost as much attention is that of Janine's entry into the Butcher family. These two story-lines continue to be juxtaposed, thus emphasising the different goings-on in the two households.

In scene 25 Matthew and Carmel's earlier conflicts appear to have subsided, though Matthew's warning that Carmel will lecture Junior about his poor school report does indicate continued tensions. These could be perceived as related to Carmel's expectations of others. This is supported by her telling Junior that had his father applied himself he could have been an accountant. In staring coldly at the table as Carmel speaks, Matthew seems to resent her work ethic. However, Carmel can be viewed as sensitive in not wanting to ruin the happy tea-time atmosphere as she does not pursue the subject. This could also be considered a calculated response to Matthew's agitation.

In scene 26 the Butcher family are also enjoying a happy tea-time. Here it is Frank who raises the issue of the children's reports. Therefore in this household the father acts as the traditional figure of authority while the wife adopts the caring role. This contrasts with Carmel in scene 25 who assumes the disciplinary role in her home.

However, such differences need not necessarily be taken as representative of anything other than the fact that it is Frank, and not Pat, who is the natural parent of the children in his home, and that Junior and Aisha are Carmel's blood relatives and not Matthew's.

Scenes 27 and 28 take viewers away from the episode's two main story-lines and provide a delay to the climactic scene. Scene 29 then confirms possible speculation that tensions between Matthew and Carmel have not disappeared. The opening of this scene offers a reading of Carmel attempting to smooth over their problems in praising Matthew's cooking and in stating that she would like to retire like Dr Legg. Matthew and Junior's expressing that this would allow her time at home to cook permits a causal understanding of the family's difficulties stemming from her not performing a traditional domestic role. Junior's comment about her cooking for Dr Samuels then provides the motivation for Matthew's anger. This can be interpreted as based on unfounded jealousy, though there is also room to speculate whether Carmel is romantically involved with the doctor. However, Matthew's aggressive and intimidating behaviour, and Carmel's obvious fear for own her and the children's safety seems to support the interpretation that he is very dangerous and needs no excuse to hit out at Carmel. In this scene, extreme close-ups on Carmel's face show her in a state of abject terror, emphasising her feelings as she is abused. But this does not exclude possible identification from a predatory and voyeuristic point of view in relation to the violence.

As scene 29 cuts to scene 30, viewers are prevented from seeing Matthew's fist making contact with Carmel's face. With scene 30 comparisons between the happy family atmosphere in the Butcher home with the violence in Matthew and Carmel's are again available. But this also provides the staging for the episode's cliff-hanger - from where the ambulance can be heard and then seen in scene 31. This encourages viewers to believe that Carmel is to be taken to hospital, though in what state can only be discovered

through watching the next episode. In fact, it will be revealed that Matthew was hospitalised following his being stabbed by Junior.

Summary of Possible Reading Positions

As *EastEnders* is marketed as an issues-based soap opera, viewers are invited to perceive the programme as presenting domestic violence as a social issue. However, as *EastEnders* is also a vehicle to attract viewers, the portrayal of violence could be considered in the context of battles for ratings. The fact that the violence features as the cliff-hanger to episode 458 substantiates an argument that it is used to this end.

It is debatable just how seriously audiences might view this portrayal of domestic violence given the common derision of soaps. With the form also often considered a woman's genre, there is a possibility that it might be perceived as foregrounding a woman's point of view on domestic violence. However, attempts to widen the appeal of soap operas has affected a stronger and more sympathetic portrayal of masculine points of view. Indeed, in this case at least, *EastEnders* does not exclude a sympathetic interpretation of the wife beater.

There are a number of ways in which the violence Matthew commits against Carmel can be causally read. The negative treatment of mixed-race marriages in soap opera provides one basis for an interpretation as to why violence erupts in this relationship. In the context of the violence the racial difference is at no time referred to in the storyline, though it is visually obvious and had been an issue at the couple's wedding. Further, in episode 458, Matthew and Carmel are the only couple involved in an interracial relationship, and, unlike other couples in the episode, their exchanges revolve around conflict rather than unity. This is particularly emphasised through the juxtaposition of their story with that of other families.

A further difference between Matthew and Carmel's relationship and others is how Carmel's career affects her family life. Regular viewers may have already been cued to associate the marital difficulties with Carmel's career. Those who only view episode 458 are also provided with grounds for this interpretation. Such a reading is additionally encouraged by British soaps' conventional portrayal of career women.

For Matthew's part, his violence could be seen as symptomatic of insecurities stemming from the status differential of his position in relation to that of his wife. He may be seen as driven by anger at the domestic arrangements imposed on him by Carmel, by jealousy concerning the relationship between Carmel and Dr Samuels, and/or by childhood experiences which have had a damaging impact on him. This last reading, made available by Matthew reading from the book on domestic violence, connects with his characterisation in earlier episodes concerning his estrangement from his mother. Therefore, for regular viewers this might well serve as the most pertinent of readings and one typifying what Dobash and Dobash define as 'the fallacious view that "evil is always caused by evil", that behaviour we deplore, such as wife beating, is generated by antecedents that are also bad, such as ... lack of parental love' (1979: 24).

Due to the narrative structure of *EastEnders* it is difficult to narrow down the range of ways in which the domestic violence can be read. What is evident, however, is that all the possible readings identified in the textual research are largely based on perceptions of character over and above perceptions of how male violence might be socially determined.

The Reception Analysis

All fourteen of the interview groups formed for the reception research were shown episode 458 of *EastEnders*. In documenting their readings of this, those relating to the production and marketing contexts of *EastEnders* are presented first. These are followed by a discussion of how interviewees engaged with the programme as a soap opera, and indications of how its narrative structure affected their response. The analysis then moves to examine the ways in which the women interpreted the domestic violence portrayal. As in Chapter Four, this assesses how their readings relate to those identified in the textual analysis and how the women's social, cultural and material experiences impacted on interpretation.

Responses to *EastEnders* as a Broadcast Product

Group discussions of *EastEnders* contained far fewer references to the production context of this programme than had discussions of *The Accused*. This may be because the episode of *EastEnders* did not contain violence of a sexual nature which many regarded as used in that film to attract audiences.

What was evident from the group discussions was a universal perception of *EastEnders* as an 'issues-based' soap opera. In this context it is viewed as intended by its makers. However, a few interviewees did question why a soap should concern itself with social issues, such as these Afro-Caribbean women with no experience of violence:

- Respondent 1: *EastEnders* is a programme that tr[ies to] reflect what's going on in society. ... Mind you, I wonder why people put these things in programmes, because I know it goes on and everyone here knows it goes on.
- Respondent 2: It's what they want to know.
- Respondent 1: Who is it trying to get in touch with to let them know it's going on?

Respondent 3: Maybe the broadcasting authority - they're probably saying 'You'll need to take *EastEnders* off because the demand for it isn't so great at the moment. How can the programme be justified? Is it dealing with XYZ?' From that point of view maybe.
[English Afro-Caribbean women, with no experience of violence]

Such references to the institutional context of *EastEnders* were unusual within the groups. More frequently interviewees remarked on what they regarded as a tension between *EastEnders'* provision of entertainment and its engagement with social issues.

For example:

It's right that these things should be shown. But whether they should be shown in the context of a programme that is actually for entertainment is another matter. Because if it's showing this thing [as] entertainment, it becomes more acceptable. Therefore, it's not actually addressed properly. It's not taken seriously.
[English white woman, with experience of violence]

It is a serious topic being beaten. But if everybody takes it so serious [in watching *EastEnders*] - it is some form of entertainment - if they do take it serious then there must be something up with them. To me it's just another programme. Things like that do happen in real life, but they shouldn't take the programme seriously.
[Scottish Asian woman, with experience of violence]

Scottish white middle-class women with no experience of violence noted that the type of issues presented in *EastEnders* might be neglected by other programme forms. In a spontaneous point of comparison between the news and soap opera genres, they saw this as justification for *EastEnders'* mediation of social issues. However, many women with no experience of violence stated that the social issues in *EastEnders* detracted from their enjoyment of the programme, making it depressing and boring to watch. English Afro-Caribbean women with no experience of violence stated that *EastEnders* was 'full of doom and gloom'. They also regarded its treatment of social issues as too conservative:

I think the script writers were really predictable in some of the scenes. He'd sort of beat her up and then he'd say 'Sorry it won't happen again'. ... You hear about these things happening, people getting beaten up and they say 'Sorry' and they say 'All right then' and forgive him. That's the sort of thing that's going through the programme really.
 [English Afro-Caribbean woman, with no experience of violence]

Women with experience of violence tended not to respond in this way. Their discussions focused extensively on what they saw as the realism of the drama and their finding strong points of identification with the violence in episode 458. This is discussed below.

Generic Form and Evaluation

In all of the interview groups women considered *EastEnders* light entertainment and detailed often watching it because it 'simply happened to be on'. Frequently younger family members were cited as more interested in *EastEnders* than the interviewees themselves:

- Respondent 1: We quite often have it on ... but it's not particularly what we'd choose to watch all the time.
 Respondent 2: It's easy to watch it's ...
 Respondent 1: Turn on the telly and - you've got to watch what the majority of people want. It's not what you'd particularly choose.
 Respondent 2: But you can pick up on it can't you?
 Respondent 1: Yes. I roughly know what the story-line is. But I wouldn't say that I'd sit and watch it.
 [English white women, with experience of violence]

I catch snatches of it because the kids sometimes have it on.
 [English white working-class woman, with no experience of violence]

Very few of the 91 interviewees identified themselves as 'fans' of *EastEnders*. There may have been a reluctance to admit regularly watching the programme because, as found in other reception studies of the genre (Alasuutari, 1992; Ang, 1985; Hobson, 1982) soaps are considered to have little cultural esteem. Scottish Asian women with

no experience of violence cited reasons similar to these in detailing their being discouraged from watching *EastEnders* by other family members:

- Respondent 1: Our family are all educated. So they they want to watch more scientific programmes than soap operas.
- Respondent 2: ...
They say 'You are wasting your time watching this kind of story.' That's why we can't have a choice to watch that programme.
[Scottish Asian women, with no experience of violence]

Though most interviewees stated that they did not regularly watch *EastEnders*, many had a detailed knowledge of the programme, its plots and story-lines, and though the genre was not regarded highly, in several groups soap operas were considered compulsive viewing. For example:

Any series like *Neighbours*, *EastEnders*, ... when you start watching one episode [you] want to see [the] next one [to see] what's happened.
[Scottish Asian woman, with no experience of violence]

Such a compulsion to watch the programme was also illustrated with reference to the episode viewed in the reception study:

I couldn't wait to see the next episode, not for the gore, but just to see how she got out of it.
[English white working-class woman, with no experience of violence]

Interviewees were then aware of how the soap genre works to stimulate a desire to watch future episodes and they often cited the cliff-hanger as important to their continued viewing. This supports Kielwasser and Wolf's claim that anticipation is a 'fundamental aspect of the soap opera viewing experience' (1989: 120).

Viewing Episode 458 in Relation to *EastEnders*' Wider Narrative Structure

Respondents demonstrated a sophisticated understanding of the complicated activity of reading soap operas.² They were conscious of whether their readings of the domestic violence story-line were of an episodic, intra-textual or extra-textual type. In many groups interviewees commented that the viewing and discussion of one episode caused problems as this removed that episode from its broader narrative context in the serial:

I couldn't follow it because I didn't know who the characters were and obviously there was plots that had been hatched long before [this episode]. So a lot of it was totally irrelevant to me.
[Scottish white middle-class woman, with no experience of violence]

You're taking one programme out of a series. So you're losing what happened before and what happened afterwards.
[English white woman, with experience of violence]

Respondents also knew how regularly they viewed *EastEnders* was likely to have considerable effect on their judgement of the single episode. They also revealed how their own life experiences affected their engagement with the episode. This illustrates the advantages of soap operas' use of multiple story-lines, in that these provide a range of points of identification for viewers.

I was more interested in the bit about Pat coping with her stepchild because I've been in a similar situation to that. ... [I] just focused in on it a bit more than anything else.
[English white middle-class woman, with no experience of violence]

I was picking up on the Cindy thing, the pregnancy. Because I think I'm a broody person ... where babies are concerned. ... I couldn't have any more after I had my daughter. It's just something that you latch on to if it happens to you.
[English white middle-class woman, with no experience of violence]

² In their research into soap opera viewing Seiter *et al* (1991: 233) detail very similar findings in this respect .

When women with no experience of violence discussed the portrayal of domestic violence in *EastEnders* the vast majority did not express an identification with this story-line. They instead engaged with it in narrative terms as a story which contained certain narrative clues as to how its plot was likely to develop. Their reading of this was therefore much less affected by personal experience, and more by the specifics of textual signification. For example, these women often remarked on how a dramatic tension was built into the portrayal to create an anticipation of violence. Matthew's throwing Carmel's book on domestic violence across the room (scene 17) was cited as pivotal in this reading:

A little bit of build up did start towards the end when he did throw the book. And you did wonder whether it was going to go any further there but it didn't. It stopped there and he went back to being nice. That was just to put the seed in your mind that there could be violence at some later stage.
[English white middle-class woman, with no experience of violence]

I thought he was going to whop her one when he threw that book over. I thought 'Oh, she's going to end up with that sandwich round her face.' ... You could see him tensing up and the innuendos with the questions, and he wouldn't answer. Then she was preaching and being a bit cagey. Then all of a sudden she didn't want the sandwich. She didn't want the glass of milk and she wanted to get out of there and get on. So I think she felt threatened.
[English white working-class woman, with no experience of violence]

For women with no experience of violence other narrative codes also contributed to speculation of an impending fight between Matthew and Carmel. Carmel's removal of Aisha from the room prior to Matthew's violence (scene 29) was read as signalling that she anticipated a row. Additionally the camera's focusing on Carmel's fraught face (scene 29) was taken as significant. The generic convention of a narrative cliff-hanger further determined an expectation of violence. For some Scottish white middle-class women with no experience of violence there was a certain pleasure in having these expectations realised:

- Respondent 1: In a lot of soap operas you know what's going to happen. It's almost an entertainment. ... If it was video you could just press the pause and say 'What happens now?' ... You're really let down if you guess it wrong.
- Researcher: What if there had been no violence in the episode?
- Respondent 2: You'd be left thinking 'Well that's not much good'.
[Scottish white middle-class women, with no experience of violence]

Not all women with no experience of violence expressed such pleasure at the final outcome. For example, English Afro-Caribbean women with no experience of violence found it all too predictable that the violence would be used as the cliff-hanger to the episode.

A striking difference between responses from women with experience of violence and those with no such experience, concerned how pleasure was invoked in reading the episode. Many women with experience of violence located their pleasure, though not one without its accompanying pains, in seeing their own experiences portrayed in the programme. This was also found among women with other experiences relevant to the episode, such as in this first quote where a woman talks of the difficulties of developing a relationship with a stepchild.

- Respondent : I can identify with Pat because I've been in that situation. Trying to be nice to this little girl to please him [her husband] ...
- Researcher: How did it make you feel seeing a re-enactment of something you've experienced?
- Respondent : It feels weird. And it makes you feel good in a way that other people go through it as well.
[English white middle-class woman, with no experience of violence]

I waited to see what was going to happen to her [Carmel]. I just clued completely in to that situation. ... You watch it to see how she handled it compared with how I handled it.
[Scottish Asian woman, with experience of violence]

It's something that has happened to you [being beaten]. So you want to see it. You want to see how they're going to show it on television and see how other people react. It's something interesting.
[English white woman, with experience of violence]

Women with experiences relating to those portrayed in the episode frequently remarked on how this personal relevance of subject matter increased their emotional engagement with the programme.

Readings of the Domestic Violence

How interviewees interpreted the portrayal of domestic violence in episode 458 was found to be largely dependent on how they read the two characters central to that portrayal. As the textual analysis argued, characterisation is, then, very important in terms of how social issues portrayed in *EastEnders* are interpreted. However, women with experience of violence were more likely than those with no experience to be critical of aspects of characterisation, and to apply an extra-textual conception of what causes a man to beat up his wife.

Carmel: the Career Woman and the Episodic Reading

There were few differences between episodic and intra-textual readings of Carmel. However, readings of the violent relationship based on the single episode focused extensively on Carmel and identified her career as causing the problems within her marriage. Where respondents had an intra-textual knowledge of the relationship, their readings were more likely to focus on Matthew's psychological make-up.

Many respondents with no experience of violence viewed Carmel's career as creating friction within the marriage. In the extreme Carmel was considered selfish in putting her career before the needs of her family.

Not that he should resort to violence to deal with that, but she was quite a strong person and I think she put herself first a lot in that didn't she?
[English white working-class woman, with no experience of violence]

It was very common for respondents with no experience of violence to view Carmel as failing to give her husband the attention which he both needed and was due. This reading was especially prevalent among Asian women with no experience of violence whose perception of the relationship was informed by a strong cultural notion of a woman's place in the home.

Respondent 1: Probably because she's coming from work - she's talking about work, work, work and he doesn't like that sort of thing.

Respondent 2: And he can't be listening to that problem.

Respondent 3: Like my husband, if he comes from work and you question him about work he gets annoyed. He says 'I want to make my mind free from work because I'm home I want to be relaxed.' ...

Respondent 4: Maybe she can't look after her house properly [because] she's very busy in her own work. Maybe she can't look after [the] kids properly.
[Scottish Asian women, with no experience of violence]

Some Scottish white women, both with and with no experience of violence also read Carmel's work as causing tensions in her relations with Matthew.

There seems to be some kind of resentment towards her work.

[Scottish white middle-class woman, with no experience of violence]

Respondent 1: She's actually not leaving her job in the office.

Respondent 2: Outside the door.

Respondent 1: She's bringing the job home with her and I think that's what the fella resents.

[Scottish white women, with experience of violence]

The characterisation of Carmel as a health visitor (though most interviewees took her to be a social worker) caused some respondents to criticise her conduct in front of Matthew. Carmel's allowing Matthew to see her books on domestic violence (scene 17) was read as indicative of a lack of foresight. In the eyes of both women with experience of violence and those without experience, Carmel's actions were considered insensitive.

Had I been her I wouldn't have left the books lying around because that would definitely provoke him. She knew it would indirectly. It's almost being a social worker and not looking at your doorstep.
[English Afro-Caribbean woman, with experience of violence]

I imagine by now that he has a lot of resentment about her work and things like that. So if she's sensitive to his feelings about the fact that she is working she would keep these things away from him.
[Scottish white middle-class woman, with no experience of violence]

Portraying a health visitor as the victim of domestic violence clearly complicated the reading of the issue. Some respondents argued that in characterising a victim of domestic violence as a professional woman the programme was of educational value, because, in the words of one English white woman with experience of violence, it 'shows that it can happen to any woman'. However, for many women with no experience of violence and for some with experience, the issue became, as had been identified as a possibility in the textual analysis, one of why Carmel, being a health visitor, was unable to recognise and deal with her husband's violent tendencies.

She should have known better. She's advising other people 'Do this. Do that' [in] situations at work, but she's not looking for them [herself].
[Scottish Asian woman, with no experience of violence]

That's what I kept thinking. 'You should be aware of all these things. ... How come you let yourself get in this situation?'
[English Afro-Caribbean woman, with no experience of violence]

Women with experience of violence were less likely to adopt this critical view of Carmel. But this was at times a matter for debate:

- Respondent 1: Being a social worker or whatever, she must have seen this coming ...
Respondent 2: Not necessarily. When do you?
Respondent 1: Oh I don't know.
Respondent 2: When do you?
Respondent 1: Well you notice changes.
Respondent 3: You know something's wrong.

Respondent 2: You're only going to notice changes if you're looking for it. If you don't know what it's like, you're not going to know.
[English white women, with experience of violence]

For many women the portrayal suggested a link between Carmel's career and the abuse inflicted on her by her husband. On the one hand this link was read as causal, in that Carmel's career resulted in her inability to give adequate attention to Matthew. On the other hand this link implied that Carmel, through an application of her professional knowledge, should have been able to foresee his tendency to violence. Fewer interviewees, either with or with no experience of violence, resisted making one or both of these associational links, though Scottish white women with experience of violence did.

Respondent 1: Maybe her job's the only thing she's got to hang on to. It's the only thing that keeps her going.
Respondent 2: It's the only thing that keeps her sane.
Respondent 3: I don't think she was wrong taking the books home. If you've got a workload where do you take it if you cannot get through it in your normal working day?
[Scottish white women, with experience of violence]

However, this very sympathetic reading of Carmel was one which these interviewees came to after some members of the group expressed an unease about less sympathetic readings they initially presented.

Carmel's Relationship with Dr Samuels

The plot involving Carmel's relationship with Dr Samuels invited possible speculation as to whether she was having an affair. Yet such a reading was rarely expressed in the groups. It was widely recognised that Matthew was jealous of Carmel's associations with the doctor, but only one of the 91 interviewees believed that Carmel was romantically involved with him:

I think that she's having an affair behind his back and not telling him the truth. She's doing this just to please this doctor.
[Scottish white woman, with experience of violence]

Other interviewees found no evidence for accepting Matthew's suspicions of an affair. Often this appeared to be informed by an intra-textual knowledge of the story-line, which here causes a critical perception of Matthew:

That's the jealousy part coming out in him - checking up on her. Because I think ... she had actually had lunch with her colleague [the doctor] at the office or something.

[Scottish white middle-class woman, with no experience of violence]

It makes you mad. Because she didn't do anything wrong. All she did was entertain the doctor.

[English Asian woman, with experience of violence]

Matthew's allusion to an affair was widely read as indicative of misplaced suspicion. Both women with experience of violence and those with no experience expressed sympathy for Carmel in facing such allegations. One Scottish white working-class woman with no experience of violence remarked on how she identified with Carmel in this context:

When we lived together he [this woman's husband] was like that. ... I wasn't allowed to go out and invite males in to my house. I wasn't allowed to go to visit [a friend's] house if her husband was there. ... He just had this thing about other men. If you met someone in the street and their man was with them, ... he would just stand there and let you gab away. But as soon as you walked away you'd have to take this ear bashing because her man was there.

[Scottish white working-class woman, with no experience of violence]

The potential to read Carmel as being unfaithful to Matthew, and his jealousies as having some real foundation was, with the exception of one interviewee, universally rejected. Suspicions of this affair were read as Matthew's inventions, requiring no speculation as to their validity on the part of viewers. In this context the programme would seem to be taken as supporting the female point of view in relation to accusations of a woman's infidelities.

Why Did Carmel Not Leave?

Readings of the domestic violence made by women with no experience of violence and those with experience differed concerning the question of why Carmel did not leave Matthew. Many women with no experience of violence read Carmel's staying as a sign of weakness. Speculating on their own reaction if in a violent relationship, many of these interviewees believed that strength and good sense would prevail:

Respondent 1: You find that with a lot of people who've been taking beatings for years, they don't do anything about it. They just accept it.

Respondent 2: I would just walk away from the situation and find a new home, a new job in a new area.
[English Afro-Caribbean women, with no experience of violence]

I'd make a stand and he'd never do it again whether I'd left or walked out, but that's me. 'You don't do it again. It's not on'.
[English white middle-class woman, with no experience of violence]

Women with no experience of violence frequently viewed Carmel as staying with Matthew out of love for him. That this reading was commonly adopted demonstrates the difficulty the programme form has in mediating a cultural and economic based understanding of the social pressures which cause women to remain in violent relationships. Without recourse to such a reading, the burden of responsibility is largely placed on the victim:

Some women are weak in that respect. The person that I know would never leave her man. And I've said to her - she's come to me greeting [crying] and everything - 'Why do you not get out of it?' And they use their home as an excuse. I'll say 'Well you can [leave]. That's only sticks of furniture. It's nothing. You can buy more. You can go. You're young, healthy. You can work. Why stay?' They love them.
[Scottish white working-class woman, with no experience of violence]

Women with experience of violence were far less likely to read Carmel's remaining with Matthew in these terms. Instead, they viewed her situation as more complex. For example:

- Respondent 1: I'm very dubious about this view that women love men that are violent towards them.
- Respondent 2: I think you can love a person and hate their behaviour.
- Respondent 3: Not always. I know women who bitterly hate the man they live with and the man they're married to. The man who is violent to them. But I think there are a lot of other women as well who do very deeply love their partners and who just hate the violent element in them, and who can quite often see why there's a violent element in that man and who understand it very deeply.
[English white women, with experience of violence]

Some women with no experience of violence appreciated the difficulty Carmel faced in leaving Matthew. English white middle-class women sympathised with her attempts to adopt a rational understanding of his behaviour. One woman suggested that Carmel may have been inclined to blame herself for the abuse. Another commented 'You'd think if I loved him enough I'll make it better. I'll help or we can sort this out ourselves.' Several Scottish white middle-class women remarked that Carmel could not simply leave the marriage as she had a 'responsibility to it'. Though this shows some understanding of the dilemma facing battered wives, it is also one of the social discourses on marriage which actually makes it difficult for women to leave their husbands (Dobash and Dobash, 1979: 166).

Carmel in Relation to Other Female Characters

Comparison between Carmel and other women characters in *EastEnders* was made in some groups. But it was almost exclusively women with experience of violence who expressed grave doubts about the portrayal of women in *EastEnders*. Criticisms frequently focused on why the one career woman in the soap was also cast as the victim

of domestic violence. This would appear to constitute a rejection of the conventional treatment of career women in soaps.

I think she's quite different to most of the other women who are nearly all a bit daft and sort of chattering about nothing. ... I thought all the other women were were very bland, petty and trivial. Carmel was more articulate and more worldly and more outgoing - a professional woman who had a proper job. ... She was the only woman who was trying to get anywhere near the man's world. ... Yes, they make her different and then they make her the one who is beaten.
[English white woman, with experience of violence]

However, there were positive responses to the portrayal of Carmel as different from other characters. One woman with no experience of violence read the portrayal as illustrating the inescapable nature of male dominance:

I think they have portrayed her well. ... She's professionally educated. She helps other people. [She's] capable of handling two kids coming into her house and carrying on a job and everything. But yet she still gets dominated by a male partner. ... It's the power thing that comes in there because it's a male at the end of the day. And despite all those abilities and everything she can't fight that final thing. It's the male power.
[English Asian woman, with no experience of violence]

This was an unusual reading of Carmel's predicament in relation to the domestic violence. A number of respondents' perceptions of Matthew, however, did make associations between social expectations of men and some men's tendency to violence. These were regarded as having a negative effect on Matthew who was unable to accept his wife's having a higher status job than himself. Therefore, interviewees did find avenues through which to engage with the cultural issues of male domination and control of women, despite the fact that these were not explicitly foregrounded in *EastEnders*. However, such interpretations were more likely to come from those respondents who had watched only the episode screened in the reception research. As

is discussed below, intra-textual readings of Matthew provided very different explanations for his violence.

Views of Carmel in Relation to her Race

The textual analysis argued that it was possible to read the domestic violence as causally related to the fact that this violence occurred in an inter-racial marriage. The potential for this reading was identified and highly criticised by English Asian and Afro-Caribbean women, both with and with no experience of violence.³ Many of these interviewees felt that the portrayal was inviting Matthew and Carmel's racial difference to be viewed as significant. These groups also alluded to what they perceived as a convention, not only in soaps but in the media more generally which depicted mixed-race relationships as problematic. They contested this convention and the implicit racism behind it. For example:

EastEnders, as soon as you knew that there was a black and white couple, you knew that it wasn't going to work. ... If you've got mixed couples the media more or less always point out more of the bad points. You watched *EastEnders* [and] said 'Well, I know that marriage isn't going to work.' So you look out for things to go wrong. Not that I was expecting the violent part, but you just knew from day one it wasn't going to work.
[English Afro-Caribbean woman, with no experience of violence]

English Asian and Afro-Caribbean groups felt an understanding of the domestic violence as caused by racial differences between the couple was given further credence

³ Interestingly it was also the Afro-Caribbean women with experience of violence who were critical of the potential to perceive the rape victim in *The Accused* as a stereotypical representation of such a victim.

through a general negative treatment of racial minorities in *EastEnders*. It was agreed that this encouraged an unsympathetic reading of Carmel because of her colour.⁴

Whilst English Asian and Afro-Caribbean women perceived the domestic violence as insinuating that mixed-race couples were incompatible, none of the white respondents expressed a reading of the portrayal in these terms, and very few referred to the racial difference between Matthew and Carmel at all. Some interviewees familiar with the story-line recalled that this had affected the couple's wedding celebrations, though none could recollect exactly why this was. It could be argued that given the context of the group discussions interviewees might have censored an expression of the violence as caused by racial difference, wary of how other group members might respond. It is therefore very difficult to argue how the representation of domestic violence in a mixed-race marriage may have affected the interpretation of that violence and/or the marriage, though there certainly is evidence to show that it affected how a number of Asian and Afro-Caribbean women related to the programme.

Matthew: Insecurity, Jealousy and the Victim of his Upbringing

For respondents not familiar with the *EastEnders* story-line involving Matthew and Carmel at an intra-textual level, Carmel very often became the focal point of attention in the explanation for the occurrence of the domestic violence. Her career and its effect on her home life was considered a primary reason as to why Matthew was violent towards her. Both women with experience and those with no experience of violence provided such episodic interpretations. However, a significant number of women with experience of violence provided a further episodic reading where Matthew was seen as using violence to assert control over his wife. For example:

4 This response to the programme was given extensive consideration in Schlesinger *et al* (1992: 98-101) and is therefore not elaborated on here.

I think he maybe feels inferior to Carmel because she's a social worker and she's liaising with doctors and things. ... So he's obviously got an insecurity somewhere in there. I think he just doesn't feel as good as her so he's got to bring her down to his level. And that's the only way that he knows how to do it. Violence. By slapping her about a bit and she won't be as big in the mouth or whatever. That's the impression I'm getting just from that wee episode.
[Scottish white woman, with experience of violence]

Respondent 1: Because he's got this complex he tries to take it out on her - his power as a man.

Respondent 2: I think we looked at it from the point of view of saying that here's a woman he's with, not just a woman, but a black woman who's achieving and he's not achieving.
[English Afro-Caribbean women, with experience of violence]

Such perceptions of Matthew reflect a feminist argument that 'men who assault their wives are actually living up to cultural prescriptions that are cherished in Western society - aggressiveness, male dominance and female subordination - and they are using physical force as a means to enforce that dominance' (Dobash and Dobash, 1979: 24).

However, a second episodic reading of Matthew's violent behaviour explained it as the effect of his upbringing. Many respondents with no experience of violence indicated that it was Matthew's reading from the book on domestic violence (scene 17) which solicited this interpretation. This was a key scene through which they made sense of Matthew's behavioural problems.

He was sneering at her having this book. ... He didn't like it because it was too close to what had obviously happened to him when he was younger. Because he wouldn't answer that bit about his mother and I think that he wanted to strike out at something and unfortunately it was her.
[English white working-class woman, with no experience of violence]

There were variations in how scene 17 was interpreted. The statement above illustrates how the book on domestic violence was taken as providing clues to the cause of

Matthew's violence. For one Asian woman the book provided Matthew with a means of expressing what had happened to him as a child:

Well he's asking her for help. More or less telling her that that's what's happened to him but not outright. He wouldn't have the pride to say it outright.
[English Asian woman, with no experience of violence]

In another group the book was regarded as a vehicle for educating viewers about the causes of domestic violence.

Respondent 1: It was just the programme writers giving you some clues on why people beat up people. Saying something about the mothers. It was just sort of pap really.

Respondent 2: It wasn't aimed at him really.

Respondent 1: I think they were giving excuses of why people do this - these things in real life. But it's just sort of reeling off things relating to the family, 'the mother was this and the mother was that'.
[English Afro-Caribbean women, with no experience of violence]

This response identifies scene 17 as intended to prompt a reading of Matthew's violence as stemming from his childhood. However, as the following quotation illustrates, some interviewees found it difficult to speculate on exactly what might have happened to Matthew as a child.

The way he was saying it. I don't know if he had mother and father, father was hitting the mother and children pick it up and that's why they do it when they grow up. It's sort of come from a background where it probably was happening.
[Scottish Asian woman, with no experience of violence]

Interviewees appreciated that the portrayal of Matthew allowed for a reading of his violence as being caused by his family background. But when lacking an intra-textual knowledge of the story-line they tended to engage with this in a speculative way, thereby demonstrating an awareness of how the programme, as soap opera, can toy with such speculations.

Where interviewees had some intra-textual knowledge of Matthew and Carmel's relationship, it was frequently mentioned that Matthew's relationship with his mother was problematic. Even when associations were drawn between this and his violence toward Carmel, many respondents appreciated that the story-line had never revealed what Matthew's mother had done to him. This therefore required some hypothesising about Matthew's childhood experiences:

I think it stems from his childhood. I can't remember the story, but his mum and dad were separating. I think that's a lot to do with it. It also brings up the subject of your childhood, the way you've been brought up, does it have an effect on you?

[Scottish white middle-class woman, with no experience of violence]

I wondered if there'd been some sort of incestuous relationship with his mother, because he wouldn't actually say what his mother had done. ... It was all hinted at.

[English white middle-class woman, with no experience of violence]

Yes, something to do with his mother. But then you've got to guess and say 'Well is it something to do with that?' You don't know really because he's never talked about it.

[English Afro-Caribbean woman, with no experience of violence]

These readings of Matthew's violence linked what could have been viewed as unconnected incidents in his life: his relationship with his mother and his later violence against Carmel. However all reveal an acceptance of the notion that what occurs in childhood can manifest itself in adult behaviour and that this behaviour cannot necessarily be controlled.

Some women with experience of violence questioned the reading offered of the domestic violence which explained it as caused by Matthew's mother. In one group this was criticised from an implicit feminist point of view:

- Respondent 1: It's getting to be the female element again isn't it?
 Respondent 2: It's the woman's fault again isn't it? Yes. If it's not his wife it's his mother. It's still the woman's fault. What they're saying is domestic violence is terrible but there are excuses for it.
 Respondent 3: Yes and that women provoke it.
 Respondent 4: You've put it in a nut shell.
 Respondent 2: Yes. We ask for it.
 [English white women, with experience of violence]

In another group the availability of this reading was objected to by some interviewees on the grounds that it promoted a myth of individual determinism:

- Respondent 1: They say a lot of it happens like that. If they see the mother getting battered by the father they can do it.
 Respondent 2: History repeating itself.
 Respondent 3: Well that theory I just cannot ...
 Respondent 2: No. It does happen.
 Respondent 3: Maybe with some of them. But not with them all.
 Respondent 1: I'm not saying with them all.
 Respondent 4: But even with that myth, I just can't blame anybody's background for what they do as an adult. They're adults. They're responsible. Their childhood has got sweet damn all to do with it.
 [Scottish white women, with experience of violence]

Such objections to *EastEnders'* permitting this interpretation were not overly common. Also of interest is that in only one group, that of the English white women with experience of violence, was it noted that Junior and Aisha's presence had an impact on Matthew and Carmel's marriage. For the vast majority of interviewees familiar with the story-line, despite the attention given to it in various episodes of *EastEnders*, the pressure put on Matthew and Carmel's marriage by the children's presence was perceived as of much less significance than Matthew's own childhood history.

It appears that because many women with experience of violence were able to identify with the violence committed against Carmel, they were less likely to search for explanations for Matthew's behaviour than were women with no experience of violence. This tended to determine that Matthew be perceived as a very jealous and possessive husband who readily sought a fight with his wife and who intended to keep Carmel 'in her place'. For example:

I'm going by the situation and relating it to myself. You see the biggest mistake was that Carmel talked about somebody else who she had made a lovely meal for, and that's what triggers it off. Whereas if that hadn't happened then everything would've been OK for the next couple of days. ... But because this other man came into what he was doing there was too much jealousy. It overtook him.

[Scottish Asian woman, with experience of violence]

That episode was quite realistic. Because most of us here have been through it. It does happen that way doesn't it? There doesn't have to be any particular reason and they can just turn round and strike us.

[English Afro-Caribbean woman, with experience of violence]

The textual research had identified the potential for such an interpretation of Matthew's violence. However, it was only women with experience of violence who adopted this reading. Women with no experience of violence were far more interested in locating narrative causal explanations for Matthew's behaviour.

Some women with experience of violence drew on extra-textual understandings of domestic violence in the reading of Matthew's character. The ability to do this seems dependent on a knowledge of how male identities are socially constructed.

I think society forces a lot of men into it as well. Because ... he's the one who is supposed to be the breadwinner, the one that's going out and being the man, and Carmel's doing it. So society - he watches the telly every day when Carmel's out working, and they're saying 'The man's off working and the woman sits in the house.' And it's affecting his mind.

[English white woman, with experience of violence]

To me he is a victim of being conditioned in society as a man. ... She has then become the victim of that. It depends what you've come through and what you've experienced. I think quite a long time ago I would probably have said 'God I could just stab that man and they should all be shot down' and everything.

[Scottish Asian woman, with experience of violence]

Such interpretations of the domestic violence portrayal illustrate that respondents were able to move beyond a character-based interpretation of the violence and explain this as

caused by social structures. They were not so constrained by the narrative presentation as to be prevented from doing this. Yet this was largely because these women seem to have, as a result of their experiences, developed an understanding of domestic violence in this context, and not because *EastEnders* encouraged an interpretation of this type.

Scene Juxtaposition in Readings of the Domestic Violence

Scene juxtaposition did have some impact on interviewees reading of episode 458. However, responses to the juxtaposing of the domestic violence with other story-lines suggest that the textual analysis may have overstated the effects of this. It had been argued that the episode invited comparison between Carmel and Matthew's relationship and that of the Fowlers and Butchers. However, though such comparisons were made these tended to be limited to a simple noting of differences among families in the community, without a great deal of judgement being passed about what motivated these differences. For example:

I think they were sort of trying to say 'Look there are many different types in the community, it's not all one way'. It was showing you different situations and different homes and different ways of living.
[Scottish white woman, with experience of violence]

[It was] to show the difference. One was enjoyment and welcoming and another of threatening violent undertones.
[English Afro-Caribbean woman, with no experience of violence]

It's just like watching two rooms next to each other. There's one getting beaten and there's one having a nice party. Which one's normal?
[English white woman, with experience of violence]

In only one group did an interviewee express a perception of the scene juxtapositioning as inviting comparison between different characters' situations. She read this as soliciting an unsympathetic reading of Carmel, particularly in relation to her career and race:

I find that contrast really interesting. Because all the other women are servicing the men in their lives. ... Yet Carmel is the professional one, who has such an important job, who has so much power and she's also a black woman. She's a black woman with a bit of power. And there's a contrast. The other women were white, with no power. It seems to me that underlying all this there's [a view that] one woman shouldn't be invested with so much power - emasculating the men. And black women shouldn't be in this position of power because [this is] what happens to you.
 [English white woman, with experience of violence]

References to the contrast between Carmel and other women in the episode through scene juxtapositioning were not common. This is not to say that the readings of Carmel documented above were not influenced by such juxtapositioning. Rather, evidence which might indicate how and where this influence occurred is lacking.

Concluding Remarks

Interviewees universally understood *EastEnders* as an issues-based soap opera, though some women were unsure of its ability to present social issues in either challenging or sincere ways given its imperative to entertain. The research also finds, in common with other studies of soaps, that this tends *not* to be a programme which interviewees value particularly highly. However, a significant number of respondents did regard it as compulsive viewing. Many women also expressed an enjoyment of how *EastEnders* provides points of identification with their own lived experiences. This provided an ability to see these experiences as not uncommon given their representation in the soap. However, little more can be made of how this might affect their understanding of their own lives apart from to say that the programme appeared to provide women with comfort, interest and a knowledge that they were not alone in facing certain predicaments.

Regarding the portrayal of domestic violence, many women with experience of violence identified with the situation of its victim and some viewed this in relation to how social structures can cause men to abuse their wives. Very few women with no experience of violence adopted a reading of this kind. This suggests that an interpretation of the man's violence as being caused by cultural factors was one influenced more by extra-textually derived knowledge than by how the violent representation was encoded. The greater proportion of women with no experience of violence hypothesised that Matthew's behaviour was caused by traumatic events in his childhood. This reading, as the textual analysis argued, was particularly foregrounded in *EastEnders*, both in the episode screened in the reception research and the wider narrative treatment of the story-line. A number of women with experience of violence recognised the availability of this interpretation but criticised and refused to accept it, preferring instead to view Matthew in more political terms as attempting to dominate Carmel through subordination.

Whilst there were broad differences in how women with experience of violence and those with no such experience viewed the causes of Matthew's behaviour, such differences became less clearcut in relation to perceptions of Carmel. This was largely due to the fact that all the groups were, to some degree, critical of Carmel for giving more attention to her work interests than those of her family. There was also a strong tendency to believe that Carmel should have used her professional knowledge in anticipating Matthew's violence. This illustrates that how the characterisation of the victim of violence had a significant bearing on how her circumstances were read: many interviewees took the fact that this woman was portrayed as a career women to be suggesting that this was the cause of her abuse. Having combined both textual and reception analyses in this study of *EastEnders*, it is also possible to identify this interpretation to be particular to many of the respondents who did not have an in-depth, intra-textual knowledge of the domestic violence story-line. As was the case with *The*

Accused, the victim of violence was often perceived at least partially responsible for her own abuse, though here this was linked to that victim's being a career woman instead of her provoking sexual desires in men.

Neither class background nor nationality had any determining impact on how women read the domestic violence portrayal. Ethnicity was significant, however, in that English Asian and Afro-Caribbean women regarded it as insinuating that inter-racial couples are incompatible. They were particularly sensitive to the conventions of such a presentation.

Largely how the domestic violence was read was dependent on whether interviewees had themselves experienced violence or not. For those with no such experience, and with very few exceptions, this portrayal supported an understanding of domestic violence as caused by individual pathology resulting from a damaged upbringing rather than social and cultural factors which might encourage men to commit violence against women as a means of dominating those women.

CHAPTER SIX

CLOSING RANKS: DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN A TELEVISION PLAY

Introduction

This chapter examines the representation of domestic violence in the television play *Closing Ranks* broadcast by ITV on 10th January 1988. *Closing Ranks* was chosen for research partly on the basis of its textual form but also because it ends with a marital rape, showing an aspect of domestic violence not found in the *EastEnders* story-line discussed in Chapter Five. Further, the perpetrator of this violence is a policeman and therefore a figure representing both the law and authority in society. It is of interest to examine both how *Closing Ranks* characterises such a man as a wife batterer and rapist and how this is received by viewers.

Closing Ranks was directed and co-written by Roger Graef. Graef has an extensive history of involvement in television production. In the 1970s and early 80s he built a considerable reputation through documentary and cinéma vérité output (see Wyver, 1982). Describing himself as a 'committed film maker' Graef states that throughout his career he has chosen difficult and often controversial subjects to portray on screen because 'I want things to be faced up to and grappled with. I have always seen my job to provide evidence for debate, not to provide answers' (interviewed by the researcher, 22/12/93). Indeed it is significant that one of Graef's fly-on-the-wall vérité series, *Police* (1982), which filmed Thames Valley police officers conducting a brutal verbal interrogation of a rape victim led to changes in how the police treat rape victims. Graef claims that 'of all television films *Police* is the only one to have affected social policy in a visible and effective way' (interviewed by the researcher, 22/12/93).

It was when conducting research for a book about the police, *Talking Blues*, that Graef approached Central Television with a view to producing a drama out of this work. Originally *Closing Ranks* was to be concerned with obligations of loyalty among police officers and how this can lead to corruption in the force. It was to draw on a notorious police attack against a gang of youths in Holloway Road North London in 1983, the truth about which was covered-up by officers for some two years (see Graef, 1988: 235-9). However, Graef states that he later decided to have the play include domestic violence because when researching *Talking Blues* he was 'shocked by how common this appeared to be in police marriages and how little was known about it. I felt an obligation to the women who had suffered it' (interviewed by the researcher, 22/12/93).

Through the textual analysis of *Closing Ranks* it will be considered how this play offers certain readings of its portrayal of a policeman's violence against his wife. As in the two previous chapters, this analysis first considers the production and marketing contexts of the drama, its generic form and narrative structure. There then follows the close analysis of the play which pays particular attention to how the violent marriage is represented. This textual analysis also draws on an interview with Roger Graef in which he explained his intentions in making *Closing Ranks* and what he hoped audiences might take from it. In the reception analysis the range of readings of the play derived from four focus group discussions are then examined and compared with those which the textual analysis claims are offered.

Synopsis of the Play

The central character of *Closing Ranks* is Rick Sneaden. A police constable, Sneaden is portrayed as generally unpleasant both at home and at work. His wife, Shirley, is a resilient woman who makes a concerted attempt to stand up to her husband's behaviour. The couple's marriage is in difficulties from the outset of the drama where

Shirley threatens to leave Rick, take their son with her and move away from London. Rick is furious, but as the narrative immediately shows the couple in a new home it would appear he has conceded to move to a rural area in order to save the marriage. Nevertheless he continues to abuse Shirley, attempting to control with whom she makes friends and what she does outside of their home. Against his wishes Shirley takes an administrative job in the local doctor's surgery and befriends women connected with the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament.

Having transferred to the rural police force, Rick becomes a bad influence on his colleagues. Eventually he leads them into corruption through the brutal beating of a 'hippy' man at a CND demonstration. The policemen fabricate evidence about the beating claiming it was self-defence. Without Rick's authority Shirley had also attended the CND demonstration where she was momentarily spotted by her husband. When he returns home drunk that night Shirley accuses him of the beating of the 'hippy', having helped tend this man's wounds at the doctor's surgery. Rick, angered by the accusations and Shirley's attendance at the demonstration, attacks and rapes her. The play ends with Shirley left quivering in a heap on the sitting room floor and Rick staring at his own reflection in the bathroom mirror.

The Production and Marketing Contexts

The single television play was at one time credited as being the most progressive of television forms (Gardner and Wyver, 1983a; Gilbert, 1980) and described as 'one of the few areas within modern television where emergent themes and unorthodox views can be presented and worked through' (Murdock, 1980: 22). However, as Kerr points out:

since the late seventies, drama has been forced to be increasingly 'accountable' to both budgets and 'balance'. The result has been a waning of the social-realist single play, and its replacement by two distinct forms - the television film (...); and the

original serial, a curious compromise between increasingly ambitious TV fictions and the increasingly industrialised demands of production and scheduling. (1987: 33)

With television broadcasters continually having to maximise ratings and with pressure to sell productions abroad, the often unpredictable content of single plays has proved a disadvantage to the form (Self, 1984). Indeed, when Graef approached Central Television with the idea of making *Closing Ranks* it was intended not to be a play, but a film for cinematic release as well as television broadcast. The decision not to shoot it on 35 millimetre film and present it in cinemas was taken only after it had gone into production. At this point Margaret Matheson, the head of its production company Zenith, argued that with its lead character Rick Sneaden having been characterised as so unpleasant and crude she could not imagine audiences paying to view *Closing Ranks*.

With concerns being expressed about the ability of *Closing Ranks* to appeal to large audiences and the decision to schedule it as a television play, the drama becomes an example of that form's ability to side-step pressure to 'work with the most prevalent ideological themes or to deliver predictable pleasures to the largest number of viewers' (Schlesinger *et al*, 1983: 78). However, in allowing plays to deal with difficult themes and issues which other television forms may be less able to accommodate, broadcast companies can deploy a strategy which distances them from criticism concerning viewpoints presented in those plays. This consists of promoting the writer, in this instance Roger Graef, as the creative force behind the production (Buscombe, 1980; Caughie, 1985; Gardner and Wyver, 1983a). In ITV's introduction to *Closing Ranks* it was described as based on Roger Graef's research into domestic violence in the police force.¹

¹ The viewing groups in the reception study did not hear this introduction as the research used a video-tape of the original ITV broadcast in which the reels of the play were mistakenly loaded in the wrong order. After some 10 minutes ITV stopped the broadcast and restarted it from the

That a discussion programme on *Closing Ranks* followed its screening could be taken as indication that ITV was concerned about its content and felt a need to offer alternative points of view by providing senior police officers with the opportunity to respond to the play.² However, it was actually Graef himself who asked for this discussion programme to be broadcast. He states of this:

My strategy was to create as big a fuss about it [*Closing Ranks*] as possible: to get ... people to realise that it was real and to get people in uniform standing up there and discussing it. ... All they had to do was take it seriously. They could deny it or whatever. ... I wanted to flush out a formal official reaction to it as if it were a documentary so that they couldn't escape it. (interviewed by the researcher, 22/12/93)

Clearly Graef's hope was that in making *Closing Ranks* seem all the more controversial through the supposed need for the discussion programme, it would not be simply dismissed as a story developed out of someone's imagination.

The Genre

Although *Closing Ranks* is a single television play, this does not constitute a precise generic description of the drama. Self (1982) argues that the single play represents a particular genre. However, it should be recognised that there are no particular conventions of single television plays apart from the commonality of their all being one-off complete narrative presentations. Beyond this, plays might dramatise personal and domestic situations, social and political concerns, they can come under the rubric of

correct reel without a repeat of the introduction. Interview groups were shown the tape from this point.

2 Following the broadcast of controversial drama documentaries (though *Closing Ranks* is more precisely a documentary drama) with studio discussions represents one means of fulfilling recommendations from the ITC that scheduling should ensure that 'alternative interpretations or points of view can be voiced' (Kilborn, 1994: 73).

fiction, theatre, social realism, drama-documentary or documentary-drama. Indeed *Closing Ranks* could be read according to the conventions of a number of these forms. However, given that it is based on actual research into police culture it can, arguably, be most accurately defined as documentary drama. This genre consists of a:

transformation of the originally factually based material ... [where] the documentary element may be little more than those periodic reminders, in whatever form they may be expressed, that what one is witnessing does have at least some basis in fact. ... [T]he documentary component may be little more than a device for heightening realism. It makes the account being rendered that much more plausible and credible, though the prime objective remains that of providing captivating dramatic entertainment. (Kilborn, 1994: 62)

In fact there is very little documentary footage contained in *Closing Ranks*. The only such material is that showing police in a riot situation watched by Rick Sneaden and his colleagues during the briefing for the CND demonstration. But in this context it is also important that ITV, as stated above, introduced the play as based on factual research. Additionally a reading of *Closing Ranks* as documentary drama is available through a perception of similarity between its portrayal of a police cover-up with contemporary controversies surrounding the British police force. Connections can be made between the play and factual cases of police corruption (the Holloway Road incident, for example) and maltreatment of crime suspects. *Closing Ranks'* portrayal of the police preparing for the CND demonstration also resembles images shown in news coverage of the police in conflict with the public during, among others, the city riots of the 1980s, the 1984-5 coal miners' dispute and strike protests at the Wapping print works in 1986.

Also in the early 1980s the women's peace movement came into the public eye with its demonstrations against nuclear weapons. During 1983 protests at nuclear bases such as Greenham Common, which again saw clashes between protesters and the police, featured regularly in news programmes. Initially the women involved in these

campaigns received public sympathy, but quite quickly this declined and they were labelled as left-wing militant cranks (see Glasgow Media Group, 1985: ch 6). *Closing Ranks* offers a more sympathetic representation of the women campaigners. It portrays them as motivated by rational political beliefs and as caring and concerned for each other, future generations and the world environment.

Closing Ranks can then be viewed as working according to a social-realist political agenda. It portrays the police as a potentially corrupt macho organisation which treats minority groups and political demonstrators as deviant and a threat to civil order. The play presents such attitudes as prevalent not only in the lower ranks of the force, but also as disseminated from above. In a briefing prior to the CND demonstration a senior police officer tells his men:

These people might be sincere, but it's the thin end of the wedge. They show disrespect for the law and attract rent-a-mob and other groups which are going to make our lives difficult. I want you to particularly look out for Class War - that's anarchists, and bits and pieces of hippy convoys.

He says riot shields should be used as protection against 'druggies and gays who might have AIDS'. The police force is thus portrayed as operating with an embattled mentality seeking the suppression of any group perceived as a threat to social and political order.

Engaging with the issues of police corruption and domestic violence, a reading of *Closing Ranks* as 'serious drama' is also encouraged. However, with its critical portrayal of the police, its challenging representation of CND and its portrayal of a marital rape committed by a policeman, it might also be considered 'progressive'

drama: 'progressive' being applied to 'those dramas which break new ground in what can be shown on television' (Millington and Nelson, 1986: 175).³

Narrative Structure

Unlike soap opera for example, the narrative length of the single television play makes it 'difficult to establish character and situation in such a short space of time' (*Television and Radio 1983*: 58). In *Closing Ranks* this constrains the variety of causal readings available of the domestic violence, especially when compared to the portrayal in *EastEnders* discussed in Chapter Five. Indeed Roger Graef states that the 'real difficulty of putting together a drama of such a short chronological time is that you cannot provide any character history. So I used short-hand to suggest that there had been problems in this marriage for some time' (interviewed by the researcher, 22/12/93). As becomes evident in the close analysis of the text, viewers are provided with very little evidence as to why Rick Sneaden might have become a violent man, and certainly few details of his background history.

In terms of the viewing pleasures which audiences might expect from a self contained drama, *Closing Ranks* does not conform to the convention of providing resolutions to the narrative enigmas which it establishes. It provides conclusions to neither its portrayal of domestic violence nor the police cover-up concerning the beating of the 'hippy' man. Originally Graef had scripted and shot a more conventional ending to the play in which Shirley was rescued from Rick after her rape by the local doctor. Rick was then to be seen phoning his superintendent, supposedly to confess to his attack on the 'hippy'. However, Graef was worried that such an ending would detract from the realism of the play as 'the truth of the matter is when things get covered-up they stay

³ For a discussion of the debates on what constitutes 'serious' and 'progressive' drama, and the problems of such definitions see Millington and Nelson (1986: 174-8).

covered-up for a very long time; and no relationship has a happy ending' (Graef, interviewed by the researcher, 22/12/93). These scenes therefore ended up on the cutting room floor, and audiences were left to imagine what might have happened to Shirley after her rape and whether the atrocities Rick committed would ever be exposed.

The Close Textual Analysis

As this research is concerned with portrayals of violence against women, it is the domestic violence in *Closing Ranks* which is primarily focused on in the following close analysis of the play's content. The analysis is again supported with scene-by-scene breakdowns of the play. As not all of the drama is broken down in this way, those parts which include scenes specifically featuring the relationship between Rick Sneaden and his wife. However, because this plot is intertwined with that involving the police corruption, parts of this second plot are included in the analysis as they are influential in affecting the range of readings it is possible to make of the domestic violence.

The Portrayal of Domestic Violence

The Problematic Marriage: Establishing the Plot and its Central Characters

The table below provides a summary of the first 14 scenes of *Closing Ranks*. Here the viewer is quickly introduced to the plot involving Rick and Shirley's marital difficulties.

| Scene | Length | Characters Featured | Summary of Action and Dialogue |
|-------|------------------|--|--|
| 1 | 1 min 33 secs | Rick, two other plain-clothed policemen, a villain | In LS at night a van waits in a quiet street. Voice-over of men talking, one saying 'Those arse-holes have threatened to put me back in uniform'. A car drives into a nearby alley, a man gets out. The title <i>Closing Ranks</i> appears. A voice says 'This is the boy, the guy in the Merc'. From the van leap two men shouting 'Police'. Rick in CU points a gun just off camera shouting 'Armed police. We are armed'. The man is grappled to the ground by two other officers. Told to put the gun away, Rick drops his arms and throws his head back, eyes closed. Over an image of a passing train the arrest of the villain for armed robbery is heard. A slow piano solo plays. |
| 2 | 8 secs | | A high rise block of flats at night. Opening credits appear as the piano solo continues. |
| 3 | 11 secs | Billy, Shirley | The music continues. MCU of a child sleeping on a sofa. CU of a woman in a dressing-gown sadly shaking her head. |
| 4 | 28 secs | Rick, 2 colleagues, several black men | The policemen drive in a car. They see what one calls 'A boat load of spades'. Another says 'Make it quick, the clubs are closing'. The car pulls up, and Rick leans out saying 'Give us the blow'. A black man slaps his hand. Though Rick wants to 'get them', his colleagues say to leave it for another time. |
| 5 | 18 secs | Shirley, Billy | Shirley takes the sleeping child in her arms and sobs |
| 6 | 57 secs | Rick, 2 colleagues | At 3.30am Rick remembers he promised to be home for his son's birthday tea. Though disappointed, his colleagues agree to take him home. A siren is put on the car roof and the men mimic its sound. |
| 7 | 2 mins 9 secs | Rick, Shirley | Rick scavenges through the remains of Billy's birthday tea. As Shirley enters he swings round frightening her. Shirley pensively tells Rick she has decided to leave him and take Billy with her. Rick angrily asks what right she has to leave with his son. Shirley wants Billy and her to be happy, and to leave London. Rick is dismissive of her, but she insists she is leaving and that he can get a transfer of he wants. |

| Scene | Length | Characters Featured | Summary of Action and Dialogue |
|-------|------------------|---|--|
| 8 | 1 min 29 secs | Rick, Shirley, Billy | A view of fields and trees is accompanied by a melancholy piano solo. Rick, in MCU, stares out of an upstairs window. He complains about the house. Shirley says 'it's great to have a garden ... Don't you know nothing about nature, planting the little seeds, the birds and the bees?' Rick replies 'It's been such a long time Shirley, I've forgotten about it. May be you should remind me.' Shirley says maybe she will. Billy enters, and he and Rick spar with each other. |
| 9 | 1 min 29 secs | WPC, PC, Rick, police superinten- dent | In a police station a WPC encourages a PC, Albert, to study for promotion. They briefly kiss. Albert introduces himself to Rick as his new partner. A superintendent interviews Rick asking 'no exams, no promotion, no ambition?' Rick says he wants to do 'proper police work'. The superintendent is not impressed. |
| 10 | 23 secs | Shirley, Billy | Shirley drags an unwilling Billy to school. |
| 11 | 33 secs | Superinten- dent, Rick | The superintendent tells Rick to smarten himself up and warns him not to step out of line. |
| 12 | 1 min 26 secs | Rick, a number of policemen, the WPC | Rick is drinking with his new colleagues in the police club. Two sergeants at the bar dislike his egotistic attitude. The WPC enters telling Rick his wife is outside. Rick slaps the WPC's behind. |
| 13 | 1 min 10 secs | WPC, Rick, Shirley | Rick is taken to Shirley. Asked why she's at the station Shirley says the buses were not working and she walked miles with Billy to school. The heel of her shoe is broken and she wants Rick to take her home. He says he is on a case. Shirley angrily asks 'a case of beer?' Giving her £10 for a taxi, he sends her off remarking 'And for Christ sake tidy yourself up. Coming down here like a bleeding Gippo.' |
| 14 | 1 min 7 secs | Shirley, various extras | Walking through a street market with her broken shoe, a stall holder shows Shirley a pair of Wellingtons. She then sees an advert selling a bicycle for £10. In the Wellingtons, Shirley, initially unstable but gaining in confidence, rides the bike through the town and its rural setting. Lively piano music accompanies her. |

As the table above illustrates, Rick is quickly established in *Closing Ranks* as a central character and as being a policeman. But with scene 4, viewers are given reason to consider him and his colleagues as racist, irresponsible and more inclined to go out drinking after duty rather than returning home.

Scenes 3 and 5 foreground Shirley as another central character in the play, portraying her as having a son and being unhappy. The accompanying piano music suggests a reading of her unhappiness as of importance to the drama. It is revealed in scene 6 that Rick has failed to keep a promise to return home for Billy's birthday tea. The following two scenes then provide significant information concerning Rick and Shirley's marriage.

Scene 7 which shows Rick stuffing food into his mouth with his hands and drinking from a beer bottle characterises him somewhat negatively. The coding of this scene also allows for a perception of Rick and Shirley as working-class given their living in a high rise block of flats (shown in scene 2) with furnishings that indicate a lack of wealth. Graef had intended this to be a class reading of the couple. He based his characterisation of Rick on his perception of police constables as 'largely ordinary white working-class men. They come from a completely unaware, unselfconscious cultural set in which sexism, racism and domestic violence is built into their ancient traditions' (interviewed by researcher, 22/12/93).

From scene 7 it is very obvious that Rick and Shirley's marriage is at a crisis point given Shirley's desire to leave her husband. The viewer is also able to regard her as physically afraid of Rick given her tensing up when he swings round as she enters the room. Because so little has been shown of the marriage, viewers might reserve judgement about why it has gone wrong and exactly where the responsibility lies for its decline. However, the generally poor image so far presented of Rick could certainly cause the audience to sympathise with Shirley's point of view.

In scene 8 it is revealed that Shirley has been avoiding having sex with Rick. No explicit explanation is given for this. On the one hand viewers could regard Shirley as quite justified in not desiring Rick given the contempt and lack of thought he has so far displayed toward her. This is how Graef intended Shirley's position to be viewed: 'I was merely suggesting that at least if I was married to somebody who behaved like Rick I wouldn't really want to sleep with him' (interviewed by the researcher, 22/12/93). On the other hand there is nothing to prevent viewers from interpreting Shirley's lack of interest in sexual relations with her husband as a causal explanation for Rick's bad behaviour and attitude toward her. For his part, Rick has moved with Shirley to save the marriage. Therefore, it is possible to view Shirley as having some power of determination in their relationship.

Scenes 9 to 13 predominantly focus on Rick. Here the text portrays him as arrogant, egotistical and sexist, and while he impresses some of his new colleagues, others are critical of him. These scenes also provide an image of police culture as very male-orientated. Whether this is caused by individuals like Rick, and/or whether it is endemic to the police force in general is open to interpretation. That both readings are possible is demonstrated in newspaper reviews of the play. The *Guardian's* Hugh Hebert described *Closing Ranks* as 'a bad apple analysis of error in the police force' (1988a). This reading identifies Rick as having a detrimental influence on others. Minette Marrin in the *Daily Telegraph* adopted a less character specific reading accusing Graef's portrayal of 'crying stinking fish in your own back yard' and asking 'Are there many such dangerous psychopaths in the police force?' (1988). Marrin, though critical of the play, views Rick as intended to be representative of policemen in general and not of a specific character type - the occasional 'bad apple'. In fact Roger Graef considered the play to be offering a 'rotten apple' scenario of how the police force can be affected by a 'psychopath coming amongst them'. Of responses to *Closing Ranks* such as Marrin's he states, 'Not enough people recognise that he [Rick] was meant to be the

odd man out and they saw that film as saying that all the police are like that' (interviewed by the researcher, 22/12/93).

With Shirley's appearance at the police station in scene 13 she is seen entering the public sphere of Rick's work. This he seems to resent. Here Rick's response to Shirley appears explicitly designed to encourage an interpretation of him as belligerent and extremely rude. He fails to show any concern for Shirley's welfare, lies to her about 'being on a case' and is very derogatory about her appearance. Yet Shirley's going to the station could be viewed as inappropriate in that it causes embarrassment to Rick on his first day at the station and might alert his colleagues to the fact that he has domestic problems. However, scene 14 proceeds to invite identification with and a sympathetic view of Shirley. Buying a bicycle with the money Rick gave her she demonstrates good spending sense when the family is struggling financially. Moreover, the up-tempo music accompanying the scene creates a feeling of approval for the pleasure and symbolic independence Shirley gains from riding the bicycle.

Scenes 15 to 20 then portray Rick at work and Shirley enquiring about a job at the local doctor's surgery. Rick, on the beat with his partner Albert, again displays sexist attitudes and now an inclination toward infidelity in asking Albert about the 'local crumpet situation'. He also annoys members of the local community, arrogantly accusing some young men of driving an unroadworthy car, for which he is later reprimanded by his sergeant. Meanwhile, Shirley visits the doctor's surgery in response to a vacancy for a receptionist. Travelling there on her bike with a new kitten in a box balanced on the handlebars, Shirley could be viewed as somewhat unprofessional in her approach to seeking work. Such a reading is reinforced when the cat escapes from its box causing the doctor, much to his annoyance, to have to recapture it. This, along with Shirley's casual attitude makes him somewhat sceptical of her. However, it is also possible to view Shirley's behaviour here as indicative of

innocence and/or naivety. Nevertheless, Shirley persuades the doctor to take her on for a few days at least, helped by her explaining she has previously worked as a nurse.

Shirley and Rick in Conflict over Breakfast

As the table below illustrates, in scene 21 Rick and Shirley are again characterised in a situation of conflict.

| Scene | Length | Characters Featured | Summary of Action and Dialogue |
|--------------|------------------|----------------------------|---|
| 21 | 1 min 54 secs | Rick, Shirley, Billy | Shirley, in her dressing gown, makes Rick's breakfast on his return from night duty. He stares at her, waiting for his food. She says 'there's no bacon, eggs will have to do'. Shirley has also given the milk to the cat. In MCU Rick shouts, his face up to hers, 'You've give the milk to the cat? Well get next door and lend some milk of them. ... Look you. I've just come in after being out all night with the naffing zombies, and you tell me there's no milk. No bloody bacon. You have given the milk which I paid for to the naffing cat.' Rick grabs the cat and, as Shirley yells 'It's Billy's cat', throws it outside. He shouts 'Cats are for pigging poofers and little girls right. Got it? Now that is my son and I will buy him a dog. Right?' In LS Billy sits silently on the stairs. |

Rick's attitude in this scene indicates that he expects Shirley to perform a traditional female domestic role in the home. Having no milk and bacon in the house, she could be viewed as inefficient at this task. However, there is the potential to perceive Rick as making no effort to avoid upsetting his wife here and as expressing overtly macho views in stating that a cat is an inappropriate pet for a boy. An additional feature of this scene is Billy's complete lack of expression when watching his parents argue. Whether this is indicative of Billy regarding their behaviour as normal, whether he is simply a withdrawn child, or whether he condones his father's treatment of his mother is not clear and it remains open as to which interpretation is taken to be the most appropriate.

There then follow six scenes where Shirley and Rick are again apart. Though these do not feature their marriage difficulties, they further develop the characterisation of the couple and could well affect how viewers perceive their relationship. Here Rick and Albert are on night duty and Rick dissuades his partner from responding to a radio call to attend a domestic violence incident telling him 'Domestics are pure poison my son. Pure poison.' Consequently a WPC who goes to the incident alone is assaulted. Meanwhile, Shirley is portrayed as proving both efficient at working in the surgery and caring toward the doctor who reveals that he has no family, his wife and child having been killed in a car crash.

Sexual Tensions in the Marriage Continue

Between scenes 28 and 34, Shirley and Rick's sexual relationship again becomes a focus of attention along with what could be viewed as Rick's continued chauvinistic and derogatory attitudes toward women. A minor plot where Rick is called to a siege involving a domestic violence incident is also featured. The table below presents a breakdown of these scenes.

| Scene | Length | Characters Featured | Summary of Action and Dialogue |
|--------------|---------------|------------------------------------|--|
| 28 | 19 secs | Shirley, Rick, Billy | The family exit from a high street decorating store with a trolley of shopping. Rick hoists Shirley onto the trolley and, as he and Billy push it, they all laugh. |
| 29 | 1 min 42 secs | Shirley, Rick, Billy | Rick and Shirley, giggling, paint the lounge. In MCU Rick cuddles her, suggesting they go upstairs. Shirley wants to finish painting. Rick says they could eat out and have an early night. Shirley apprehensively agrees. |
| 30 | 1 min 6 secs | Shirley, Rick, a woman baby-sitter | Shirley and Rick leave a baby-sitter in the house. They feel romantic going out dressed-up. The telephone rings, and though Shirley pleads with Rick to ignore it, he answers and is called to an armed siege. Shirley is left standing crying as Rick speeds away in the car. |

| Scene | Length | Characters Featured | Summary of Action and Dialogue |
|-------|-------------------|--|---|
| 31 | 42 secs | Superintendent, Rick | At the police station the superintendent hands Rick a gun and explains how the siege began. |
| 32 | 3 mins 11 secs | Rick, Albert, armed man, his mother, policemen | At the siege a man leans from an upstairs window of a terraced house with a knife to his mother's throat. As other policemen keep the man talking Rick and Albert ascend the back stairs of the house. Rick grabs the man from behind and shouts at Albert to hit him. The mother pleads for them to stop. |
| 33 | 53 secs | Rick, Shirley | Rick gets into bed and tries to arouse Shirley. Uninterested, she says 'leave it out'. |
| 34 | 1 min 59 secs | Rick, Shirley, Billy, Mrs Forrester, 2 CND women | The family drive in the countryside. Shirley recognises a woman at a roadside CND stall. They pull up and the woman comes over. Shirley introduces Mrs Forrester to Rick. The woman asks if he is a civil servant. Rick replies 'Not exactly' and drives away, leaving Mrs Forrester stumbling to the ground. Shirley is angry. Rick tells her to be careful who she talks to: 'Those women are a lot of loony, lefty, lesbos. You know what they need is a good stiff ... dose of housework'. He gets Billy to agree with him. |

Scene 28 offers an unusually happy portrayal of Rick, Shirley and Billy. This happy family atmosphere continues into scene 29. Yet when Rick makes a pass at Shirley in this scene it is possible to view her as remaining sexually nervous of him. Again it can only be speculated on why Shirley feels this way, as explicit causal explanations have not been provided within the narrative. Viewers might regard her as continuing to find Rick undesirable, but a reading of her as frigid is equally possible. However, this scene does indicate that the couple are able to enjoy each others' company, which might be considered suggestive of an improvement in their relations. With scene 30 though, any such improvement is immediately thrown into doubt when Rick speeds away in his car to attend the armed siege leaving Shirley crying in the road. From this it might be concluded that Rick's job is partly to blame for their marital troubles. Indeed it was this reading which was privileged in a *TV Times* feature article on *Closing Ranks* where it

was billed as 'a TV film about the effects of stress on a fictional police officer' (Guttridge, 1988: 19).

In the portrayal of the armed siege viewers are provided with the opportunity to consider Rick as quite ingenuous in dealing with this crisis. However, he can also be perceived as unnecessarily violent in encouraging Albert to hit the already captured man. Such a critical interpretation of Rick could well affect how he is viewed in relation to Shirley, and provide increasing reason to identify with her dislike and fear of him. When Rick's sexual advances are rejected by Shirley in scene 33 it is difficult to make a critical reading of her response. Rick simply gets into bed with no apology for leaving her earlier and belligerently assumes that she will now have sex with him.

Scene 34 then reinforces further negative perceptions of Rick. His behaviour toward Mrs Forrester is overtly rude, and unless the audience, like Rick, adopts a very hostile attitude toward CND demonstrators, then they are highly unlikely to view his behaviour positively. Additionally it is apparent from this scene that Rick encourages Billy to imitate his chauvinism by making fun of Shirley's delight at being in the countryside and in stating that the CND women need a 'dose of housework'.

The CND Demonstration

As the play continues scenes 35 to 39 present Rick and Shirley in diametrically opposed contexts. Shirley develops a friendship with a woman CND campaigner whom she meets at an ice-rink where she has taken Billy. Here Shirley begins to express support for the beliefs of the CND. Meanwhile, at the police station, Rick participates in riot training and briefings in preparation for a CND demonstration at the local nuclear base. The impression of CND presented by officers at this briefing is very different from that which Shirley encounters in her conversation with the woman at the ice-rink. These different views the couple each have of CND campaigners cause considerable animosity

between them in scene 39. Shirley, surprised to discover how the police are preparing for the demonstration tells Rick he should read about the dangers of nuclear weapons. In turn he forbids her to have anything to do with the campaigners. However, as the scene-by-scene breakdown below details, Shirley goes on to attend the demonstration where she is spotted by Rick. Immediately after this Rick then instigates the violence against the 'hippy' which leads him and his colleagues to have to fabricate evidence about the incident.

| Scene | Length | Characters Featured | Summary of Action and Dialogue |
|-------|-------------------|--|--|
| 41 | 9 mins 11 secs | Rick, numerous policemen, CND women, Shirley | Rick and 3 PCs sit tense and irritable in a van at a nuclear base, the site of the heavily policed CND demonstration. Shirley arrives on her bike in an anorak and scarf to avoid recognition. CND women welcome her. A lorry approaches the base, but following a protest is sent away by the police superintendent. Women quietly start cutting the base's perimeter fencing. Many are arrested, making no resistance. The police van is called to investigate an intruder on the base. As the van speeds away, Rick, spotting Shirley, shouts 'That's my fucking wife'. |
| 42 | 2 mins 56 secs | Rick, several policemen, a 'hippy', his wife & child | The police van speeds down a track. The policemen discover an old ambulance. Its 'hippy' owner is told to move it, but it has a puncture. Rick smashes one of its windows with his truncheon. The 'hippy' pulls a knife. Rick and Albert truncheon him to the ground. He lies badly wounded and bleeding as his wife and child scream. Rick arrests the man for possessing an offensive weapon and assaulting a police officer. |
| 43 | 1 min 46 secs | Shirley, doctor, the 'hippy', his wife, child & Albert | The doctor examines the 'hippy' with Shirley's assistance. Albert tells the man's wife 'It was an accident'. |
| 44 | 47 secs | Rick, 3 colleagues | At the station, Rick tells his colleagues how to write their reports about the incident with the 'hippy', giving different details from those in scene 42. |

In scene 41, although Rick and his colleagues are clearly shown in a high state of tension as they sit in the police van at the CND demonstration, that demonstration is

portrayed as a very peaceful one involving women of all ages. The women campaigners are very aware that in cutting the fence they are committing a crime, but they are determined to make their protest even though this means they will be arrested. Shirley is also aware of the fact that she might be recognised by the police, hence her heavy disguise. But her attendance at the demonstration and her bringing sandwiches for the women suggests that she supports CND's political beliefs and/or at least seeks to establish herself as part its community.

The violence Rick commits upon the 'hippy' in scene 42 can be viewed as partly the effect of senior policemen training the officers to expect trouble at the demonstration. This could explain the nervous tension they exhibit whilst in the police van. However, a more likely reading is that of the police officers hoping for a chance to be let loose on the demonstrators whom they clearly hold in contempt. Rick is particularly aggressive toward the campaigners, and when he comes across the 'hippy' man viewers are clearly encouraged to perceive him as needlessly provoking that man to pull a knife on him. Indeed, Rick's smashing up of the contents of his vehicle and his violence against this man permits a reading of his being extremely dangerous and beyond rationality. Further, not only does he seriously harm the 'hippy', he brings the police into disrepute in doing so. As is shown in scene 44 Rick then has to initiate a cover-up of what was actually involved in this incident. The following scene then involves the doctor suggesting to Shirley that Rick may be responsible for the beating of the 'hippy', having been told by the man that the policeman who beat him had a London accent. This then invites speculation as to how Shirley will later react to Rick, and he to her given his sighting of her at the demonstration in scene 41.

Scenes 46 to 58 then focus on the plot involving Rick and his colleagues' fabrication of evidence. In these scenes it is clearly apparent that though the superintendent at the station suspects Rick is responsible for the violence, he is defeated by a conspiracy of silence about the attack.

The Play's End and the Rape of Shirley

The table below documents what viewers encounter in the final stages of *Closing Ranks* and how it ends.

| Scene | Length | Characters Featured | Summary of Action and Dialogue |
|-------|-------------------|--|--|
| 57 | 2 mins 4 secs | Walter, Rick, Albert, young sergeant | Walter stands in an office with Rick and Albert. He stares at Rick who insists they stick together. A sergeant enters telling Walter to see the superintendent. Rick warns Walter that one day he may need his support. Walter pushes him aside in disgust. |
| 58 | 21 secs | Walter, superinten- dent | Walter is taken into the superintendent's office. |
| 59 | 23 secs | Rick, Albert, sergeant | Rick tells his colleagues a racist joke. |
| 60 | 45 secs | Walter, superinten- dent | Walter denies seeing what happened with the 'hippy'. The superintendent says he knows what Walter is doing, and thinks he's making a mistake. |
| 61 | 1 min 6 secs | Walter, Rick, Albert, sergeant | Walter tells his colleagues 'I saved your arses'. Alone with Rick he says he wanted to save the young sergeant's career, not Rick's, and that, in time, he will get Rick 'good and proper'. |
| 62 | 22 secs | Shirley | At home Shirley paints the lounge. Slow piano solo on the sound-track. |
| 63 | 1 min 10 secs | Rick, policemen, woman behind bar | In the police bar CID and uniformed men compete in drinking games, remove their trousers and gesticulate with snooker cues. The uniformed men line up and expose bare backsides to the CID. |
| 64 | 3 mins 10 secs | Shirley, Rick | Shirley is decorating. Rick returns home drunk. He says 'If it ain't the enemy within' and accuses her of being with her 'scumbag dyke friends' that day. She in turn says she knows he was 'out giving somebody a pasting'. He denies it, claiming self-defence. She retorts 'What do you think I am? Some thick tart that cooks your dinner?' He grabs her from the step ladder, repeatedly banging her head against the wall and rapes her from behind. Then as Shirley tries to hit him, Rick grabs her round the neck. She slumps to the floor shaking. He walks across the disarrayed room saying 'Come on you, beddy byes.' |
| 65 | 30 secs | Rick | Rick stares at himself in a mirror. Slow piano solo on sound-track. The image turns black. |

From what is presented in scenes 57 to 61 viewers are encouraged to believe that, were the narrative to continue, Rick would eventually be appropriately dealt with by his fellow officer Walter for the corruption into which he has led his fellow officers. Though Walter was in attendance at the 'hippy' incident, he took no part in it and is angered by having to remain loyal to Rick so as to avoid getting the other officers into trouble.

As *Closing Ranks* reaches its end audiences are provided with no reason to view Rick positively, indeed, he could be read as Roger Graef intended as of a psychopathic nature. This, along with his having sighted Shirley at the CND demonstration in scene 41, invites viewers to be concerned as to how he will treat her when he returns home - which he does in scene 64. In the early part of this scene Shirley makes a concerted stand against her husband's verbal attacks, and one stronger than any she has previously displayed in accusing him of the beating of the 'hippy'. Shirley's strength is further symbolised through her standing above Rick on the step ladder.

At this point the audience knows that Rick is lying to Shirley. Therefore, by pulling her off the ladder and then raping her this suggests an interpretation that he is trying to put her in her place through overt sexual humiliation and punishment. Rick's final remark then ridicules Shirley even further and viewers are surely expected to be appalled at his denial of what he has just done. The final scene (65) of Rick staring at himself in the mirror then allows a reading of him in an intense moment of self-reflection. Whilst he appears horrified at what and who he sees, it is left very much up to the viewer to decide for themselves what this image might mean.

Summary of Possible Reading Positions

From the analysis of the portrayal of domestic violence in *Closing Ranks*, several features of the text can be identified as especially important in affecting how that violence can be read. Through its characterisation, the play encourages a particularly critical viewing of Rick Sneaden. He is portrayed negatively through both how he performs as a policeman and as a husband and father. The play neither excuses him for his behaviour, nor offers any explanation as to why he is such an unpleasant, violent and disruptive man. Therefore, unless viewers condone such a character, there is little impetus to either identify or sympathise with him. However, the play is open to a either reading portraying Rick as an unusual 'rotten apple' type character or as representative of (police)men and - given the encoding of the drama - perhaps working-class men in general.

As one of Rick's victims, a sympathetic perception of Shirley is encouraged. Yet Shirley may not necessarily be viewed as without faults of her own. Her refusal to have sex with her husband can be regarded as contributing to their marital tensions. However, such a reading supposes that Shirley should find Rick desirable, when there has been little suggestion that he is. Other critical readings can be made of Shirley. She does rile Rick by visiting him at work, befriending CND campaigners, being inefficient as a housewife and by attending the CND demonstration. Such criticisms of Shirley can only be adopted, however, in tandem with a belief that she should constrain her independence and conform to behaviour as expected by Rick.

Rick and Shirley's marital problems and the domestic violence in *Closing Ranks* can be perceived as caused, in one way or another, by one or both of these characters. However, it is also possible to consider the portrayal in relation to certain forms of male culture. Rick's sexism, chauvinism and violence toward his wife can be viewed as reflective of male values which denigrate women, values which some of his male police colleagues appear to revere. A restricted class-based cultural reading is also possible,

where the narrative permits an interpretation of Rick and Shirley's marriage as perhaps working-class in nature. Indeed, Roger Graef's own conception of the relationship suggests that this is how he envisaged the portrayal to be understood. He states, 'I wanted to provide a kind of evidence of difficulty in the marriage which a more sophisticated, civilized, friendly or amenable couple would have handled in a different way' (interviewed by the researcher, 22/12/93).

Scheduled as a single television play, the makers of *Closing Ranks* were able avoid having to provide conventional narrative pleasures for the audience. However, when the drama was commissioned, because a possible cinema release was anticipated, it was expected to fulfil such expectations. It would seem that once it was decided not to construct *Closing Ranks* as a film, its makers were able to exploit this by giving it an inconclusive ending. With this the play invites viewers to provide their own answers as to whether the police cover-up would eventually be exposed, how Rick's police colleagues would treat him in the future, and whether Shirley would leave the violent marriage and even report her rape to the police.

Closing Ranks is based on factual research into the police and reflects police corruption of the type exposed in British police forces throughout the 1980s and early 90s. Additionally, through its general images of the police and CND it makes links with real events. Therefore, viewers are able to regard the play as not merely a fiction. If read as 'faction' they could well consider it as passing both social and political comment, and even somewhat progressive in its attempts to do this. There is little doubting then that audiences are encouraged to view this as 'serious drama'.

The Reception Analysis

The reception analysis of *Closing Ranks* is based on four focus group interviews: one group of Scottish white working-class and one group of English white middle-class women both with no experience of violence, a group of Scottish and a group of English white women with experience of violence. As was explained in Chapter Three, this represents a more limited study of the play's reception than that of *The Accused*, *EastEnders* and *Crimewatch*. But it does allow for some comparisons to be made with readings of the portrayal of domestic violence in *EastEnders*. However, as responses to *Closing Ranks* were not sought from Asian and Afro-Caribbean women it is not possible to consider the impact of ethnic difference on interpretation.

Readings Related to the Production and Marketing Contexts

When compared to the other texts featured in this research, it is notable that women hardly ever mentioned any readings linked to the production context of *Closing Ranks*. In the case of *The Accused* and *EastEnders*, as has been illustrated, and as will be detailed in relation to *Crimewatch*, there were varying degrees of discussion in the groups about what motivated the making of those texts, as well as indications of how the respondents related to them as 'productions'. It is difficult to explain why this did not occur in relation to *Closing Ranks*. It could be that the regularity of the broadcasting of *EastEnders* and *Crimewatch* may have meant that interviewees had already, prior to their involvement in this research, reflected on the intentions behind the making of those programmes. Similarly with regard to *The Accused* the research uncovered the fact that interviewees had developed conceptions of the economic imperative in Hollywood film production. Perhaps then interviewees simply had not had sufficient opportunity to consider what motivated the broadcast of *Closing Ranks*, though more generally the decline of the single play in television schedules may have also contributed to this.

What was evident is that interviewees were able to reflect on the historical context behind the portrayal of the police in *Closing Ranks*, in that they considered it to be drawing on controversies surrounding practices in British police forces. This will be discussed further below in relation to how the play was read generically.

In the context of its production, it is interesting to note how some interviewees conceived of the writer of *Closing Ranks*. Again it should be stressed that references to the writer were very rare. When he was discussed (an interesting assumption was that the writer was a man), it was believed that this individual represented the creative force behind the contents of the play. In the reception studies of the other three texts discussed in this research, interviewees did not express a view that any one individual could be credited as so responsible for what they found in those texts.

A number of English white middle-class women with no experience of violence were concerned as to why anyone would want to create a programme such as *Closing Ranks*. Here one respondent considered it to be simply representative of one person's view of society, and a very distorted view at that:

I just can't understand somebody sitting down and writing that. Maybe it comes from somebody's experience ... but to actually sit down and make it up, I think they must have something warped about them. Well, it's just warped about society in general.

[English white middle-class woman, with no experience of violence]

Among the group of Scottish white women with experience of violence, the only other group in which the writer was mentioned, a very different response was found. Here general objections to the contents of *Closing Ranks* were not made and one interviewee considered the play an attempt on the part of its writer to highlight the issue of police corruption:

I think he [the writer] was actually trying to point out that there is corruption in the police force. In any office there is corruption. I think that was what he was trying to get at, that men can be so very easily corrupted.
[Scottish white woman, with experience of violence]

Here then the writer is considered an agent portraying a view of society with which this interviewee identifies. This clearly contrasts with the point of view adopted by the English middle-class woman quoted above.

Genre and Reception

Closing Ranks was at no time referred to by interviewees in relation to a *specific* generic form. It was most usually described simply as a play. However, there is evidence to show that this text was viewed by many interviewees as a mixture of fact and fiction. Therefore the textual analysis was right to argue that a reading of the play as documentary drama was available.

When English white middle-class women with no experience of violence were asked if they would have viewed *Closing Ranks* at home, it was because it was a television play that interviewees stated that they might have been attracted to it. For example:

Researcher: If you were at home and you had seen a preview of *Closing Ranks*, would you have watched it?
Respondent 1: I enjoy plays
Respondent 2: ... I don't like violence ... but I watch most plays.
Respondent 3: Yes. I do too.
[English white middle-class women, with no experience of violence]

In none of the three other groups were television plays commented on as connected with respondents' viewing tastes. However, whilst the English white middle-class women approved of the textual form of *Closing Ranks*, it would seem that the drama did not conform to their expectations of a single television play, nor were they entirely enthusiastic about how that form was being used:

- Respondent 1: All the violence and all those issues packed into one programme ... it was just made to sort of hit you [so you think] 'God does this really happen?' It was just made to hit all your senses, all your emotions in one go ... to shock you.
- Respondent 2: There wasn't a light hearted theme to that. There was the issue of women's rights. ... Then there was the domestic violence. Then there was corrupt police force. It was all heavy. It wasn't meant to be a light entertainment play.
[English white middle-class women, with no experience of violence]

Whilst this suggests a reading of *Closing Ranks* as serious drama with an intention to shock, one interviewee from the group was concerned that the play might be read as documentary drama. It was felt this could have damaging effects on public perceptions of the police force:

It [had] no sort of disclaimer to say that this is a fictional film. ... A large percentage of the population would believe that that's what goes on. Which doesn't do the police any good.
[English white middle-class woman, with no experience of violence]

In other groups, however, interviewees were happy to accept the portrayal of the police in *Closing Ranks* and links were made between this and contemporary controversies surrounding the British police force.

Scottish white working-class women with no experience of violence made connections between *Closing Ranks* and factual television programmes reporting on police corruption:

- Respondent 1: Corruption has been televised before with the police.
True stories ...
- Respondent 2: True stories like Freemasons and things like that.
- Respondent 1: Documentaries.
[Scottish white working-class women, with no experience of violence]

This illustrates how reception does not involve a simple relationship between a single text and its viewer, but that other texts can affect the reception of any one text. This has been noted by Kilborn where he states:

an audience's understanding of one text is going to be substantially determined by the network of connections that readers make between it and a potentially endless series of other texts with which it is bound up by virtue of the conventions it employs, the subject it treats and the imagery it deploys. (1994: 69)

English white middle-class women with no experience of violence also associated the drama with other media texts on police corruption. They, however, found such critical images of the police less acceptable. One interviewee claimed that these were unrepresentative of the reality of policing, and again from within this group emphasis is put on the dangers of portraying the police in this negative way. This form of concern is very similar to that expressed by television regulators who believe that "'viewers" should not be "confused" between fact and fiction' (Fiddick, 1990: 5).

There are a few incidents you hear about in the papers but very few and half of those are disproved. It's a shame to portray the force like that. Most policemen say it's just boring paperwork most of the time. And to have them sneaking off and not doing their duty, beating [people] up, it's not a big part of most policemen's everyday life. They showed it going on behind scenes covering up for each other all the time. I should not imagine that happens very often and people might take it literally and suspect that the police force is like that. Then you get women not reporting rapes and people not reporting assaults because they're frightened of the police.
[English white middle-class woman, with no experience of violence]

In the other three groups *Closing Ranks'* portrayal of the police was read as credible, plausible and tied to a known reality of how the police sometimes operate. It is also interesting to note that in two of the following responses, the term 'closing ranks' is drawn on in interviewees arguments about this:

It does happen. The police, they close ranks against the public, they back each other up.
[Scottish white working-class woman, with no experience of violence]

The bit with the police and that, ... I do know that that goes on.
[Scottish white woman, with experience of violence]

You get these things coming up and they have internal enquiries, but they do all close ranks and and protect one another. It happens all the time. You see it on the news and it's obvious they've covered up for one another.

[English white woman, with experience of violence]

Extra-textual evidence about police corruption did then affect how respondents viewed *Closing Ranks*. The drama was read neither in isolation from other media products nor from its historical specificity. Of interest though is that in all the groups it was specifically the issue of police corruption which led to such cross-textual referencing. Nowhere were there allusions to police clashes with rioters and strikers in the 1980s which the textual analysis suggested might figure in the reading. This could have been because such images are not considered a critical reflection on the police whereas corruption in the force clearly was.

Also notable is that some interviewees read *Closing Ranks*, despite its being a fictional text, as adding to their knowledge of the police force. If David Russell's statement is accepted, that '[b]eneath television drama lies its sociological, documentary aspiration, its attempt to be part of the forming of contemporary history and historiography' (1990: 178), *Closing Ranks* seems to have scored some success. From two groups, responses suggest that, though they came to very different conclusions about what the drama was saying, *Closing Ranks* had an impact on interviewees' thinking about the police:

I quite like it when these programmes are shown because to me it's a case of 'Well we're not hiding it. This does happen. We'll do our best to sort things out.' But what can they do against closed ranks? Not a good deal.

[Scottish white working-class woman, with no experience of violence]

We are sort of socialised into believing that our police force is the best in the world and you see something like that and you think 'Oh, its not so far from Chile'.

[English white woman, with experience of violence]

Again in this first quote the term 'closing ranks' appears, indicating that the play had some effect, as Roger Graef intended, in creating a perception of police corruption as based on loyalty among officers. Also notable is that the second of the above quotes alludes to the police performing an oppressive role in society. This reading was also made of *Closing Ranks* by English white middle-class women with no experience of violence, on one of the rarer occasions when they identified with the play's critical portrayal of the police. When discussing the beating of the hippy they noted how some social groups are negatively labelled:

- Respondent 1: They didn't even give him the chance to tell them why he was stopped there. It looked like his van had broken down or something. But there was no chance, he was a hippy, therefore he was trouble.
- Respondent 2: He was labelled straight away.
- Respondent 1: Yes. 'We'll get him before he gets us'.
- Respondent 3: 'He was on drugs'.
- Respondent 1: 'Smash his windows in'.
- Respondent 2: That was the the top nobs at the police station that were doing that.
- Respondent 1: Yes they were. It came from above hadn't it.
- Respondent 2: We all giggled when he said ... 'Use your shields against gays, they might have AIDS'. You think 'Oh this is CND demonstrations'. It's the way they class everybody. Just because they don't want nuclear weapons and everything. Madness.
[English white middle-class women, with no experience of violence]

This reading is achieved through a very close engagement with the coding of the text, and is almost identical to how the textual analysis argued the portrayal represented the police as operating with an embattled mentality. Scottish working-class women read the hippy incident similarly, but here an additional class perspective structures the reading:

- Respondent 1: It was a totally innocent man getting hit just because he was dressed scruffy. Because he didn't have a society suit and tie or even fresh jeans.
- Respondent 2: If he was sitting there in his big BMW in a suit and tie would they have thought the same way about him? [It's] just because the way his van was and the way he was dressed.
[Scottish white working-class women, with no experience of violence]

Scottish and English women with experience of violence reflected less on the play's coding of the police's treatment of 'deviants'. Instead, as this example demonstrates, their interpretation was informed through their own experiences of police violence:

- Respondent 1: My husband, he got battered by the police. But then there was no proof.
- Respondent 2: I got it about two years ago. So I've been at the receiving end of it for totally nothing.
- Researcher: You were battered by the police?
- Respondent 2: Yes. There was an official complaint made. There was an enquiry - it was sent to the Procurator Fiscal. I got questioned and she [a police woman] said to me 'What would you say if it was said that you resisted arrest?' I goes 'I would call them f-ing liars'. I said 'I've told you what happened. That is my story and I stick by it. Because that is the truth.'
[Scottish white women, with experience of violence]

Closing Ranks was then, without exception read as a critical discourse on the police. Even though English white middle-class women with no experience of violence objected to this representation, they did understand the drama as intended to be viewed in this way. It was not then only Rick Sneaden who was viewed as a bad and corrupt policeman - a 'rotten apple'. Rather, contrary to Roger Graef's intentions (see above), the portrayal of the police in *Closing Ranks* was read as a critical representation of the *whole* force.

The Portrayal of CND

Although respondents regarded *Closing Ranks* as portraying the police from a critical point of view, they did not perceive its portrayal of CND as challenging accepted (negative) views of that organisation. English middle-class women believed that the drama portrayed 'typical CND types' whom one described as 'obviously being lesbians'. Scottish working-class women with no experience of violence described CND women as 'dirty criminals' who would 'put men off'. In something of a contrast, English women with experience of violence likened CND women to the type of women who work for Women's Aid and saw them as a potential source of external

support for Shirley. Whilst links were made between CND in *Closing Ranks* and the real existence of this organisation, the portrayal did not affect how actual CND campaigners were perceived as the textual analysis argued was intended by the play. Rather, already established extra-textual negative impressions of CND proved too strong for any challenge to these to succeed.

Narrative Structure and Reception

It was mainly in the context of the inconclusive ending to *Closing Ranks* that interviewees referred to its narrative structure. But it is interesting to note that in two groups interviewees alluded to the fact that the play's form affected its presentation of character. One Scottish white working-class woman with no experience of violence was frustrated that *Closing Ranks* did not provide any understanding of why Rick Sneaden had developed a tendency toward domestic violence, as *EastEnders* had in its characterisation of Matthew:

When we were watching *EastEnders* we knew what he [Matthew] was like before. Then we saw what he ended up like. But in this we didn't know what he [Rick] was like before. So [it's difficult] to pass judgement on him because we didn't know him before he [was] this violent man.
[Scottish white working-class woman, with no experience of violence]

One English white woman with experience of violence commented on the limited ability of a single play to characterise a victim of domestic violence. She (the third respondent in the exchange below) recognised that in the play Shirley had to be characterised in a very short space of time:

- Respondent 1: She [Shirley] seemed to make a lot of mistakes, because it was obvious what he was like.
- Respondent 2: But then I suppose we've all done it as well. You learn by your mistakes.
- Respondent 3: But that's the play isn't it? They had to rush it all.
[English white woman, with experience of violence]

Here several interpretative approaches can be identified. The first respondent reads the play at the manifest level of the text and her reading is critical of Shirley. Such perceptions of Shirley were quite common among the interview groups as shall be illustrated below. Respondent 2 combines her reading of the text with her own experience and in doing so defends Shirley. The third respondent then questions whether the problem is Shirley's at all, pointing to the limited space which the programme makers had to present her predicament. Very few interviewees however actually reported recognising this problem of how the narrative structure affected characterisation.

A general sense of emotional dissatisfaction was evident in all the groups with *Closing Ranks*' failure to end with a resolution to the domestic violence it portrayed. In each group there was an expressed desire to know what would have happened to Shirley and Rick's marriage following Shirley's rape. Many wished to see justice done and Rick prosecuted for this attack. Although most wanted Rick to get his just desserts, English white middle-class women with no experience of violence wanted it to be 'shown to your audiences that this is not the norm. This is what should happen to people that do things like this'. However, in three of the groups individual women stated that they preferred the drama to remain without a conclusive ending. One middle-class woman felt, as had Roger Graef, that it was best to leave the resolution to the viewer's imagination so as to retain the play's realism:

It's a clean ending like that because [for] everybody who watches it there's going to be something different about it that they want sorted out. ... If it had carried through it would have either lost its realism or upset some faction of the population because they wouldn't have got what they thought was the right punishment.
[English white middle-class woman, with no experience of violence]

Scottish white working-class women expressed similar views. Although they would have liked to see a 'happy ending' to the play, they agreed that what constituted a happy

ending would vary from viewer to viewer. They also pointed out, again in sentiments similar to those expressed by Graef, that 'life is not a happy ending' and that, therefore, their call for a resolution was a call for the drama to move beyond the bounds of realism. English white women with experience of violence responded similarly. Here hopes were expressed that Shirley would leave her violent husband and perhaps even have a romance with the doctor. However these interviewees were aware of just how much they wanted to believe in happy endings, and one woman even pointed out 'that's something else socialised into us'.

Readings of the Domestic Violence

Perceptions of Rick Sneaden as a Perpetrator of Domestic Violence

That *Closing Ranks* offered a very broad negative portrayal of Rick Sneaden had a clear impact on how interviewees interpreted the domestic violence in the play. Without exception, and confirming the claims made in the textual analysis, Rick was viewed as an unpleasant character about whom little positive could be said. Unlike their approach to Matthew in *EastEnders*, interviewees did not attempt to explain why Rick may have developed a tendency toward violence. As has been stated, some were frustrated that the play did not allow them to do this. Interestingly though, English white middle-class women with no experience of violence discussed Rick in relation to the domestic violence to a much lesser degree than the three other groups. Their reading of the violent relationship focused more on Shirley's character where criticisms of her were often made. When this group did discuss Rick's treatment of Shirley, their reading again, as was the case with *EastEnders*, reveals a careful engagement with narrative coding as a means of achieving an understanding of Rick's violence.

- Respondent 1: He felt guilty when he came in. ... He knew he was wrong. It was his guilty feelings and he took it out on her.
- Respondent 2: Especially when she knew that he'd done wrong, from what the doctor said.
- Respondent 1: Which sort of made him lower in her esteem.

Respondent 3: And she was on a ladder. She was above him, she was looking down on him and that look!
[English white middle-class women, with no experience of violence]

This represents an attempt to understand Rick's personal psychological motivation for his violence against Shirley. This compares, for example, with the interpretation given by Scottish white women with experience of violence who considered Rick's treatment of Shirley in broader, less character-specific terms. They explained the violence through notions of the power that men assume over women, thereby, as these women had also done in response to *EastEnders*, offering a gendered cultural explanation for the violence.

Respondent 1: She was prepared to stand up to him any other way. She went out and got herself a job when he didn't want it. She went to that demo he didn't want it. She papered the living-room and everything by herself. She was quite prepared to do it by herself and he thought 'Oh no'. It didn't suit his ego.

Respondent 3: A man doesn't like a woman when she starts fighting back. That really does their manhood in.
[Scottish white women, with experience of violence]

Even though English white women with experience of violence did describe Rick in terms of specific character traits, this was also linked to broader notions of male behaviour:

Respondent 1: He was a total bastard.
Respondent 2: An ass-hole basically, for want of a better word.
Respondent 3: He was just a bully.
Respondent 1: A big-head.
Respondent 3: I think he thinks that's the way he's supposed to be.
Respondent 2: That's the man's way
Respondent 3: It just seems natural to him, as if he wasn't doing anything wrong. As if that was the way he was.
Respondent 2: Yes. That was how a man behaves. 'Mr Macho'.
[English white women, with experience of violence]

This group of respondents were not condemning all men. They viewed Rick as a specific male type with his sexism, love of violence and belief that women should stay at home and always be ready to serve a man's sexual needs. This suggests that experience of violence was significant in viewing Rick's violence toward his wife as deriving from attitudes inherent to a form of male culture, and not simply a problem of

his specific character. However, Scottish white working-class women with no experience of violence perceived Rick in almost identical terms, and could easily identify with the impact of male culture in the home on themselves:

- Respondent 1: Some guys just like to be the macho image. Just have women to cook and clean for them and go to bed with and don't say a word out of place. There are some guys that ...
- Respondent 2: Are chauvinists.
- Researcher: Do you think that's unusual?
- Respondent 3: No that's everywhere. Everywhere women should do this and women should do that.
- Respondent 2: It happens even in my house. I live in the house with two sons and I've got two jobs and you've still got to do everything for them. Men think women are there just to be their servants.
[Scottish white working-class women, with no experience of violence]

English white middle-class women with no experience of violence did not identify with pressures on women to perform as housewives. Rather, they claimed that such a woman's role in the home only really existed within working-class households. As was suggested was possible through the textual analysis of the play, for this particular group *Closing Ranks* produced a reading of Rick and Shirley as a working-class couple.

- Respondent 1: It's that sort of working-class environment where there are two different worlds if you like and they don't cross. You have your man's dinner down on the table when he comes in or you're in trouble and you're a bad wife. You do what they tell you to do.
- Respondent 2: Yes. ... she was still trying to please him as such wasn't she? And get things right. She was still trying to do everything in the home and she was sort of the motivator there. She wanted her house nice and she just got on and did it, and he just did his job.
[English white middle-class women, with no experience of violence]

Significantly it was only in relation to the domestic violence and Rick and Shirley's relationship that class became part of the discussion in the middle-class group. The general portrayal of the police was not discussed in these terms. Additionally, it was only in this middle-class group that interviewees expressed a perception of Rick and Shirley as working-class.

Perceptions of Shirley as the Victim of Domestic Violence

Despite the character of Rick being viewed in negative terms, a reading explicitly encouraged by the drama, it was not always the case that Shirley was perceived from a contrastingly sympathetic perspective. English white middle-class women with no experience of violence tended to blame Shirley for the breakdown of her marital relations with Rick. In this group respondents believed that Shirley was dishonest with her husband, in that, for example, she went against his wishes in attending the CND demonstration. Shirley was also criticised by the middle-class women as having a weak personality.

Scottish working-class women with no experience of violence and Scottish and English women with experience were more likely to consider Shirley's personality as the effect of living with a violent husband and not, as with English middle-class women, the cause of that violence. Even though it was suggested by one interviewee in the Scottish group with no experience of violence that Shirley was 'stupid', a reading considered to be encouraged by the drama, a second interviewee stressed that it was the husband who was responsible for this:

- Respondent 1: She looked stupid.
 Respondent 2: He seemed to bring her down ...
 Respondent 1: And she didn't lift herself up.
 Respondent 2: She wasn't allowed to do anything or give an opinion.
 Respondent 1: She was portrayed as looking weak and foolish.
 Respondent 2: I think she knew she was in a bad situation but she couldn't seem to do anything about it.
 [Scottish white working-class women, with no experience of violence]

The first interviewee in this exchange was to later confirm an appreciation of Shirley's predicament, even though it was not one which she could identify with. In doing this that interviewee also reflected on the fact that Shirley could be representative of many women:

It [seems] stupid if you're not in that situation. But if you're a person maybe with some inner fears about being on her own - maybe she can't face life on her own. This is like talking about ten different women but they're all lumped into one woman because they've all got that one defect in their character: they're actually frightened to be without that person violent as they may be.
 [Scottish white working-class woman, with no experience of violence]

This interpretation of the domestic violence in *Closing Ranks* takes the portrayal to represent a social comment on the difficulties many women may face in relationships with male partners. It suggests an understanding that for many women there are problems associated with coping on their own and that tolerance of violence may be the price paid for this.

Women with experience of violence also viewed Shirley as the embodiment of many women's experiences in marriage. Though Shirley was at times again considered weak, some women with experience of violence could identify with her submissive tendencies. For example:

- Researcher: You were saying she should have stood up for herself more?
 Respondent 1: I think she should've done.
 Respondent 2: Yes, but we don't. I lived with a man for ten years and everyone thought it was a wonderful marriage. You don't say I'm not standing this for years.
 Respondent 3: I put up with having [my husband's] girlfriend living in my spare room for 10 months. You don't stand up and say - you say you would and you say people ought to, but you don't. It takes something to really get you like 'This is it. I can't take it'.
 Respondent 4: Suddenly you think 'What the hell's happened to me?' ... And then you do something about it. But it takes a long time because you've got down so low.
 [English white women, with experience of violence]

In contrast, English white middle-class women found no basis on which they could identify with Shirley. Here the response again reveals a class-based reading and a distancing from the portrayal of domestic violence on the part of these interviewees. As is evident from the following statement, this again reveals a careful engagement with particular textual codes to achieve this reading:

I'm not saying she's soft I'm just saying she's lower intelligence. There's something about her that - you wouldn't look at her and say she'd been to grammar school and university. Just the way they portrayed her in very, very high heeled shoes, very tight skirts no matter how they looked. Tottering along, the clothes she wore, everything was made to make her that sort of working-class. ... It was just that image they gave her.

[English white middle-class woman, with no experience of violence]

For this woman then, and indeed the majority of the middle-class respondents, because Shirley was perceived as being working-class this meant that they were able to distance themselves from the type of predicament which she was in.

Shirley as a Housewife: the Breakfast Scene

How Shirley performed in the traditional role of housewife was also a feature of the group discussions. It was largely the breakfast scene (scene 21) out of which these discussions arose. Despite Rick's unpleasant behaviour in this scene, it was Shirley who became the focus of interviewees' criticisms.

Both women with experience of violence and those with no such experience viewed scene 21 as suggesting a lack of thought on Shirley's part.

I wouldn't give the cat the milk. If the bloke's out at work all night, I would make sure I'd got enough to give him a cup of tea in the morning, even if it meant the cat waiting till the milkman came - which would seem quite a reasonable thing to me.

[English white middle-class woman, with no experience of violence]

Respondent 1: I'd have made sure there was milk in for his breakfast. But the times that I have got up in the morning with the kids and he's been out to work at six and he's used all the milk.

Respondent 2: That's the same really isn't it?

Respondent 3: That's different ... because he's a working man, so he gets preference.

[English white women, with experience of violence]

Here then women with experience of violence and those without agree that Shirley should have given priority to the needs of her husband as the breadwinner of the household. Yet, on the part of English women with experience of violence, this entailed a strategic notion of why Shirley should have done this not found among those with no experience of violence:

- Respondent 1: She knew he was violent, she should've had it so it wouldn't start an argument knowing what he's like.
 Respondent 2: She should've had the milk and bacon. ... I think most of us would have knowing what our husbands were like.
 Respondent 1: ... You don't give them any reason to start on you.
 Respondent 3: You'd go without to make sure they've got enough.
 Respondent 4: Make sure there's no row first thing.
 [English white women, with experience of violence]

Though representing a critical reading of Shirley, this can also be considered a criticism of how an abused wife was characterised in *Closing Ranks*. For these women Shirley's behaviour did not accurately represent how women living in a violent relationship anticipate the type of reasons which a man might use to maltreat his wife.

The Sexual Relationship and the Marital Rape

Shirley was also read critically in terms of her sexual relations with Rick. As detailed in the textual analysis, *Closing Ranks* did not provide any explicit explanation as to why Shirley declined Rick's sexual advances. A perception of her as frigid was possible. Indeed women with no experience of violence understood the text as foregrounding this interpretation. Several English white middle-class women with no experience of violence believed the play to be suggesting this was why Shirley was eventually raped. For example:

She was mentally cruel to him ... She was denying him sex. I would imagine if you were working in any social services you're very tense, very uptight and you need some release from stress. And even if she didn't enjoy sex as a wife you would feel that

your partner needed some release. Even if it was just once a month or whatever. All the way through she denied him that, which is probably why they finished it with the rape to be honest.
[English white middle-class woman, with no experience of violence]

It is as though this group read Shirley's rape as a moral lesson for frigid wives. Scottish working-class women with no experience of violence viewed the portrayal quite similarly. For example:

She was frigid ... and obviously that would be quite frustrating for a man. Especially a man like him who was an aggressive character.
[Scottish white working-class woman, with no experience of violence]

At times, however, women with no experience of violence sympathised with Shirley's feelings toward Rick. Interviewees saw him as simply desiring sex for the sake of sexual release and not as a means of giving pleasure to his partner. From this there is a clear recognition that Shirley wanted sex to involve wider emotional engagements:

- Respondent 1: Men can have sex with a doormat if it looked attractive enough - as a release. But most women tend not to get turned on unless they like the partner in general.
Respondent 2: There's got to be a bit more.
Respondent 3: There's got to be emotions with it.
Respondent 4: Yes. And if there's no relationship then she's not likely to feel like sex. Whereas he'd still feel like sex even if he didn't respect her any more.
[English white middle-class women, with no experience of violence]

Women with experience of violence read Shirley's denial of sex to Rick quite differently. They did not sympathise with Rick's sexual needs at all. Through their own experiences these interviewees understood Shirley as not wanting sex because it was something Rick subjected her to against her will. It was read into the drama, as Roger Graef expressed a hope that it would be (see above), that this would have occurred on previous occasions in the relationship. Here Rick's attitude toward sex was framed around questions of his power and domination through a perception of his believing that as her husband he had certain rights over Shirley's body:

- Respondent 1: There's no man likes to be refused sex, put it that way. If you say 'no', if he's that het up he's going to take it one way or another. And it does put you off sex.
- Respondent 2: But they don't need to be that het up. It's just a fact they're going to take you right reason or none. They're going to take you and that's it.
[Scottish white women, with experience of violence]

How interviewees read the tensions in the sexual relationship between Rick and Shirley, and Shirley's rape by Rick, was, then, very much determined by whether they had experienced violence or not and the sexual subjugation which comes with such violence. The following statement from an English white middle-class woman with no experience of violence also reveals how surprised this interviewee was to discover what was involved in a marital rape, a form of response found in no other group:

It was a shock to see a husband rape a wife. You hear it happen[s]. But I'd never imagined the violence to be that bad. I always thought a husband raping a wife would [involve her saying] 'Oh no, not tonight' and him getting on top, and her not having the strength to do anything about it. Whereas that was real violence. It wasn't anything pleasant. There wasn't anything gentle or whatever. It could have been anybody who walked in and raped her.
[English white middle-class woman, with no experience of violence]

For this interviewee, *Closing Ranks* offered a reading of marital rape taking her beyond any understanding of such violence to which she had been previously exposed.

Concluding Remarks

Class was an important factor in how *Closing Ranks* was read by interviewees. Scottish and English women with experience of violence and Scottish working-class women with no such experience all considered this play to be presenting a very realistic portrayal of the police force as an organisation in which the concept of loyalty could lead to corruption. They also viewed the play as dramatising how members of the police force can, without justification, actually label and treat certain social groups as

'deviant' and therefore criminally inclined. The group of English middle-class women with no experience of violence were the only women to object to such a representation of the police. These women were very worried that *Closing Ranks* could undermine public confidence in and respect for the police. In none of the other three groups was such a response found. Rather, they applauded *Closing Ranks* for contributing to the debate on malpractice in the force, and, in these terms, viewed the play as documentary drama.

With such critical perceptions of the police being voiced in response to *Closing Ranks*, it is evident that the play was not viewed as presenting a 'rotten apple' scenario of how corruption in the force can come about. It would seem that a general mistrust of the police as an organisation among all but the middle-class women, meant that interviewees were unlikely to regard rogue individuals as ultimately responsible for misdeeds in the force.

The great majority of interviewees would have liked the narrative of *Closing Ranks* to have reached some form of resolution, most notably with regard to the domestic violence plot. However, a number of women expressed an understanding of why the play did not do this. It was appreciated that had the play ended more conventionally this would have detracted from its realism. Women also reflected on what narrative outcome they would have liked, and how some of their expectations were driven by fictitious romanticised scenarios. This would suggest then that the inconclusive ending, as the textual analysis argued was possible, encouraged a form of questioning about how a violent relationship might in reality be brought to an end.

The portrayal of domestic violence was viewed from a range of perspectives, again supporting the claims made in the textual analysis that this could be comprehended through several routes. English middle-class women with no experience of violence were quite critical of the victim of this violence, Shirley. Many of these women viewed

her as 'frigid', as did several Scottish working-class women with no experience, and used this as a causal explanation for her later rape - though they did understand her lack of desire for Rick. As the textual analysis argued, it was then possible to perceive Shirley's lack of interest in sex with Rick as contributing to their marital problems. During the interview with Roger Graef concerning his writing and direction of *Closing Ranks*, I asked how he responded to this perception of Shirley as 'frigid' (prior to that interview he had read an earlier draft of this chapter). In reply he stated 'I learnt something from your research because I just never imagined that viewers would not be *totally* on Shirley's side' (interviewed by the researcher, 22/12/93).

Women with experience of violence, in contrast to those with no such experience, did not tend to find fault in Shirley's denial of sex to Rick. Through their own experiences they identified her, as Graef hoped viewers would, as simply not wanting to sleep with a man who treated her so badly. The fact that women with no experience of violence did not see this would seem to suggest that those interviewees believed that women have a sexual obligation to their husbands, even if a husband does not fulfil any emotional obligation he has to his wife.

Shirley was also frequently considered inefficient as a housewife. In this context interviewees with no experience of violence felt that she should have shown more concern for the needs of a working husband. Whilst women with experience of violence expressed similar sentiments, they believed that Shirley should have done this not out of duty, but as a means of preventing Rick from finding excuses for an argument.

Shirley was also viewed by a large number of interviewees as 'weak and stupid'. English white middle-class women with no experience of violence put this down to her being working-class, a reading which was permitted by the text, but which also enabled these interviewees to distance themselves from this character, her predicament and the

threat of violence from a partner. Interviewees from other groups concluded that Shirley's submissive tendencies resulted from how Rick treated her.

There was also a difference in how the English middle-class women and the three other groups of interviewees perceived the perpetrator of domestic violence. The middle-class group looked for narrative causal explanations for Rick's attack on his wife, and viewed it as the effect of a specific set of relations between the couple. They were also prompted by the coding of *Closing Ranks* to view Rick as embodying working-class male characteristics. From something of a contrasting point of view, Scottish and English women with experience of violence and Scottish working-class women with no such experience read Rick's treatment of Shirley as not so much an illustration of his particular character traits, but representative of male cultural attitudes toward women, attitudes which they had often encountered.

Finally it is interesting to examine how the reception of the domestic violence in *Closing Ranks* compares with that in *EastEnders* - though it must be recognised that the findings relating to the former text are based on a much smaller number of interview groups than those of the latter. Common to both programmes was a tendency, especially among interviewees with no experience of violence, to perceive textual coding as suggesting that the female victims of violence were, at least partly, responsible for the attacks committed against them. However, in the case of *Closing Ranks* very little sympathy was expressed for the perpetrator of the domestic violence. This compares with the reception of *EastEnders* where many women with no experience of violence viewed Matthew's hitting his wife as resulting from factors outwith his own control, and not as an effect of how the wider culture encourages men to treat women. Women with experience of violence were angered by the fact that *EastEnders* allowed such perceptions of Matthew. However, at no time did interviewees with experience of violence suggest that *Closing Ranks* invited Rick Sneider to be understood in this way. Indeed, this might suggest that the fact that

there was only a very limited amount of time in this play to characterise Rick, actually went some way toward promoting a better understanding of domestic violence as caused by a socialised male desire to dominate women. Though this is not to deny that this analysis again reveals that if women who have not experienced domestic violence can find means of causally blaming the female victim of domestic violence, then this is a reading which they will often adopt.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CRIMEWATCH UK: A RECONSTRUCTION CONCERNING THE SEXUAL ASSAULT AND MURDER OF A WOMAN

Introduction

Television programmes showing reconstructions of real-life crime are a regular and popular feature of the television schedules. *Crimewatch UK*, broadcast on BBC1 since 1984, was the first of such programmes transmitted in Britain. It has since been followed by ITV's *Crimestoppers*, *Crime Story* and Michael Winner's *True Crimes* series, London Weekend Television's *Crime Monthly*, and *Crimewatch UK*'s two sister productions *Crimewatch Unlimited* and *Crimewatch File*.

Crime reconstruction programmes are far from uncontroversial. Journalists have questioned the moral justification of real-life crime being presented as entertainment (Hebert, 1988b and 1993; Minogue, 1990; Sweeney, 1992). Programmes have been accused of creating a public fear of crime, or even capitalizing on that fear (Hebert, 1993; Moore, 1993). Further, they have been described as voyeuristic (Culf, 1993; Hebert, 1993) and sensationalist (Moore, 1993). As a result of such critical concern ITV has stopped broadcasting Michael Winner's *True Crimes* series. This decision, it is said, 'represents a significant shift in the attitudes of broadcasters towards the depiction of real-life crime cases' (Culf, 1994). Given the deregulation of British television and the need to maximize audiences, one might remain sceptical of just how significant this 'shift' will prove to be.

It is of particular interest, therefore, to examine how one of these programmes presents a crime of violence against a woman, and to explore what 'messages' it might mediate

to women about such attacks. This chapter focuses on an edition of *Crimewatch UK* which features a reconstruction concerning the sexual assault and murder of a 17 year old woman Rachael Partridge. This provides a point of comparison with the fictional portrayals of violence against women discussed in the three previous chapters.

As with the other textual analyses, the edition of *Crimewatch UK* is examined in relation to its production context, generic form and narrative structure. The analysis then focuses on the reconstruction concerning the sexual assault and murder. The devices which the *Crimewatch* producers use in reconstructing the crime are assessed, as is how viewers are invited to relate to and comprehend that crime. The reception analysis then examines how interviewees engaged with *Crimewatch* as a programme and specifically with the murder reconstruction.

Programme Synopsis

This edition of *Crimewatch UK* was broadcast live on BBC1 on 10th November 1987 at 9.30pm. In form it is the same as all *Crimewatch UK* programmes in that it reports crimes within specifically itemised slots and includes three reconstructions.

The programme is presented by Nick Ross and Sue Cook. Assisting in the presentation are two police officers, Superintendent David Hatcher and WPC Helen Phelps. In this edition a third police officer, Detective Constable Michael Hincliffe presents a filmed insert from New Scotland Yard car pound. Below is a summary breakdown of the programme.

Crimewatch UK, 10 November 1987: Summary of Contents.

| Item | Time | Reporting Method | Presenter |
|---|--------------------|--|--|
| Opening titles | 38 secs | | |
| Opening introduction | 41 secs | Presenters to camera with clips of forthcoming reconstructions. | Cook & Ross |
| Progress Report (news of previous <i>Crimewatch</i> cases) | 51 secs | Presenter to camera, video-fits, photos of victims and short clips from previous reconstructions. | Ross & Cook |
| Reconstruction: Hitchen bank Fraud | 10 mins 17 secs | Presenter's intro followed by reconstruction. A Detective Sergeant then gives further details of crime and its suspects. | Ross |
| Incident Desk: a missing couple, sexual assault of 2 young girls, attempted armed robbery and the theft of a quantity of toys | 3 mins 56 secs | Presenters to camera; photographs of crime scenes; objects/evidence linked to reports shown in studio. | Intro by Cook, reports by Hatcher & Phelps |
| Reconstruction: theft of Mercedes cars | 8 mins 23 secs | Intro followed by reconstruction. Further details then explained by a PC with video-fits of suspects. | Cook |
| Advice on car theft prevention and how to identify stolen cars | 4 mins | Phelps to camera in studio. Second section from New Scotland Yard presented by a Detective Constable. | Phelps, DC Hincliffe |
| Photocall (television's version of the 'Wanted Poster') | 1 min 55 secs | Presenters straight to camera with security camera footage of suspects relating to four separate robberies. | Intro by Cook, reports by Phelps & Hatcher |
| Report on responses to crimes so far featured | 24 secs | Presenter straight to camera | Ross |
| Reconstruction: Rachael Partridge murder | 8 mins 35 secs | Intro by presenter followed by reconstruction. Detective Sergeant then details further evidence. | Ross |
| Closing remarks, phone numbers and details of programmes to report on public response | 44 secs | Presenters to camera | Cook & Ross |
| Closing titles | 40 secs | | |

The Production and Marketing Contexts

Crimewatch UK is transmitted nationally once a month ten times a year with a break over the summer months. It is made by the BBC documentary features department with extensive cooperation from the police.

In relation to the BBC's public service broadcasting remit, *Crimewatch* functions to 'seek help and information from its audience in the solution of major crimes' (*BBC Annual Report and Handbook 1986*: 9). It is claimed that one in five of crimes featured on *Crimewatch* is solved as a direct result of the programme's appeal to viewers (*Biteback*, BBC1, 5/12/93). A public service function is additionally provided by the programme offering advice on crime prevention. For example, the edition used in this research specifically advises on how to prevent car theft and how to identify stolen cars.

With each edition being watched by up to 12 million viewers (Minogue, 1990), *Crimewatch* also serves the BBC's need to attract audiences. Its ratings are quite exceptional for a factual programme. The types of crimes featured in *Crimewatch* and their reporting methods play a crucial role in attracting and holding the audience. As Schlesinger *et al* detail, 'the programme team select their crime stories from the popular end of the market, with murder, armed robbery with violence and sexual crime as the staple items of coverage' (1991: 408). The programme makers also seek to reflect the national reach of the programme by featuring crimes committed in a range of locations throughout Britain.

In the face of criticism that *Crimewatch* concentrates on reporting sensational crime, Anne Morrison, Executive Producer in charge of BBC crime programmes, has argued that it simply 'appeals on the most serious cases which have happened, which very often are murders, rapes and so on' (interviewed on *Biteback*, BBC1, 5/12/93). From

this point of view then the programme makers would justify the inclusion of a reconstruction concerning the sexual assault and murder of a young woman.

Crimewatch's ability to attract audiences can additionally be considered in relation to current social attitudes toward crime. Schlesinger and Tumber state that the 'emergence of *Crimewatch* in the mid-1980s dovetails neatly with the accentuated concern with "law and order" politics that characterised Mrs Thatcher's successive governments and which has remained a prominent public preoccupation' (1994: 254). Thus, the programme capitalises on a supposed public belief in fighting crime through the capture and punishment of offenders. It ignores questions of how crime might be linked to certain social conditions.

Crimewatch depends on the cooperation of the police who provide information on unsolved crimes and who also assist in its presentation. Schlesinger *et al* explain that when the police were approached over the idea of making *Crimewatch*, 'the more sophisticated chief constables were very aware of the potential public relations benefits of the programme, as well as the marginal contribution it might make to the solution of particular cases' (1991: 409). As *Crimewatch* depends on their cooperation, it is not in its makers' interest to portray the police in a critical light or question their practices. However, the producers are careful to avoid the police becoming so involved in the programme that its, and therefore the BBC's, independence are threatened. Nick Ross and Sue Cook write 'That may sound strange to those who see the police as politically neutral, hardworking, honest protectors of society against wrongdoers. But, like any institution, the police have their own axes to grind and conceal their own mistakes' (1987: 156). The police are not therefore permitted editorial control over *Crimewatch*. But this also reflects the broadcasters' need to 'safeguard themselves from being used by the police' (Schlesinger and Tumber, 1993: 23). If the police were given editorial control they could, in theory, use the programme to 'fit-up' suspects.

The Generic Form

Crimewatch belongs to the factual genre of crime reporting where the audience is invited to participate in solving crimes. Prior to *Crimewatch* the only similar television broadcast in Britain was Shaw Taylor's *Police Five*, a short feature transmitted on occasional weekdays at the end of the early evening news bulletin in ITV's Midlands and London regions. *Police Five* reported crimes to viewers with the use of still photographs of crime sites and, for example, get-away cars. It did not reconstruct crimes nor use what Ross and Cook have described as a 'magical ingredient' of *Crimewatch* which allows viewers to 'actually participate in the programme simply by picking up the telephone and giving information directly to police officers whom they could see, live, in the studio' (1987: 9). In its approach *Crimewatch* can then be considered alongside 'the new wave of participative television which has taken the form, for instance, of successive charity-seeking *Telethons* and, in the case of social concern about child abuse, of *Childline*' (Schlesinger *et al*, 1991: 408).

Though a factual programme, *Crimewatch* draws on a variety of televisual techniques, some of which stretch the category of 'factual reportage'. In providing information which might help the audience to identify perpetrators of crime the programme draws on photo-fit pictures, security video-camera recordings and reconstructions. These reconstructions involve a 'blurring' of fact and fiction where narrative techniques very similar to those of crime-fiction are drawn on (Kilborn, 1994: 63). More accurately described as 'dramatised reconstructions', these, as is illustrated below in the case of the reconstruction concerning the sexual assault and murder of the female hitchhiker, Rachael Partridge, often show events entirely incidental to the crimes. Such events are included purely to increase viewer involvement in the programme. This could be construed as encouraging voyeurism (Kilborn, 1994: 63) and certain assumptions to be made about those portrayed in the reconstructions.

The Narrative Structure

The three reconstructions included in *Crimewatch* occupy the centre stage of the broadcast. In the edition used in this research, these are the sole concern of the opening introductions and over half of the programme is dedicated to their reporting. The *Radio Times* billing of this particular *Crimewatch* broadcast also focused entirely on the featured reconstructions in its listing of the programme. They are then used as they key means of attracting and holding the audience.

A promise of drama comes in the programme's opening introduction where the crimes to be reconstructed are detailed as if they were 'mysteries'. However, the progress report which follows this introduction appeals to the audience to consider *Crimewatch's* proven ability in helping solve crime. This suggests that even though the programme offers entertainment, this is justifiable given that it brings results. From this point on the programme engages the audience with a variety of crime reports varied both in their style of presentation and in their content.

The positioning of the reconstruction concerning the sexual assault and murder of Rachael Partridge in the programme is of particular note. In this *Crimewatch* broadcast it is the only reconstruction concerned with violent crime and is also the last to be shown. It could therefore be regarded as functioning as an audience hook, persuading viewers to watch the entire programme before their being able to see the most emotive of the reconstructions.

Once the Rachael Partridge reconstruction has been presented, viewers are reminded of telephone numbers to call with information on the featured crimes. As well as performing an obvious practical function, this reiterates to viewers the public service intention behind the programme: to catch criminals. Then, with the detailing of future programmes which will reveal how successful the appeal for help in the solving of the

crimes has been, the audience is invited to discover the outcome of the reporting. This indicates that with further viewing, the audience might be provided with resolutions to the question of who was responsible for perpetrating these criminal acts.

As *Crimewatch* comes to its close, Nick Ross states that the programme has shown a lot of unusual crime, and urges viewers 'Don't have nightmares, do sleep well.' Intended to *dissuade* viewers from adopting an exaggerated perception of the prevalence of crime, the presenters have written that this does not seek to 'detract from the appalling grief and misery that most crime causes. But ... programme makers have a duty to put things into context' (Ross and Cook, 1987: 158). How the programme is brought to its close, therefore, demonstrates a desire for its makers to be seen as having a sense of social responsibility.

The Reconstruction of the Sexual Assault and Murder

From the above analysis it can be concluded that the reconstruction concerning the murder of Rachael Partridge was included in *Crimewatch* for a number of reasons. Firstly, it is a serious crime deemed worthy of broadcast time in the pursuit of its perpetrator. Secondly, the police were able provide sufficient information concerning this murder from which a reconstruction could be compiled. Thirdly, it is a crime capable of attracting audiences to watch *Crimewatch*. Finally, its being shown at the end of the programme could help sustain viewing of the whole programme.

The Presenter's 'Framing' of the Reconstruction

Nick Ross introduces the reconstruction thus:

The last of this month's reconstructions is yet another that highlights the dangers of hitchhiking. Now young people, and especially young women of course, know the risks of hitchhiking. But the truth is, if you don't have a bike or a car and there are no buses where you want to go when you want to go, the temptation to hitch is overwhelming.

Over a photograph of Rachael, Ross's voice-over continues: 'Rachael Partridge took that risk. She was 17 years old'. This introduction immediately *and explicitly*, suggests that Rachael was a victim of crime *because* she went hitchhiking. It implies that no sensible young person, and especially a woman, would hitchhike without considerable concern for their safety. Hitchhiking is then described as a 'temptation', and one Rachael, who is shown to viewers through the photograph, succumbed to.

Focusing entirely on the victim of this crime, Ross's introduction establishes the route through which the reconstruction can be engaged with - as a critical examination of a young woman who acted without prudence. Therefore, this reconstruction is presented as having, among other functions, a didactic role where viewers are alerted to the folly of hitchhiking.

Establishing the Crime Story Through Location and Characterisation

The reconstruction concerning Rachael's murder is opened with details of the location of this crime. The two following scenes then develop a characterisation of Rachael.

| Scene | Length | Characters Featured | Summary of Imagery, Action and Dialogue |
|-------|--------|---------------------|--|
| 1 | 7 secs | | A helicopter view of Chinnor. Ross voice-over: 'This is the village of Chinnor, just off the M40 and some 10 miles from High Wycombe.' |
| 2 | 7 secs | Rachael | MLS of Rachael in a dental laboratory. Ross voice-over: 'Rachael Partridge had just started an apprenticeship there at Rohan's dental laboratory.' CU on Rachael's moulding of a pair of dentures to CU on her face. Voice-over: 'She joined the firm straight from school and they were very impressed with her ability and hard work.' |
| 3 | 9 secs | | Photograph of Rachael as in introduction. Voice-over: 'Rachael lived with her parents in the countryside at Chinnor Hill, a mile from Chinnor village. At 17 she was the youngest of the family. Her two older sisters had left home.' |

From the view of Chinnor presented in scene 1 viewers can consider whether this locality is known to them and whether there is a chance they may be able to assist in solving the crime. Yet this establishing of the geographical context for the crime story bears considerable similarity to the early scene setting which occurs in the three fictional texts already discussed: the opening titles of every episode of *EastEnders* are shown over a map of London; *Closing Ranks* uses images of London during its opening credits and later emphasised a shift in the narrative to a rural setting; *The Accused* opens with an image of a roadside bar. In putting together this reconstruction then, its makers have conformed to a classic narrative convention of establishing the geographical context for the crime story.

Scenes 2 and 3, again conforming to conventions of 'storytelling', establish the character at the centre of the drama, Rachael. These scenes are among a number which are entirely superfluous to the needs of providing information which might help viewers solve the crime. In scene 2 Rachael is portrayed as well groomed, bright, and very capable at work. With the mention of her family in scene 3 the audience is

introduced to a set of people affected by the crime. With it being mentioned that the family lived in the countryside viewers might consider them as perhaps affluent and middle-class. The fact that Rachael succumbed to the 'temptation' to hitchhike might then be regarded as surprising. Her intelligence and *possible* privileged upbringing could be seen as providing her with the resources to know better than to hitchhike, as well as the financial means to pay for transportation home - assuming such transportation was available.

The Motivation for Rachael's Hitchhiking

Scenes 4, 5 and 6 continue to portray Rachael in contexts superfluous to the murder investigation. These scenes further develop the characterisation of Rachael, promote a sense of identification with her, and introduce her boyfriend and mother. In terms of classic narrativisation techniques, scenes 4 and 5 show a 'happy situation' which is about to be disrupted.

| Scene | Length | Characters Featured | Summary of Imagery, Action and Dialogue |
|--------------|---------------|-----------------------------|---|
| 4 | 26 secs | Rachael, Steven | Rachael and Steven sit on a settee. Looking at a holiday brochure Rachael comments 'It looks really lovely, I can't wait.' Ross voice-over: 'That Tuesday evening after work, as she did most evenings, Rachael went to see her boyfriend. They had met at school and in 3 days' time were due to go on their first holiday together in Italy.' Steven shows Rachael his passport. A car horn sounds. |
| 5 | 10 secs | Rachael, her mother, Steven | Shot of a stationary car. Rachael voice-over: 'Oh that'll be mum. Better not keep her waiting'. Rachael walks round the car saying 'I'll give you a ring later OK. Bye bye'. She gets in to the passenger seat. Steven, in MLS, waves saying goodbye. |

| Scene | Length | Characters Featured | Summary of Imagery, Action and Dialogue |
|-------|---------|---------------------|---|
| 6 | 36 secs | Rachael, her mother | ELS of car driving away from the camera. Ross voice-over: 'Though Rachael's mother had specially driven down to the village to bring her home, Rachael announced that she had other plans that night.' Alternate CUs on Rachael and her mother with dialogue, - Rachael: 'Mum can you take me to Alex's, I want to use the sunbed?' Mother: 'No I can't tonight Rachael, your father needs the car for a meeting.' Rachael: 'But she's expecting me.' Mother: 'I can't help that. Your father needs the car now.' Ross voice-over: 'Rachael couldn't be persuaded. She didn't want to go home and there wasn't time to take her to her friend's in Thame. So her mother turned around and, at Rachael's request, left her back in the village. Once there Rachael met a colleague from work and cadged a lift to Thame to use her friend's sunbed.' |

Detailing how Rachael and Steven were about to embark on their first holiday together scene 4 offers a reading of tragedy around Rachael's death. The couple are described as having been together for some time. However, though clearly fond of each other, there is no indication of Steven and Rachael having indulged in sexual relations, as only limited physical contact occurs between them - and no more than would be expected of close friends. It is possible then to view Rachael and Steven simply as a couple of quite innocent teenagers in love. However, at this point, further middle-class symbolism could affect how viewers perceive these characters. The limited views of the interior and exterior of Steven's home (scene 5) suggest signs of wealth and both Rachael and Steven are quite well-spoken.

In scene 5 Rachael appears thoughtful in not wanting to detain her mother. Further, it can be extrapolated from her mother's coming to collect her that Rachael was not in the habit of staying overnight with Steven, an interpretation supported by the voice-over stating, in scene 4, that Rachael simply visited him 'most *evenings*'.

Scene 6 begins to characterise the motivations for Rachael's later hitchhiking. Thus, the central narrative plot is set in motion. Here what could be considered an adolescent insistence on going to her friend Alex's contrasts with the earlier characterisation of Rachael's thoughtfulness. She makes impossible demands upon her mother, and Ross's voice-over stating that she '*cadged* a lift to Thame' suggests a lack of concern about imposing on others. Yet it is *also* possible to interpret Rachael's mother as being less than responsible in giving in to her daughter's demands without establishing how Rachael was going to both get to Alex's and return home later that night.

An example of how reconstructions in *Crimewatch* might tend toward voyeurism comes with scene 7. Again, this is a scene of no relevance to the pursuit of Rachael's killer.

| Scene | Length | Characters Featured | Summary of Imagery, Action and Dialogue |
|-------|---------|---------------------|---|
| 7 | 17 secs | Rachael, Alex | Alex plugs in the sunbed telling Rachael to use it for 10 minutes only. In MCU Rachael lies on the sunbed in a white bra and eye protectors. She protests saying she doesn't want to be 'all white and horrible on the beach.' Alex tells her she risks being 'all red and horrible'. Rachael giggles. Ross voice-over: 'After using the sunbed Rachael had the problem of getting home.' |

In terms of a plot function, scene 7 shows that it was Rachael's wanting to use the sunbed that caused her to hitchhike home. Yet Rachael's partial nakedness and giggling on the bed could be viewed as titillating and voyeuristic, particularly as this shot is from above where the view is one bearing down on her. In terms of characterising Rachael, this scene could imply a lack of responsibility and common sense through a desire to remain on the sunbed for longer than is wise. Such an interpretation is enhanced if Rachael's attitude is compared with Alex's who emphasises the risk of staying on the bed for too long.

A critical perception of Rachael could also be achieved if her lack of concern about getting home is compared with her boyfriend's attitude in scene 8. In temporal terms this scene illustrates what other characters were doing while Rachael was at Alex's. Steven, aware that Rachael is likely to be stranded in Thame, goes out in search of her. He therefore seems to demonstrate a sense of foresight totally lacking in Rachael who, we are told in scene 9, has left herself with no option but to hitchhike home.

| Scene | Length | Characters Featured | Summary of Imagery, Action and Dialogue |
|-------|---------|---------------------|---|
| 8 | 11 secs | Steven | Image of Steven riding a motorbike. Ross voice-over: 'Her boyfriend had heard she was somewhere in Thame and knew there were no buses back, so he went to look for her. Ironically he drove right past the road where Rachael was.' CU on road sign 'Croft Road'. |
| 9 | 16 secs | Rachael, Alex | As Rachael leaves Alex's large detached stone house Ross's voice-over states: 'Rachael had no way home now except to hitch a lift.' Caption reading 8.40pm at the bottom of the frame. Rachael walks down the pavement away from Alex. |

Scene 9 reiterates the problem which Rachael had created for herself in having no transport home and acts as a 'stair-step' plot construction device. This scene also offers the potential to again view Rachael as middle-class given her association with Alex who lives in an obviously expensive house.

The Portrayal of Rachael Hitchhiking

Scenes 10 and 11 portray Rachael in a context which might help bring forth evidence from viewers about when she was last seen alive, who was responsible for her death and at what time she met that person. They also compositionally illustrate the predicament which has developed out of Rachael's urge to use the sunbed.

| Scene | Length | Characters Featured | Summary of Imagery, Action and Dialogue |
|-------|---------|---------------------|--|
| 10 | 43 secs | Rachael | A car drives toward and past Rachael hitching in ELS. Ross voice-over: '15 minutes later at five to nine, Rachael was seen thumbing a lift past the railway bridge on the Chinnor road. She was walking in the direction of her home. The Chinnor road is a busy one and moments later she was seen again by a couple who were driving slowly looking for an address.' Shot from inside a moving car a white van is seen with a figure outside evidently speaking to its driver. Voice-over: 'They turned round at the Garden City roundabout and as they drove back up the road they noticed a parked van. They think it was white and only one headlamp was working properly. The hitchhiker was talking to the driver.' |
| 11 | 26 secs | Rachael | ELS of Rachael on roadside with car coming from behind. As the car drives past, MLS on Rachael looking nervous which is held for the rest of the scene. Voice-over: 'Just after nine another driver saw Rachael standing on the grass verge of the Garden City roundabout. This is the outskirts of Thame. Beyond this point there are no street lights. Rachael was frightened of the dark and there was six miles of black country lanes between Rachael and her home at Chinnor Hill.' |

The initial image of Rachael in scene 10 resembles how witnesses would have seen her as she attempted to hitchhike home. This eye-witness point of view is emphasised with the sighting of Rachael from the interior of the moving car. The view of the white van from this car provides vital imagery and evidence which the police seek to build on in the hunt for Rachael's killer. These are then added to through scene 11 portraying Rachael alone in the dark by the roadside. It is implied that Rachael would have used this as the last point from which she would hitchhike as, being afraid of the dark, she would have been unlikely to walk further down the unlit road.

The Continuation of the Story

With scenes 12 and 13 the reconstruction returns to portray events which serve dramatic needs rather than informational ones. As with scene 8, these take the viewer away from the main plot in showing what is occurring 'elsewhere' at this time. Again they feature Rachael's boyfriend Steven.

| Scene | Length | Characters Featured | Summary of Imagery, Action and Dialogue |
|-------|---------|---------------------|--|
| 12 | 31 secs | Steven | CU of a telephone followed by MCU of Steven sitting with the phone. Ross voice-over: 'Back in Chinnor her boyfriend was ringing round to see where Rachael was. She had promised to call him but it was now 10.30pm. When he found she still wasn't at home he began to worry.' Steven on the phone: 'Hello, I'm trying to reach my girlfriend Rachael.' Voice-over: 'Eventually he found the friend's number in Thame and rang to see if she was there. She wasn't.' Steven: 'Is Alex in? No. Did Alex's note say where she was going to? The Three Horseshoes at Towsey. Yes I know it.' |
| 13 | 13 secs | Steven | Exterior of a rural pub at night with Steven on a motorbike outside. Ross voice-over: 'Steven drove to Towsey and checked the pub, but the girls weren't there. He drove on into Thame but at 11 o'clock he gave up looking.' |

These two scenes detail the progression of time between the last sightings of Rachael and Steven's continued search for her. Creating a sense of narrative tension by postponing the revelation of other events, Steven's search for Rachael invites the audience to identify with a concern as to what became of her.

The Discovery of Rachael's Body

The final three scenes of the reconstruction detail how Rachael's body was discovered. Here, in terms of classic narrative convention, the point has been reached where the happiness depicted in scenes 4 and 5 is found to have been terminally violated.

| Scene | Length | Characters Featured | Summary of Imagery, Action and Dialogue |
|-------|---------|------------------------------|--|
| 14 | 23 secs | 2 male farm workers | ELS of a barn surrounded by fields. A tractor approaches. Ross voice-over: 'Next morning. Seven miles from Thame and 2 and a half miles from Rachael's home lies Bledlow Ridge. A small track runs from the road to Caladown farm. Back in August these hedge rows were over-grown and the fields were full of ripened corn. At 11.40 two farm workers saw someone lying in the corner of the barn.' Two men jump from the tractor and run towards the barn. |
| 15 | 11 secs | A number of police personnel | ECU of green foliage with the camera panning upwards to reveal police personnel and vehicles by the barn in ELS. Ross voice-over: 'They had discovered the naked body of a young woman. There was blood around her head and neck.' |
| 16 | 6 secs | | Photograph of Rachael as shown in intro and scene 3 with the camera pulling out from a CU to LS. Ross voice-over: 'Rachael had been struck heavily on the face, sexually assaulted and asphyxiated.' |

Ross's voice-over in scene 14 is sombre in tone as he explains how Rachael's body was found. These details could serve to elicit information as to whether any viewers might have seen a suspicious vehicle driving in the direction of the barn. Given the nature of Rachael's death, viewers might be further persuaded of the need to come forward with information. However this account also caters for the audience's desire to know exactly what was involved in Rachael's murder, a desire which has been encouraged by the enigmatic nature of the story presented in the reconstruction.

Though the view of foliage in scene 15 could be regarded as providing a simple backdrop for the presenter's voice-over to detail her death, it might also be considered symbolic of the position of Rachael's body on the ground. Though the programme could not justify portraying the body, in not depicting the actual crime - as a narrative end in itself - the resolutionary emphasis is placed on the capture of Rachael's killer. Scene 16 then brings the audience back to the image of Rachael shown in the

introduction to the reconstruction. Where her photograph had then provided the visual identification of a woman whom Nick Ross described as succumbing to the 'temptation' to hitchhike, here it could be viewed as identifying all that is left of Rachael - a memory. This could, again, affect a perception of a close relationship between Rachael's risk-taking behaviour and the fatal and tragic consequences of that behaviour.

The Presentation of Evidence in the Studio

Following the reconstruction, Nick Ross introduces 'the man who is seeking Rachael's killer', Detective Superintendent Roy Payne. In the studio Payne explains that the police want to speak to anyone who travelled along the Chinnor road or who gave Rachael a lift on the night of her death. Ross reminds viewers of the location of this road. Payne details a need to identify the driver of a white Fiesta - a car which until this point has not been mentioned. A video-fit picture of this driver is presented. A plaster cast of a footprint found in the barn is shown. A tyre track also found near the barn is described. Ross then explains that a reward is being offered for information on the crime and provides telephone numbers for viewers to ring.

Summary of Possible Reading Positions

There are many connections between how viewers are invited to engage with the reconstruction concerning the death of Rachael Partridge and the needs and intentions of *Crimewatch* in its broader reporting of crime. There are also various, but by no means mutually exclusive, routes through which audiences can read this reconstruction.

As an illustration of the risks of hitchhiking the reconstruction offers a crime prevention message warning against hitchhiking, and perhaps against doing as Rachael's mother did, allowing young people to hitchhike. Viewed in this way, the reconstruction certainly suggests a critical reading of Rachael and possibly her mother as well. In this

crime report the victim is therefore portrayed as at least partly responsible for her own demise.

The reconstruction also offers engagement with real life crime as drama where familiar techniques of scene-setting, characterisation, tragedy and plot progression engage the viewer in a story. The use of such techniques are indicative of the need to attract viewers through the provision of entertainment. The positioning of the reconstruction in the programme and its subject matter also adhere to this need, as does the introduction to the programme which points to the inclusion of this crime drama.

Very few scenes in the reconstruction are concerned with providing information which may bring forth viewers with vital evidence concerning Rachael's murder. Nevertheless, this is one of the ostensible functions of the reconstruction. The detective's role in the studio is to reveal evidence collected from witnesses and the crime scene which has not been shown in the reconstruction. His documenting of this evidence shows the police going to considerable lengths to solve this murder.

The Reception Analysis

The reception analysis of *Crimewatch* is presented in two parts. First it is examined how interviewees evaluate and respond to this as a broadcast production. The analysis then moves to consider responses to the reconstruction concerning the murder of Rachael Partridge. These are assessed in terms of how interviewees engaged with this reconstruction, what it communicated to them about that crime, its victim and the other characters associated with that victim. Again, here the concern is to assess commonalities and differences in interviewees' readings, and to relate these to the range of readings which the textual analysis identified as available from the reconstruction.

Reading *Crimewatch* as a Television Product

Respondents widely and commonly perceived *Crimewatch* to be performing a public service. All interview groups valued the programme for promoting an awareness of crime and a sense of vigilance. For example:

That's the type of thing I would have done that age myself [hitchhiking]. But then you didn't have *Crimewatch* and you weren't aware of crimes. ... You never thought twice about hitchhiking along the road.

[Scottish white middle-class woman, with no experience of violence]

I think it's good because it highlights crime and makes you more aware of [what] can happen to you. Just to be more cautious and everything.

[English Asian woman, with no experience of violence]

I watch it and I hope that it's highlighted that particular risk area. This woman has been murdered and hopefully somebody has learnt something from it.

[English Afro-Caribbean woman, with experience of violence]

Crimewatch was also viewed as providing a service in helping to solve crime. However, it was white and Asian women with no experience of violence, and Asian women with experience of violence who were most likely to express this reading of the programme. With some interviewees valuing *Crimewatch* as contributing toward solving crime it could be supposed that the response reveals a degree of identification with law and order politics. Though such identifications were very rarely *directly* expressed within the groups, few questioned the emphasis which *Crimewatch* places on the need to catch criminal offenders.

Well it makes you realise that there is crime being committed and they're trying to be solved.

[Scottish Asian woman, with experience of violence]

I think they're trying to solve a lot of the crimes and they're trying to get the public to help them solve the crimes. ... That's why it's such a good programme.

[English white working-class woman, with no experience of violence]

They need all the help they can get to catch the criminals and programmes like this work because they do solve crimes.

[Scottish white middle-class woman, with no experience of violence]

White and Afro-Caribbean women with experience of violence, as well as Afro-Caribbean women with no experience of violence were *less* likely to view *Crimewatch* as providing this service. They were more inclined to adopt a critical stance toward the programme and particularly toward the role of the police within it. This is discussed further below.

Some women did not regard *Crimewatch* as providing a public service in helping solve crime because, for them, it was placing the emphasis on solving the wrong type of crime: i.e. property crime rather than crimes against the person which they considered far more worthy of media coverage. Women with experience of violence were particularly likely to view the programme in this way, though similar readings were found among women with no experience of violence.

I think the whole atmosphere of the programme was that serious crime is the thefts against property.

[English white woman, with experience of violence]

I wonder how they actually choose which sort of crimes to put on and why they put something as simple as a car theft on when they've got this big murder, and obviously [there are] so many of them. Why don't they show more of the really serious crimes?

[English Afro-Caribbean woman, with no experience of violence]

Some women, however, did show an astute appreciation of why *Crimewatch* included what they regarded as less serious crimes. In two groups it was understood that the programme sought to show a variety of crime:

They've obviously only got a set time ... and they're probably wanting [to show] five different types of crimes.

[Scottish white woman, with experience of violence]

If it was all murders and things like that, people wouldn't watch it probably. There are serious things happening every week, but if you saw the same things every week, you'd think 'Oh crikey. I can't watch it again'. So you've got to have a variety haven't you?

[English white woman, with experience of violence]

In a third group the showing of a variety of crimes was considered reflective of a need to entertain audiences.

They knew the fraud and the car theft - people would find that quite humorous, it would entertain them. They were trying to make the programme a bit more entertaining.

[English white woman, with experience of violence]

Only infrequently did interviewees *indicate* a belief that one of *Crimewatch*'s intentions might be to attract and entertain audiences. Yet, as becomes evident below, a large number of interviewees did engage with *Crimewatch* in a manner which provided them with the type of emotional pleasures associated with dramatic entertainment.

The National Reach of *Crimewatch* and Consequences for Viewer Engagement

Whilst *Crimewatch* was regarded as providing an awareness of crime, a number of women with no experience of violence expressed a frustration with the programme for not reporting crime committed within their local areas. This, they explained, often decreased their sense of involvement with the programme. For example:

When it's far away from you I think that it's less important than if it's happening locally. If you have a local *Crimewatch* you might feel more in tune to it than when it's in London. It doesn't affect us so much.

[English white working-class woman, with no experience of violence]

It just seems to happen to everybody else, it's always in a different part of the country, so I don't take much notice.

[English white middle-class woman, with no experience of violence]

Some interviewees remarked on how locally transmitted crime programmes had a greater impact on them than *Crimewatch*:

STV do one ... *Crime Stoppers*. It's not as lavish a production as that, but I think that's good. It's crimes committed all over Scotland. There's the building society one in Stirling, it was on just a couple of weeks ago. You know - 'Were you here. Did you see?'
[Scottish white working-class woman, with no experience of violence]

With *Police Five* some of them used to be close to home. You'd see a girl missing and she probably lives in the next road but one and you think 'Oh my God'.
[English Afro-Caribbean woman, with no experience of violence]

The national reach of *Crimewatch* would then appear to reduce some viewers' sense of spatial proximity to its content. With crimes being reported (most usually) outwith interviewees' own locality, this lessens the programme's direct personal relevance to them and reduces the likelihood that they may be able to respond to its call for assistance. This is not to say, however, (as shall be illustrated in relation to the murder reconstruction) that interviewees were not able to identify with a wider 'message' found in the programme.

The Involvement of the Police in *Crimewatch*

The involvement of the police in *Crimewatch* appears not to bear the fruits that the police force hope for and intend. In only one group, Scottish middle-class women with no experience of violence, was it found that *Crimewatch* enhanced the public image of the police. There interviewees stated that *Crimewatch* made the police appear very approachable. However, among the Scottish groups of women with experience of violence there was considerable scepticism about the image the of the police presented by the programme.

To me it makes the police look really efficient, and they're not always that efficient.

[Scottish white woman, with experience of violence]

That's glamorised - the friendly smiling policemen. They don't do that. Not up here anyway.

[Scottish Asian woman, with experience of violence]

They don't represent any policemen or women I've ever met.

[Scottish white woman, with experience of violence]

Some interviewees' viewing of *Crimewatch* produced a criticism of the police for putting what was essentially their job in the hands of the public. This was found among *many* groups of women with experience of violence, but also among both Scottish and English white working-class women with no experience of violence. For example:

I always think it makes the police look idiots because it looks like they're wanting us to do their job.

[Scottish white working-class woman, with no experience of violence]

That annoyed me. The police were sitting there answering the phone. We're the ones that are supposed to be doing all the work. ... They don't have to do anything, just get the guy.

[Scottish Asian woman, with experience of violence]

It just makes you give up hope of them ever doing anything properly. They need the general public to solve the crimes because they can't do it themselves.

[English white woman, with experience of violence]

This view of the police completely subverts *Crimewatch*'s presentation of them as efficient. English Afro-Caribbean women with experience of violence also reacted negatively to the representation of police in the programme. Their reading was informed by an extra-textual perception of the police as racist. This was considered to have a detrimental impact on the potential of the programme:

Respondent 1: When it comes to the black women, the police treat us differently from white women.

Respondent 2: Yes, that's why we're coming back to saying 'Why should we help them? They're not helping us'.

Respondent 3: I don't agree that police should present the programme, because there are a whole host of people

that have negative views of the police and knowing that the police are going to be presenting it, a lot of people would switch off.
[English Afro-Caribbean women, with experience of violence]

As far as many women with experience of violence and some white working-class women with no experience of violence were concerned then, the cooperation of the police in *Crimewatch* did not have its desired public relations effect of informing sympathetic and positive perceptions of the police.¹

***Crimewatch* as Participative Television**

With interviewees viewing *Crimewatch* as performing a public service function in promoting awareness of crime, the programme is clearly engaged with as factual *informative* television. There is also some, but only very limited, evidence to show that *Crimewatch* is viewed as participative television. In the two middle-class groups of women with no experience of violence a desire to become involved in the programme by responding to its call for assistance in the solving of crime was expressed:

You're sitting there thinking 'I wish ... I could help them. ... I wish I knew them'.
[Scottish white middle-class woman, with no experience of violence]

Respondent 1: I used to watch in case I recognised anybody. I think that's a side of it you would love to be able to say ...

Respondent 2: You'd love to be able to know somebody. I would like to help. You can see it from the moral side again, I'm doing it because I would like to help.
[English white middle-class women, with no experience of violence]

This appears to represent a particularly middle-class response. In one group of English white women with experience of violence there was considerable cynicism of

¹ This aspect of the response is discussed in some detail in Schlesinger *et al* (1992: 70-3) and as is argued there, these responses would often appear to be shaped by direct experience of the police.

Crimewatch's attempts to mobilise its audience into participation. *Crimewatch* was viewed as creating an illusion of the public's involvement in social justice, and cited as having to prompt involvement through financial reward:

Respondent 1: It's a big public relations con actually. The whole thing, phone in and everything, it's just trying to make you feel that you are involved and a part of society and that you can do something. Really annoying.

Respondent 2: But they go on about how much you can help solve these crimes and they also go on at the same time 'if you do help us solve these crimes, you'll get loads of money'.
[English white women, with experience of violence]

Given the very specific requirements of viewers' participation in *Crimewatch* it is not surprising that more interviewees did not express a reading of it as participative television. However, the lack of such expressions may well be linked to many women giving precedence to explaining that they were cynical of how the police were asking viewers to assist in solving crimes.

***Crimewatch* as Dramatic Entertainment**

Although few interviewees identified *Crimewatch* as *intended* to entertain audiences, some engaged with it, and particularly the reconstructions, as 'gripping drama':

I think that a lot of people really do watch it just for entertainment value. People watch in the hope that - 'Oh, I heard about that, I read about that, I wonder how it comes out?' More like it wasn't fact, ... a drama kind of thing.
[Scottish white woman, with experience of violence]

It's as if you've just watched a detective story or something.
[English white working-class woman, with no experience of violence]

I watch it every time it comes out. I don't miss it. I just like crimes. ... You can get into the programme and if I'm going out at the time, I tape it. ... It's just a drug to me really.
 [English Afro-Caribbean woman, with experience of violence]

Also evident is an enjoyment taken from the programme's offering possible resolutions to the reported crimes through the *Update*:

I can't see anybody sitting watching this programme seriously and not wanting to know what the outcome was. [It would be] like a murder mystery [being] cut off at the end [where] you never found out who did it. It's necessary. If they didn't have the *Update* I don't think I would seriously watch the programme.
 [Scottish white woman, with experience of violence]

- Researcher: Do you - shall I say - enjoy that side of it? The solving of the crimes?
 Respondent 1: Yes I like thrillers and Agatha Christie, but I like any sort of thriller.
 Respondent 2: It's seeing right come through isn't it.
 [English white middle-class women, with no experience of violence]

Even though a factual programme, *Crimewatch* is then read as working according to the conventions of, and providing some of the same pleasures as fictional narratives. Its overall structure provides the very same gratifications as a classic realist text in that it poses a variety of narrative enigmas and seeks, with the audience's help, to solve these real-life crime mysteries.

Reception and the Programme's Narrative Structure

Clearly how *Crimewatch* is structured to report on crime is important in how it manages to engage viewers. Other aspects of the programme's structure were also significant in how interviewees read it. The textual analysis argued that the Rachael Partridge reconstruction was positioned at the end of the programme as an audience hook. However, there is little evidence to indicate whether it did have this effect. Establishing whether this was the case is, of course, greatly affected by the unnatural viewing

context of the reception research. Yet some interviewees' interpretations of the positioning of this reconstruction contradict the arguments put forward in the textual analysis. This is interesting given how textual theory can quite justifiably argue that texts seek to sustain audience viewing. English white women with experience of violence felt that this reconstruction was shown last because the broadcasters considered it of lesser importance than the financial and property crimes shown in the two earlier reconstructions:

They gave fraud and things priority over the murder. The murder came further down the programme as if it was less important than the money and the property that was missing.
[English white woman, with experience of violence]

The money was put in front of the programme and given more attention and the violence was put at the back.
[English white woman, with experience of violence]

It would seem that these women's sensitivity to the issue of violence against women was the cause of their criticisms of the programme, and that they would prefer such crimes to be dealt with at the front of the 'menu' of reported crimes. If the murder reconstruction was used as an audience hook then this strategy clearly back-fired in terms of how it affected these respondents' view of the programme.

The ending of *Crimewatch* with Nick Ross's message to the audience not to have nightmares given that a lot of unusual crime was featured *did* have the intended effect on some interviewees. This was particularly so for women with no experience of violence as the following responses demonstrate:

That wee bit calms you at the end of the programme, at the end of all the hype and excitement of it.
[Scottish white working-class woman, with no experience of violence]

They say 'don't worry ... sleep well'. They want to relax you, that's why they say it.
[Scottish Asian woman, with no experience of violence]

It just makes you feel a bit safer. You think 'Oh well they are that rare'.
 [English white middle-class woman, with no experience of violence]

Ross's statement did not, however, have this same impact on women with experience of violence. They were emotionally affected by the programme to a much greater degree than women with no experience of violence. In three groups the presenter's 'pay-off' was ridiculed and the sense of tension the programme created likened to that of a horror movie:

[It's] like a joke, like after you've seen maybe a chilling horror movie or something like that, then 'go to bed, sleep well'.
 [Scottish white woman, with experience of violence]

That's sort of like showing you a horror movie and then later on telling you not to have a nightmare about it.
 [Scottish Asian woman, with experience of violence]

It's like saying there's a bogey man in the cellar, but don't worry about it.
 [English white woman, with experience of violence]

Also contrary to the programme makers' intentions some women with experience of violence read the 'pay-off' as trivialising the crimes reported, and especially the Rachael Partridge murder which this immediately followed. For example:

I take that very offensively. They show you that somebody's been raped and all that and then they end the programme by saying that.
 [Scottish Asian woman, with experience of violence]

The ending of the programme really annoyed me. 'Don't have nightmares or anything'. Ha, ha, ha, let's joke about this. Somebody's just been violently murdered, but you can still go to bed and sleep. I thought it was disgusting.
 [English white woman, with experience of violence]

For a number of women with experience of violence, then, the 'pay-off' was not interpreted as an act of social responsibility seeking to prevent viewers from adopting an exaggerated fear of crime. Rather they considered it demeaning, and, given the close association often made between this statement and the reconstruction concerning

the act of violence against a woman, perhaps even as demeaning of their own experiences of violence.

Reception of the Reconstruction Concerning the Sexual Assault and Murder

Responses to the reconstruction concerning the sexual assault and murder of Rachael Partridge reveal that interviewees engaged with this on a range of levels. On a broad level it is found that the readings are consistent with interviewees' understanding of *Crimewatch* as intended to develop an awareness of crime and how to avoid it. These readings tend to take precedence over any concerning the programme's intention to solve crime. This might be a consequence of this particular crime being committed outwith any locality familiar to the respondents making it impossible for them to assist in the murder investigation. Yet this could also be considered an effect of Nick Ross emphasising that this reconstruction was '*highlighting the dangers of hitchhiking*'. In all of the groups respondents viewed the reconstruction as an illustration of this danger, and as a warning to those who might be tempted to hitchhike. For example:

People have got to be made aware. Some seventeen year old lassie could have watched it and said 'Well if I'm in the same situation I'd better not do that'.
[Scottish white working-class woman, with no experience of violence]

It's just highlighting the danger of her being a woman and hitchhiking.
[English Asian woman, with no experience of violence]

That is something I wouldn't do. That is something I wouldn't encourage any of my children to do and that's something I definitely would say to friends who are thinking of it, 'I wouldn't do that if I were you'.
[English Afro-Caribbean woman, with experience of violence]

As the last of the above quotes indicates, interviewees who were mothers also viewed the reconstruction as a warning against allowing their children to hitchhike. It was extremely common for respondents to detail this form of reception.

Many interviewees did indeed then accept and adopt Nick Ross's introductory framing of the reconstruction as being an illustration of the perils of hitchhiking. However, some interviewees questioned how Ross's statement invited viewers to understand Rachael's murder. One group of English white women with experience of violence showed a marked resistance to accepting the implied suggestion that hitchhikers themselves were to blame for this form of crime:

What they actually said about hitchhiking was wrong. ... The first thing they said is 'This is what happens when you hitchhike' basically. Why should we be the ones to stop hitchhiking? They should be catching the people that are murdering these people. ... I've done some hitchhiking in my life and you meet some nice people. It's not us that are at fault because we hitchhike. It's them, it's their minds. They made you think that you shouldn't hitchhike, because this is what will happen to you.
[English white woman, with experience of violence]

Another member of this group protested that this crime should be seen in the wider context of the withdrawal of public transport facilities:

I think the important issue is that bus services have been completely axed. ... Not everybody can afford to run their children about. Not everybody's got cars. Not everybody can afford taxis and young people want to go out and [they] will be murdered and raped if this is allowed to carry on.
[English white woman, with experience of violence]

Criticisms of how *Crimewatch* invited viewers to engage with the reconstruction were at times expressed in other groups of women with experience of violence.² On only one occasion were similar criticisms found among women with no experience of

² These criticisms are examined in some detail in Schlesinger *et al* (1992: 62-3).

violence. This was in the Scottish white working-class group of women where one interviewee remarked 'Does it mean all women are not allowed to go [hitchhiking] because somebody might come along and murder them?'

Ethnicity and the Warning Against Hitchhiking

Although the greater majority of interviewees viewed the reconstruction as a warning of the dangers of hitchhiking, Asian and Afro-Caribbean women did not identify with this message in the same manner as white respondents. They considered the temptation to hitchhike as more applicable to white women. A number of Asian interviewees explained that the constraints placed on women in their culture served to prevent their vulnerability to attack. For example:

- Respondent 1: I think Asian women are more careful than white ones. Especially late [at] night, we don't go out alone.
- Respondent 2: We are not allowed that's why.
- Respondent 3: Yes we are brought up like that and that's why we can't go alone. ... [If] we should go [there are] two women, and sometimes a man and a woman go, sometimes son and mothers go. We can't go alone after eight o'clock; we are brought [up] like that. You [white women] are not brought [up] like that. You always go [out] alone.
[Scottish Asian women, with no experience of violence]

Similar comments were presented in the three other Asian groups. Clearly for these women Asian culture is perceived as bringing certain benefits in terms of women's safety, benefits which women are not afforded (because of their greater independence) in more westernised cultures.

Some Afro-Caribbean women with experience of violence also argued that white women were more likely to hitchhike. However, this was linked to a perception of it being more dangerous for black women to do so, as is illustrated in this response:

I feel that it is mainly something that a lot of white women would do. They've got the confidence to go out there and do that kind of thing. Whereas we know, as black women, there's nothing out there protecting us and we can't all put our fingers out to stop a white man in his car. Because for one he'd go 'Fucking black bastards, you're not getting in my car', ... [or] 'Oh there's a piece of erotica. I'll stop and pick her up'. That kind of thing.
 [English Afro-Caribbean woman, with experience of violence]

Identification with the warning against hitchhiking was then affected by factors not foreseen in the textual analysis of the reconstruction. This illustrates that the textual analyst is not always able to anticipate how reception may be affected by differences among audiences. Even when textual research is used to identify a possible *range* of readings of a text instead of making claims about how texts *do* read, only through reception research can we discover for sure how viewers' own identities might impact on their reading of certain texts. However, it is important that textual research is involved in the analysis. This helps reveal how reception can be affected by factors other than the specifics of textual coding (i.e. extra-textual experiences) which inform viewers of their structural relationship to the textual material. The above quote demonstrates that the reconstruction is regarded as symbolically addressing white women. The distance this interviewee feels from the reconstruction *could* be an effect of her experience of violence and an utter dismay at how black women are perhaps regarded by white people as 'appropriate' victims of violence. However, as is illustrated below, other Afro-Caribbean women were able to identify a 'message' in the reconstruction applicable to themselves.

Engaging with the Reconstruction as Drama

Women with no experience of violence appeared to value the illustrative *dramatisation* provided by the reconstruction of how a young woman might come to place herself in a vulnerable situation.

I think when they reconstruct anything it brings it home to you and especially when you see the girl's family and you see the boyfriend and everything. Then you think 'Oh my' - you feel as if you know her.

[English Afro-Caribbean woman, with no experience of violence]

It could be a play, it could be a film. ... I do feel that ... it does bring it home ... that this is how easily these crimes are done on people

[English white working-class woman, with no experience of violence]

I thought it helped you to identify with this person; what she was doing, where she worked, that she was a responsible young girl, hard working. She had her love life. Everything [was] really going for her. And then she was murdered. I think that was the whole point of the first part of the reconstruction, to make you care somewhat about this individual.

[Scottish white middle-class woman, with no experience of violence]

These comments reveal how the reconstruction created an identification with Rachael Partridge. Women with experience of violence did not reveal a desire to experience this identification. In two groups of women with experience of violence interviewees indicated being greatly disturbed at being able to imagine how Rachael met her death, even though this was not actually shown.

It's like watching a film with no ending. You put [create] your [own] end[ing], that girl was either unconscious or she was conscious, you don't know. They haven't said. That girl could've gone through hell, so your mind, if it's going to upset you, is going to think what that girl went through.

[English white woman, with experience of violence]

It may as well have been a soap opera because it didn't seem violent. ... They didn't emphasise the violence in the murder. It was just 'Oh well, at the end we found her body with a bit of blood on it', and that's it.

[English white woman, with experience of violence]

There is some evidence to show that for women with experience of violence, an intimate knowledge of how Rachael may have suffered meant that they found little pleasure in engaging with the reconstruction as drama. Indeed, as a 'drama' these

interviewees argued that it presents a sanitised view of the crime. Possibly they would have preferred to see the actual violent act reconstructed so that other viewers would understand the exact nature of this crime. However, there is then clearly the problem that *Crimewatch* would be accused, even more than it is so at present, of exploiting violence, sensationalising it, pandering to voyeurism and promoting even more fear of crime. This raises the question of just how media audiences can be shown the nature of violent attacks against women - as women with experience of violence seem to want - within a framework which does not result in utter condemnation of those broadcasters who might attempt to do this.

Views of Rachael and her Motives for Hitchhiking

From the reconstruction interviewees generally regarded Rachael Partridge as, in most cases, not a particularly unusual young woman, but rather one who embodied the qualities of many a 17 year old in both thoughts and actions. However, at times, as is illustrated below, interviewees did criticise how Rachael was portrayed.

Rachael's Employment and Romantic Life

Very little mention was made of the early scene in the reconstruction which showed Rachael at work in the dental laboratory. This was only ever mentioned in passing where it was noted that she did work and was good at her work. It therefore only seems to have been considered as providing background information on Rachael's life. It might also be that this scene was regarded as less significant because it played no part in showing the motivations behind Rachael's hitchhiking. This points to one of the difficulties of the textual research in that it can credit significance to parts of the text which respondents do not cite as important in their reception. Again, however, this

underlines the importance of combining textual and reception research in that this helps identify which features of the text take on relevancy - or not - in its reception.

The fourth scene of the reconstruction which portrayed Rachael with her boyfriend Steven did occasion greater discussion in the interview groups. This was viewed by a number of women as providing a sense of Rachael's emotional state prior to her going hitchhiking. For example:

She was happy-go-lucky at that point. [It was showing] that she was looking forward to her holiday. And in fact it was the first holiday abroad with her boyfriend.
[Scottish white woman, with experience of violence]

It put across how easy it is to lose yourself with excitement. Perhaps she wasn't thinking straight. The holiday and the boyfriend - if they hadn't shown that part, you wouldn't have realised what was going on in their life at that time. [It] built up that picture and [shows] how easy it is to distract yourself.
[English white middle-class woman, with no experience of violence]

It had been argued in the textual analysis that this scene primarily functioned to develop the characterisation of Rachael and promote a sense of identification with her. Whilst there is evidence to show that it did this, the textual analysis did not anticipate, in terms of cause and effect, a possible association between her excitement at going on holiday and the 'temptation' to hitchhike. However, by far the most common reading of this scene was that it contributed to a perception of Rachael as a very normal young woman.

For example:

She just looked like an ordinary teenager. He did as well.
[Scottish white woman, with experience of violence]

I think that's probably just to portray she was like in the norm. Yes, happy and in love. It's like having the kind of stereotype of the normal girl.
[English Asian woman, with no experience of violence]

From some English women with experience of violence there was an expressed understanding that *Crimewatch* constructed an impression of Rachael as very respectable. The availability of this reading had been identified in the textual analysis which noted the lack of suggestion that Rachael and Steven were involved in sexual relations. Yet it is especially interesting that it was women with experience of violence who remarked on this. It is as though they were particularly sensitive to assumptions that 'promiscuity' might - however indirectly - explain violent attacks against women:

One thing they did make sure [of] in that programme was that they didn't actually show any physical contact between her and her boyfriend - so that she didn't look like 'Oh well, get your clothes off'. She didn't look like she was asking for anything. They'd obviously done that. She wasn't shown kissing her boyfriend [goodbye], which is the natural thing she would do. ... All you heard was the voice in the background saying 'Oh, I'd better go'.
[English white woman, with experience of violence]

Respondent 1: It showed a positive image of her, that's she's not sort of a loose girl didn't it?

Respondent 2: Yes. Showing that she's not one of them girls that go out and sit on the corner and doss.

Respondent 1: And that she's very twee and middle-class and very nice.

Respondent 2: Yes. If she'd had that much sense she wouldn't have been hitchhiking. ... She'd already know the dangers.

[English Afro-Caribbean women, with experience of violence]

It should be noted here that it was only among Afro-Caribbean women with experience of violence that Rachael was specifically identified as middle-class. This depiction of Rachael was regarded with considerable cynicism within this group. Further it appears to have prompted a denial of her death as a tragedy. In this group two other women went on to state:

Respondent 3: It's all very well us watching it, but we're not the type to go hitchhiking. So in fact my attitude to it is tough titty for her, because she knew what she was doing. If she wanted to do that, that was entirely her business. It's just really unfortunate that she died.

Respondent 4: Yes. She's not the first person in the world to have died because she hitchhiked. So she knew the dangers before she went out there.
[English Afro-Caribbean women, with experience of violence]

This resentment toward a middle-class character had also been expressed by this group in response to *The Accused*. This shows a class reading taking precedence over an ethnic reading, revealing that class identity can, at times, take on a greater importance in these women's reception than a racial one.

Rachael and Her Mother

The scene portraying Rachael with her mother in the car asking to be taken to her friend Alex's house was generally received as a critical representation of Rachael's mother, far more so than it was of Rachael. For example:

I don't think the mother should've given in and driven back and left her there. I don't think I'd have done that with my daughter. I would've insisted that she came home with me, or, if I did give in, I'd make sure I went back and picked her up.
[Scottish Asian woman, with experience of violence]

I think her mother was to blame for that, partly to blame anyway. Her mother should have had the sense to warn her not to hitch.
[Scottish white woman, with experience of violence]

If I were her mother I wouldn't allow my daughter or her friends to do that.
[Scottish white middle-class woman, with no experience of violence]

It is evident that some of these readings are informed by interviewees' own notions of how they, as mothers, would have responded to Rachael's wanting to go to her friends. In documenting their response these interviewees seemed concerned to present a view of themselves as having a greater sense of responsibility toward their children than they found in Rachael's mother.

The Sunbed Scene

The scene showing Rachael at Alex's house on the sunbed was the one scene which a number of interviewees argued should not have been included in the reconstruction. This is significant in light of the textual analysis having identified the potential for voyeurism and titillation in relation this scene, and, indeed, frequent criticisms of how real-life crimes are reconstructed on television. Some Scottish white working-class women with no experience of violence objected to this scene as being superfluous to the need to bring forward witnesses to Rachael's hitchhiking:

- Respondent 1: I don't think they should have put in the bit about she wanted to sunbathe and that, because who else would be there? Her friend and that would have been it. Plus she was wearing her top - you don't wear a top on a sunbed.
- Respondent 2: I know, that's stupid isn't it?
- Respondent 3: She went to a sunbed at her friend's so only her and her friend must have been there.
[Scottish white working-class women, with no experience of violence]

This group was the only one to criticise the lack of *relevance* of the scene to the murder investigation. In other groups, however, this scene was, at times, read as tasteless and unnecessary. English Asian women with experience of violence objected to its showing Rachael in a state of undress:

- Respondent 1: It wasn't really necessary to show what she'd been through - I mean wearing a bikini. ...
- Respondent 2: That's not really important. They showed what she went through the whole day. But when it came to - God she's laying there with a bra and whatever.
[English Asian women, with experience of violence]

Though this might suggest that these Asian women were particularly sensitive to the partially naked portrayal of Rachael on the sunbed, a similarly sensitive response was found among English white middle-class women:

- Respondent 1: I didn't like her being shown on the sunbed in her underwear, I just thought that was totally unnecessary.

Respondent 2: Well she wouldn't have been in her underwear on a sunbed. They should have shown her from the neck upwards. It was titillation showing her in her underwear, it was too much.
[English white middle-class women, with no experience of violence]

In this group and among English women with experience of violence there was a suspicion of *Crimewatch* portraying Rachael in this context because the crime committed against her was a sexual one, a fact which was being played upon:

You don't need to see the fact that she was in her underwear on a sunbed. I think that was a bit of titillation which you don't need - the sexual context for a sexual murder.
[English white middle-class woman, with no experience of violence]

Respondent 1: They could just have said she'd been to her friend's sunbed, there was no need to actually show her lying on it.

Respondent 2: Well, it all depends if they were trying to show a sexual part of it doesn't it?
[English white women, with experience of violence]

These readings reveal a certain sensitivity to the mediation of this crime involving an act of sexual violence against a woman. In the Afro-Caribbean group of women with experience of violence it was argued that the portrayal of Rachael on the sunbed was a reflection of how men perceive women:

I think it's saying something about their perception of women. To me it didn't have anything to do with the actual incidence of the crime. I just felt they were giving her an unnecessary referent [sic] and perhaps even negative view of so-called things that women do.
[English Afro-Caribbean woman, with experience of violence]

However, many interviewees did not criticise the inclusion of the sunbed scene, even in those groups where scepticism about it was expressed. A number of women with no experience of violence valued this scene as integral to the *dramatisation* of a warning against hitchhiking.

[It was] to make us more aware that you don't have to be upset and marching home to get - you can be happy and say 'Oh I'll just hitchhike, it'll not happen to me'. That was the whole point, because she was up on a high.

[Scottish white middle-class woman, with no experience of violence]

I could say 'I'm going down my friend's for a bit of sunbed'. ... You're just thinking 'I'm going to do this, I'm going to do that' and you've forgotten about how you're going to get back home. So it just makes you more aware again.

[English Afro-Caribbean woman, with no experience of violence]

Interestingly Rachael's friend Alex hardly featured at all in responses to the sunbed scene. What could have been viewed as a more responsible attitude towards the use of the sunbed on the part of Alex and in contrast to Rachael was never mentioned.

Why Rachael Hitchhiked

With the reconstruction having provided the background context to Rachael's decision to hitchhike, interviewees were able to pass judgment on her choice of methods to return home. By far the most common view was that Rachael did not put enough thought into her actions, and that this was a reflection of her age. Such readings were prevalent in all of the groups:

I remember when I was seventeen, I wasn't scared of nothing and nobody.

[English Afro-Caribbean woman, with no experience of violence]

A bit young and foolish.

[English white woman, with experience of violence]

She's seventeen, she's no a brain. ... Think back to [being] sixteen, seventeen. [You are] quite stupid at that age.

[Scottish white working-class woman, with no experience of violence]

Despite the prevalence of these critical interpretations of Rachael's actions, interviewees were able to sympathise with her predicament. A number of women with experience of violence viewed her hitchhiking as the only course of action left open to her.

She had no choice. ... If she knew she was going to get murdered, she probably would've stayed at her friend's house. But she didn't know that did she? She had no choice, she had to get home somehow, so she went out and hitchhiked.

[English white woman, with experience of violence]

She has to do it to get home. She didn't know that's going to happen really.

[English Asian woman, with experience of violence]

Such sympathetic views of Rachael suggest an understanding that she could not have anticipated the attack upon her which was to follow. Therefore, little blame is placed on her. It would seem then, that according to such interpretations, this woman's death simply becomes a tragedy which others might take a lesson from.

Other interviewees also viewed Rachael's setting out to hitchhike as one where she might not have felt the need to be afraid. The geographical context of the murder played a part in this reading. A small number of interviewees from a variety of groups remarked on how Rachael might have felt safe hitchhiking in a rural community where inhabitants would be known to each other and where Rachael could have anticipated a lift from a local driver.

Rachael's preference for hitchhiking rather than taking the alternative decision to walk home was also considered understandable by some interviewees given that the road to her home was unlit and, being in the country, brought its own dangers. Here it was the fact that Rachael was afraid of the dark, as detailed in the reconstruction, that resulted in these readings:

She was frightened of walking down a dark road.
 She would feel a bit safer in a car. You never know
 what's behind the trees or the risk, things like that.
 So it's the lesser of two evils.
 [Scottish white woman, with experience of violence]

She was scared to go along the dark road, and rather
 than walk, which is perhaps as dangerous - she
 could've been picked up anywhere and dragged in
 the bushes anywhere along that dark road.
 [English white middle-class woman, with no
 experience of violence]

Maybe the danger was worse, her having to walk
 home in the dark.
 [English Afro-Caribbean woman, with no experience
 of violence]

Though the reconstruction did not suggest that Rachael might have contemplated walking home, the mention of her being afraid of the dark was used by these interviewees to explain why she did not do so. Such forms of extrapolation the textual research did not anticipate as textually encoded suggestions of cause and effect relations are being inverted (i.e. Rachael hitchhiked because she was afraid of the dark, instead of *because* she was hitchhiking she placed herself in a situation where she became afraid). Clearly this identifies some problems for textual analysis in attempting to identify *how* texts can be read. However, what the reception analysis illustrates here is the extent to which audiences can sympathize with a character's actions by interpretatively 'bending' details found in the text. In doing so these women respondents have revealed their own sense of enormous unease about being alone at night on a dark country road, an unease which has significant impact on their understanding of Rachael's situation.

Steven's Search for Rachael

The textual analysis argued that the presence of Steven, Rachael's boyfriend in the reconstruction could have affected how Rachael's character was interpreted, and function to promote a further sense of tragedy over her death. Some such readings were found with, as detailed above, interviewees viewing the early scenes of the reconstruction as showing that the couple were in love and excited about their forthcoming holiday. Several interviewees commented on how they felt sorry for Steven, as for example this English Asian woman with experience of violence:

I felt sorry for him actually because of what happened at the end. They were so excited about the holiday and everything. And then it's just all gone.
[English Asian woman, with experience of violence]

One English white woman with experience of violence was more critical of how the reconstruction offered this reading of Steven's tragic loss:

I think it was really horrible the way they mentioned that her boyfriend was waiting for her and looking for her and they were about to go on holiday. That was really upsetting.
[English white woman with experience of violence]

This such comment, though rare in the groups, is again indicative of how women with experience of violence were uneasy about how this crime was dramatically reconstructed. However, Steven's presence in the reconstruction also prompted another reading not anticipated by the textual analysis: he represented an alternative means for Rachael to get home other than hitchhiking.³ Given that Steven was available to search for Rachael, many interviewees could not understand why she did not telephone him to arrange a lift. For example:

³ In presenting their responses to the reconstruction interviewees were very likely to discuss ways in which Rachael could have found other means home instead of hitchhiking. See Schlesinger *et al* (1992: 66).

The boyfriend had a scooter. He went looking for her so she could have phoned him.
[English Asian woman, with no experience of violence]

Even phoning her boyfriend to come and get her and tell him exactly where she was.
[Scottish white woman, with experience of violence]

He was a respectable person, so I can't imagine why she couldn't phone him up and say 'Look, I'm stranded, could you give me a lift?'
[Scottish white middle-class woman, with no experience of violence]

The reconstruction had not suggested in any way that Steven might have been able to provide Rachael with transportation home. What these interpretations do suggest, however, is that the respondents believed they would have thought of options which Rachael did not think of. They therefore present themselves as being different from Rachael, and not vulnerable to her fatal mistakes.

The Portrayal of Rachael by the Roadside

The scenes which portrayed Rachael hitchhiking and those revealing where her body was found occasioned much less discussion in the groups than those leading up to her hitchhiking. The one detail discussed from the scenes of Rachael hitchhiking was that she was afraid of the dark. For the most part when these scenes were discussed more broadly they were viewed as designed to jog viewers' memories and bring forward new witnesses:

You do need that because ... I think perhaps it does trigger something off. Perhaps you remember a car that you've seen as you were going up that road ...
[English white middle-class woman, with no experience of violence]

Respondent 1: It is to jog memories of drivers who were in the area.
Respondent 2: I think it was to shake people's memories to [make them] think 'Did I pass her?'
[Scottish white woman, with experience of violence]

Yet, the portrayal of Rachael by the roadside was also read as a final viewing of this woman prior to the (inevitable) revelation of her death. In this quote from an English white working-class woman with no experience of violence this reading combines with one where there is a fear of the chance that the murderer might be known to the viewer:

When you see her there, you know what's going to happen. You know something awful is going to happen to her and you're just waiting to see what sort of vehicle she's getting in. And then, somewhere in the back of your mind, you must think 'Oh, I don't know anybody with a white van', [or] 'Oh God, I know somebody with a white van!'
[English white working-class woman, with no experience of violence]

For most other interviewees seeing Rachael hitchhiking symbolised the closing of the drama:

Researcher: What about when she was hitching?
Respondent 1: You knew she was finished.
Respondent 2: Oh she was that.
Respondent 3: You know it's stupid for her to be doing that.
[English Afro-Caribbean women, with no experience of violence]

Everything just fell in place then what was going to happen. ... Murdered or raped.
[English Asian woman, with no experience of violence]

Such readings are to be expected given that Nick Ross had signalled that this reconstruction highlighted 'the dangers of hitchhiking'. However, another form of response reveals a lack of willingness to accept the presumed inevitability of Rachael's death. Some interviewees critically reflected on the lack of action taken by witnesses to Rachael's hitchhiking who could have helped her get home safely. Others put themselves in the position of those witnesses, hoping that they would have acted to save Rachael's life:

What makes me really think it was the worst crime was that people drove by her. A seventeen year old girl. They knew she was at risk and ignored her. That's what really sickens me.
[Scottish Asian woman, with experience of violence]

It makes you realise the next time it would be nice to stop and say to the girl, if it's a woman, to help her rather than just ignore her.
 [English white middle-class woman, with no experience of violence]

The final scenes which detailed how Rachael's body was found were mentioned rarely by the respondents. It would appear then that the discovery of how Rachael died was of perhaps less interest than engaging with the events which preceded her death and what these revealed about how a young woman could be led to hitchhike. Similarly there was very little mention of the detailing of evidence in the studio linked to Rachael's murder. This may have occasioned so little discussion simply because it was of no relevance to the interviewees - they were not in a position to help the crime investigation. Yet more likely was that this did not form part of 'the story' as they took it.

Concluding Remarks

Crimewatch is both presented and was received by respondents in this research as public service television. However, whilst the broadcasters emphasise the service of helping to solve crime, this reception analysis has found that interviewees place a greater value on *Crimewatch's* ability to create an of awareness of crime. With the exception of several middle-class women, they were more concerned with taking lessons from the programme than watching it on the slight off-chance that they might be able to respond to its call for assistance. This suggests that *Crimewatch* encourages, and indeed is able to capitalise on, women's belief in the need for vigilance and their concern that they could themselves become victims of crime.

Whilst *Crimewatch* brings rewards for the BBC in that it is viewed as having didactic value, it evidently does not bring great rewards for the police in encouraging interviewees to adopt a positive image of them. Scottish interviewees from all but the

middle-class group with no experience of violence were particularly averse to this reading of the police, one which they understood as clearly intended by the programme, as were a number of English white and Afro-Caribbean women with experience of violence.

As factual television considered to perform a pedagogic function, *Crimewatch* was not criticised for exploiting the reporting of a crime of violence against a woman for entertainment. Yet this reconstruction, and *Crimewatch* in general, was often viewed as compelling drama. Women with experience of violence argued that the programme should prioritise the reporting of crimes against the person, thereby supporting the programme makers' own selection criteria, and those which have been criticised for promoting a fear of crime. However, a number of interviewees from various groups did take issue with how *Crimewatch* portrayed the Rachael Partridge reconstruction, particularly in showing Rachael on the sunbed. They were concerned as to why this scene, which they identified as superfluous to the murder investigation, was shown. However, some respondents with no experience of violence found this scene a useful illustration of how a woman could fall prey to the temptation to hitchhike.

The reconstruction of the sexual assault and murder was presented as a warning against hitchhiking and especially to young women. The vast majority of interviewees accepted this warning, and viewed the reconstruction from within this framework. As was the case with *The Accused* then, this reconstruction was interpreted as a demonstration of how women should avoid placing themselves in situations where they are vulnerable to attack. Women with no experience of violence placed a particular value on how the reconstruction dramatised this message, though there were differences in how women *identified* with that message according to their cultural background and/or ethnicity. A number of women with experience of violence were, however, disturbed by the way in which the crime was reconstructed as a 'tragic

drama'. These women were also highly critical of the juxtaposing of this reconstruction with the programme's 'pay-off', which they viewed as trivialising the crime of violence against a woman.

What was not anticipated by the textual analysis of the reconstruction was how certain extrapolations would figure in the reading of why Rachael was tempted to hitchhike. This supports Branigan's point that 'the spectator cannot avoid retelling a story which exists less on the screen than in our predisposition to make sense' of it (1992: 62). However, it is interesting that this is found in relation to this murder reconstruction. In the cases of *EastEnders* and *Closing Ranks*, for example, women with no experience of violence had looked more toward textual coding for explanations as to why incidents of domestic violence occur than toward notions of how *they* would behave in such a violent situation. This difference might be explained by the fact that many of those interviewees found it difficult to identify with a violent marriage, whereas many could identify with the prospect of being stranded at night with no means of getting home.

What becomes evident from both the textual and reception analyses of the murder reconstruction is how *Crimewatch* encourages, and how the vast majority of respondents accepted, a belief in women's vulnerability to attack when hitchhiking. There were those (almost exclusively women with experience of violence) who questioned this message. Yet such criticisms were not widely expressed. From this it can be argued that *Crimewatch* confirms women's sense of trepidation over hitchhiking. That fear has not been *created* by *Crimewatch*, as most respondents already believed that hitchhiking was a perilous act. In the absence of statistics on just what percentage of female hitchhikers are attacked, it cannot be established whether this belief is justified. Nevertheless, the vast majority of women in this study generally accept that, unless they want to risk their life, their freedom does not extend to hitchhiking.

CHAPTER EIGHT

CONCLUSION

In combining textual and reception analyses this research has facilitated a very broad and detailed investigation of a selection of audio-visual portrayals of violence against women. It has been able to explore contextually why such portrayals appear in the television schedules and in movie theatres. It has also examined how different textual forms represent violence against women, and how textual conventions and methods of signification might affect the various ways in which these might be received and discursively understood.

In following each textual analysis with an examination of the text's actual reception, it has been possible to identify which readings of the violent event women viewers found to be the most pertinent. It was also possible to identify how factors such as production and marketing, generic form, narrative structure and aspects of textual signification impact on reception. This has enabled a sophisticated comparison of the various ways in which the audio-visual products can be theorised through textual research, with how women viewers actually do receive them.

This research has highlighted the very complex nature of the relationship between texts and their audience reception, and how reception can involve engaging with a text through a variety of different perspectives. For example, in the case of *The Accused* it was found that many interviewees were aware of the economic imperative behind mainstream Hollywood film production. There was also a widespread awareness of how the film set up and toyed with expectations of a 'happy' narrative resolution. Many women expressed a pleasure in the conventional ending. But it was only women with experience of violence who were concerned about how this represented a very

untypical outcome to a rape allegation. Women with no experience of violence, in contrast, were more likely to engage with and gain pleasure from the *narrative strain* of the text and less likely to question the realism of its conclusion. Therefore, whilst such viewers tended to be critical of the text as a 'product' because of its explicit violent content, they were less inclined to question the broad message which they located within it.

If it is agreed that *The Accused* could be perceived as a critical commentary on aspects of male culture which might entice men to denigrate, and commit violence against women, we should consider why such a reading was not widely and commonly adopted by the women interviewees. This is indicative of the fact that those social discourses which place a degree of responsibility on women to avoid 'provoking' men to attack them, are more culturally dominant than those which hold men entirely to blame for the atrocities which some of them choose to submit women to. There is, then, a strong cultural framework of understanding which functions to encourage women to read *The Accused* as revealing what can happen to women who do not censor their activities in relation to a male threat of violence. In turn the film substantiates this very point of view, not because this was intended by its makers, but because the women respondents in this research found this to be the most relevant reading available from the text.

The findings of this research are that audio-visual texts portraying violence against women, whether factual or fictional, do contribute to the circulation of meanings about the nature of this social and criminal problem. It does not support the notion that audio-visual texts contain a power to determine how audiences will read them. But it does conclude that they hold a greater *power of suggestion* than much 'active audience' theory has claimed. As Roscoe *et al* argue 'viewers are active but, within the parameters set by the text' (1995, in press). This is particularly so when viewers are

not critically aware of the range of discursive meanings that can be brought to bear on an issue such as men's violence against women.

The investigation of *Crimewatch* further illustrates this point. The reception analysis of this programme identified a widespread 'common sense' belief that women, and indeed any 'vulnerable' individual, should not hitchhike. In adopting this point of view, interviewees were clearly accepting the programme's explicit encoded suggestion that the murder of the female hitchhiker was caused by that woman's 'irresponsible risk-taking' behaviour. Although some of the interviewees did question this interpretation, very few believed there were alternative means of protecting potential hitchhikers (such as, for example, providing more public transport facilities or making a greater example of those who do commit crimes against hitchhikers) other than through educating them not to hitchhike. This illustrates how the programme's coding limited how such a crime could be understood. But it also indicates that the range of interpretative discourses which can be brought to bear on such a crime are also very limited. Therefore, whilst viewers do actively construct meaning from a textual presentation - by reading and making coherent sense of its coding - it is questionable how actively aware they often are of the discursive nature of their interpretation if they are culturally constrained from a capacity to *critically* engage with the textual message.

When the makers of audio-visual texts attempt to portray violence against women they have to do so within the conventions of the form with which they are working. This can result in readings being made of that violence not originally anticipated by the textual producer. For example, this research illustrates how the form of the television play made it difficult for the makers of *Closing Ranks* to convey to viewers exactly why a marriage had broken down to such an extent that the wife found her husband sexually undesirable. The director and co-writer of this drama had hoped audiences would sympathise with this woman's position. However, a number of women with no experience of violence perceived her to be 'frigid' and used this as a causal explanation

for the violence committed against her. This supports the argument that textual research should be used neither in an attempt to identify an 'intended' or 'preferred' reading of a text, nor to make claims about how texts are constructed to cue and constrain particular readings. Whilst it is legitimate to use textual analysis as a means of identifying a range of possible readings of a text, it is necessary to combine such analysis with reception research. This can then serve to test any claims made by the textual analyst and to identify which readings *audiences* find to be the most pertinent.

Textual form was also found to have an impact on the reception of domestic violence in *EastEnders*. Many women with no experience of violence considered this soap opera to be depicting a man's violence against his wife to be the result of childhood experiences. Whilst this reading was made available by the text, it also reveals how an intra-textual knowledge of soap characters can markedly affect perceptions of their behaviour in any one context. However, such interpretations not only demonstrate how textual form can affect reception, but again how certain interpretations are deemed credible according to cultural discourses which foreground certain explanations for domestic violence.

This research found that women with experience of violence are far more likely than women who have no such experience to *critically* engage with portrayals of violence against women. They were very sensitive to the fact that women are often blamed for violence committed against them, and were more inclined to sympathetically perceive such female characters in the texts. This shows that experience of violence can lead to an awareness of the range of discourses which surround such violence. However, there were occasional exceptions to this, most notably when the violence was committed outwith a domestic context.

Experience of violence was not the only factor to affect critical reception activity. In their reception of *EastEnders* English Asian and Afro-Caribbean women, both with and

without experience of violence were very sensitive to the fact that the programme portrayed wife battery in a mixed-race-marriage. They quite rightly viewed this as allowing an inter-racial relationship to be causally associated with the violence. Further, in response to *The Accused* and *Crimewatch* some Afro-Caribbean women with experience of violence were highly critical of the portrayal of middle-class female characters. They disliked how viewers were encouraged to sympathise with these characters. This demonstrates how multiple group membership can impact on reception, and that in some cases one form of group membership can structure the reading, and at other times another. This therefore bears witness to the fact that women, in relation to how they interpret audio-visual texts, can by no means be classified as a group on the basis of their gender. However, it is of significance here that this study identifies a general fear among the great majority of women interviewees concerning the need to avoid situations where they might be perceived as leaving themselves open to male attack, or even as 'provoking' such attack.

As this research combined textual and audience analyses and made direct connections between the textual material and its reception it has taken the investigation of portrayals of violence against women beyond that contained in *Women Viewing Violence*. That project had concluded

for the most part, the violence on television portrayed in this study was not defined as 'exciting' or 'entertaining', but rather as 'educational' or 'relevant', while at the same time as 'disturbing' and sometimes 'offensive'. Thus the importance attributed to what was viewed was not in terms of pleasure, escape or fantasy but in terms of relevance and social importance. (Schlesinger *et al*, 1992: 169)

However, whilst interviewees might not have *defined* the audio-visual texts as entertaining, it is evident from this research that many engaged with the featured texts as drama, and viewed them according to dramatic conventions. They were also very often aware of the entertainment imperative involved in the production of each of the texts, recognising them as intended to attract and maintain audiences. But even more

significant is how it is now possible to understand interviewees perceiving the texts as of relevance and social importance. Given the findings of this research that women would often blame female victims of violence, and especially violence committed outwith the domestic context for instigating that violence, the educational impact and relevancy of the portrayals has to be considered in relation to what women think are to be learned from these texts. In fact the message often taken from them, and particularly by women who have not experienced violence, is that women should constrain their own behaviour and desires if they are to male avoid attack. Therefore, the texts do work, to some degree at least, to compound their fears for their safety in relation to the possibility of such violence.

Given the need for audio-visual production to be justified through audience ratings, and mindful of the fact that depictions of violence are capable of attracting viewers, a decline in the amount of male violence against women depicted in the audio-visual media cannot be expected. It is very possible then that women's consumption of such material will continue to substantiate their perceptions of a need to act in a manner which will alleviate the likelihood of their becoming the victim of male attack. However, in terms of social understandings of, and discourses around the issue of domestic violence, it is significant that very recently a number of media texts have attempted to report this crime from the victims' point of view, and to counter the belief that women are to blame for its occurrence (see, for example, *Cosmopolitan*, 1995; Crabtree, 1994; *Marie Claire*, 1994; Melville, 1994). It is of note that these reports have appeared in popular mainstream magazines specifically targeted at women. There is then the *possibility* that if this kind of reporting continues, and if it were to become more prolific, a greater number of women could become familiar with those discourses which hold men entirely responsible for the acts of violence which they commit against women.

Additionally, various government agencies have recently been involved in attempting to promote a greater awareness of domestic violence, and to encourage the public to understand it from a very particular definitional perspective. For example, in Scotland an advertising campaign against domestic violence was launched in June 1994 by the Scottish Office Crime Prevention Unit. This 'specifically targets the offender, highlighting the criminality of the act and attempts to change public attitudes by making it clear that such action is abhorrent and socially unacceptable' (Scottish Office, 1994). The campaign included a 40 second television commercial which ran on Scottish Television, Grampian Television, Border Television and Channel 4 (Scotland) in June and July, October, November and December 1994. Scottish Office publicity material on this commercial details its contents thus:

The setting is a busy, local pub. We focus on a group of friends who are enjoying a pleasant night out, however, the soundtrack is [sic] flashbacks to various violent arguments that have taken place at one of the couple's homes and although the argument is heard we see no violence. This is because domestic violence often takes place at home; and its effects can be hidden from friends and the general public. Therefore, although the viewer sees the injuries inflicted on the victim it is unseen by her friends. ... The final scenes of the commercial show the offender confronted [through his seeing the battered, bruised and bleeding face of his girlfriend] with the consequences of his behaviour. (Scottish Office, 1994)

This commercial ends with a voice over stating: 'If you assault your partner it will often go unseen by others because you do it at home - in private. But you can be made to face your brutality in public in front of a jury. You only have to hit your partner once to commit a criminal offence'. A further 10 second commercial was aimed at a more general audience beyond the domestic violence offender. In white writing on a black background this states 'We're all sorry domestic violence happens. But being sorry won't change a thing'. Viewers are invited to call a freephone number 'if you're a victim, an offender, or know someone who is.'

A very similar campaign to that presented in Scotland was launched in England in October 1994 by the Home Office at the cost of £170,000. Speaking on this David Maclean, the Criminal Justice Minister stated:

Victims must not blame themselves. They should not accept responsibility for the violence and intimidating behaviour of anyone who abuses them in their home. For many women, physical violence, and sexual and emotional abuse are so commonplace that they accept it as part of their household routine. Domestic violence is a crime and no-one should stand for it. (quoted in Travis, 1994)

It could be then, that with public recognition of domestic violence as a very serious social problem and a crime, attitudes to this form of attack might change, and with that those discourses which blame the abused woman might become less commonly accepted. This might in turn affect how the audio-visual media portray domestic violence, and perhaps even other forms of violence against women, and how audiences read these portrayals. This, however, remains to be seen.

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