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Patterns of Involvement in Television Fiction: A Comparative Analysis

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Abstract

This article analyses discussions of an episode of Dallas by focus groups of different ethnic origins in Israel and the United States. It identifies four rhetorical mechanisms by which viewers may 'involve' themselves in or 'distance' themselves from the story: referential v. critical framings; real v. play keyings; collective' or universal v. personal referents; and normative v. value-free evaluations. Use of these mechanisms varied across the groups, and when the cultures were arrayed along a multidimensional involvement scale overseas viewers appeared to be more involved in the programme than Americans. Possible roles for involvement in the process of viewer susceptibility to programme messages are then discussed.

Disciplines

Communication | Social and Behavioral Sciences

Patterns of Involvement in Television Fiction: A Comparative Analysis

*Tamar Liebes and Elihu Katz**

This article analyses discussions of an episode of *Dallas* by focus groups of different ethnic origins in Israel and the United States. It identifies four rhetorical mechanisms by which viewers may 'involve' themselves in or 'distance' themselves from the story: referential v. critical framings; real v. play keyings; collective or universal v. personal referents; and normative v. value-free evaluations. Use of these mechanisms varied across the groups, and when the cultures were arrayed along a multidimensional involvement scale overseas viewers appeared to be more involved in the programme than Americans. Possible roles for involvement in the process of viewer susceptibility to programme messages are then discussed.

Introduction¹

To study the effects of television, says Gerbner, don't ask people about television, ask them about life. In their famous series of studies, Gerbner et al. (1979) attempt to infer the influence of television from the correspondence between what heavy viewers say about life and what television says about it. Whether one agrees with Gerbner's method or not (Hirsch, 1980), it is an important step beyond inferring effects from content analysis alone, or from individual self-reports alone.

For the same reason, one cannot accept content analysis as a basis for statements about cultural imperialism. To study the effects of the widespread diffusion of US television programmes abroad, one must examine both the message and its incorporation into the consciousness of viewers. Neither intent nor effect need be witting, but the message must be shown to be self-serving in some way from the point of view of US interests, and its incorporation must be found to create or increase dependence on the message and/or its supplier, and to have debilitating consequences for the self-interest of viewers from other cultures.

Unlike Gerbner, we are not satisfied with inferring effects, but would like to get closer to the process of influence in action. As far as US television overseas is concerned, we are not even certain that people understand the programmes. Perhaps they may only look at the pictures, or weave their own story into what they are offered.

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This paper, then, is about the ways in which people are engaged by television fiction. It is a study not of effects but rather of the processes that might lead to effects. Specifically, it is a study of patterns of involvement in an episode of the world-wide hit *Dallas*, focusing on how viewers discuss the programme in nearly natural settings. These discussions reveal several different types of involvement; and involvement, we believe, may hold the key to effect.

Method

Ideally, we should like to have empirical data on how people talk naturally about television: whether they refer to the medium or to specific programmes; how they decode what they see and hear; how they help each other to do so; whether and how they weave the experience of viewing into their social and political roles; whether they have categories for criticism, and if so, what these are. The only data we know come from several quasi-anthropological studies of family interaction (Bryce and Leichter, 1983; Lull, 1981); two analyses of peer group discussion of film (Custen, 1982; Laulan, 1983) focus group discussions of a news programme (Morley, 1980) and a radio marathon (Merton, 1946);² and two questionnaire studies attempting to clarify the critical ability and vocabulary of television audiences (Neumann, 1982; Himmelweit, 1983).

We tried to combine these methods in our own study, although what we have done does not pretend to solve the problem of truly unobtrusive observation of natural conversations concerning television. We organized some 50 small groups of viewers of *Dallas* by asking an initial couple to invite two other couples from among their friends. The group viewed an installment of *Dallas* in a living room setting, together with others who might have joined them anyway.³ Following the programme, our observer switched on his tape recorder and put a series of open questions to the group; in some cases recording was begun during the viewing period to catch spontaneous conversation.

First, the group was asked to retell the episode in their own words, then to describe the attributes and motivations of the three leading characters, following which we introduced a series of somewhat more specific queries such as 'How would you end the series?' 'Is the programme real?' 'Are they trying to tell us something?' 'What does the programme say about America?' etc. In short, we were interested not so much in effect, not even in gratifications, but rather in what is understood and how it is talked about.

We applied this method to five ethnic communities, four of them in Israel (Israeli Arabs, veteran Moroccan Jews, Russian Jews only recently arrived, and kibbutz members, mostly second-generation Israelis) and to groups of second-generation Americans in Los Angeles. The Israeli groups represent a naive attempt to simulate the diverse cultures that have made *Dallas* a world-wide hit, while the US groups are the audience for whom the programme was presumably intended in the first place. An effort was made to make groups comparable as to age and education, but we did not have full control over the invitations, and certainly not over the correlation between ethnicity and education in the general population. We wanted to see whether the American readings differed from those of the Israelis and whether the Israelis differed among themselves. We chose *Dallas* not only because of its popularity, but because of its dependence on

words, because it is so American in form and content. The puzzle of how most of the world manages to understand it all may thereby be revealed.

The generic problem of the study, then, is addressed through analysis of how viewers use the narrative to discuss their own lives. Our object is to discover the mechanisms through which the viewer interacts with the programme, becoming involved with it, and perhaps affected by it, in different ways and to different degrees.

A major indicator of involvement— or, better, a measure of the viewer's ability to distance himself from the reality of the programme— is the extent to which he or she invokes the 'metalinguistic' rather than the 'referential' frame in responding to the programme. The 'referential' (Jakobson, 1980) connects the programme and real life, as if the viewers were relating to the characters as real people and in turn relating these real people to their own real worlds.

The 'critical' (Jakobson's 'meta-linguistic') frames discussions of the programme as a fictional construction with aesthetic rules. Referential readings are probably more emotionally involving; critical readings are more distant, dealing as they do with genres, dynamics of plot, thematics of the story and so on. We shall see, however, that certain uses of the critical may betray an effort at self-protection, a refusal to admit emotional involvement.

About What? The Subjects of the Referential Statements

All referential statements that figure in the interaction within the discussion groups were coded by topic, and the 23 resulting topics were then reduced to 4. These are: (1) motivations for action; (2) kinship/relations and norms; (3) moral dilemmas, having to do (mainly) with the price of success; and (4) business relations. There is substantial similarity among the ethnic groups in the rank -order of attention given to each of the topics. With the exception of the Arabs, motivation was the most discussed topic in all groups; in other words, reference to the motivation of the characters in the story led to talk of motivations in real life, and vice versa.

The Arabs focused their referential statements, first of all, on the subject of kinship roles and norms; for the other groups, this was the second most frequent referential category. Thus, relations among story spouses, generations, siblings and so on were frequently used to discuss kinship relations in real life, and vice versa. Moral dilemmas occupied the kibbutz groups and the Arabs disproportionately; only Americans make frequent reference to business relations in story and life.

The large measure of agreement over the rank-order of the topics discussed referentially suggests that programmes such as *Dallas* may be able to impose an agenda on diverse communities of viewers. It seems a better bet, however, that the social agenda proposed by the programme coincides, with pervasive and preexisting concern, with the primordial human motivations and interpersonal relations, particularly

within the family. This is a clue to the ease with which a programme like *Dallas* crosses cultural frontiers and engages participation.

Within these broadly defined topics, however, the different groups display different tendencies in their interpretations. In explaining motivation, for example, the Americans and the kibbutz members invoke a sort of Freudian theory, perceiving individuals as governed by irrational drives and connecting these with childhood events. Thus, JR's personality is thought to derive from his having been second to Bobby in his mother's favour. Interpretations of this kind, of course, relieve individuals of much moral responsibility. In contrast, a large proportion of the Russian statements invoke 'determinism' of another form, as if people behaved in a particular way because their roles impelled them to; as if businessmen, for example, or women, were programmed by society. The Moroccans, also 'blame' society, but invoke a Hobbesian model in which the world is a jungle in which individuals must fend for themselves. In this, they come close to the 'Mafia principle', which at least one analyst (Mander, 1983) finds in the programme. Only the Arabs— who focus not on motivation but on family interrelations and moral dilemmas— find the individual free and responsible enough to struggle against temptation and constraint.

When asked explicitly— late in the focus interview— about the message of *Dallas*, respondents said that the predominant message they perceived is that 'the rich' or 'the Americans' are 'unhappy' or 'immoral'. There follows an implicit, sometimes explicit, 'and we are happier', or 'we are more moral'. In the more spontaneous referential statements coded here, however, emphasis shifts from a moralistic mood to a pragmatic one. Indeed, when discussing the programme informally, the groups which were most moralistic in their replies to the formal question— the Arabs and Moroccans— say that it teaches that one has little choice but to act immorally; in effect, the message they perceive is that immorality pays.

Relating to *Dallas*: Referential and Critical Frames

But rather than focus on the *what* of viewer's statements, this article focuses on the *how*.⁴

The first thing we shall do, therefore, is to calculate the ratio of use of 'critical' and 'referential' frames by ethnicity. Having done so, we shall focus on the 'referential' only, that is, on those statements that associate television fiction and real life. We shall also analyse these statements in terms that will permit description and measurement of the ways in which viewers involve themselves in, or distance themselves from, the programme. Thus, within the world of the referential, we shall distinguish two kinds of keyings ('Real' and 'Play'), three kinds of referents ('I', 'We', 'They') and two kinds of value orientations (interpretive or 'value-free', and evaluational or 'normative').

We extracted from the 54 group discussions every statement that connects an observation about the programme with an observation about real life or about the programme as 'text' or artistic construction. The overall ratio of the two types of statements is better than 3:1 in favour of the referential. For every 18 statements about

life, the average group makes 6 'critical' statements. This finding itself is of interest, though it is hard to judge without comparison to reactions by similar populations to other media, such as books or the theatre. A question of interest is whether the naturalism of television, in both content and viewing context, makes difficult the distance required for critical thought.

Here are several examples. The first is critical, the second referential:

Example One (Kibbutz group 81)

Reuven: It's impossible to achieve one's goal in this series; I'll tell you why. It's what they call a 'soap opera' in the States. Are you familiar with this term? It's a series that goes on for years on end, and in order to get the audience to stay with it, it ends in the middle. The audience hopes the missing end will be told next week, but it never is. They always manage to get to another scene that won't be completed either. That's the way they hold the audience for years, endlessly. If they get to some ending, if everybody gets what he wants the following week, nobody will view

.....
Avi: The series will end.

By contrast, the following example refers directly to real life:

Example Two (Russian group 66)

Lara: It's not clear to me why he wants so much to get his son back.

Natasha: As somebody explained to me, in the United States family status— whatever is going on behind the curtains— is very important for one's career. Every big manager has a family picture on his desk, his wife and children. That's why all the flirting is unconnected with the career. That's why his family status is so important, from the point of view of his career.

Comparing ethnic communities in this way, we find that the groups differ significantly in the ratio of referential to critical utterances. The highest ratios (the most critical utterances relative to the referential) were made by the Russians, followed by Americans and kibbutzniks, followed by Moroccan Jews and Arabs (see Table 1). Higher education also increases the proportion of critical statements, but even when education is held constant, the rank-order of ethnic differences remains unchanged.

That the Western groups make more statements in the critical frame invites speculation. The obvious inference is that Western culture inculcates critical distance. If so, this may be related to greater experience with dramatic forms; or it may be that a Western story invites

TABLE 1
Statements in Referential and Critical Frames, by Ethnicity
(percentages)

	Americans	Moroccans	Arabs	Russians	Kibbutz
Critical (meta- linguistic) frame	27	10	11	37	28
Referential frame	72	90	88	62	72
No. of statements (100%)	(293)	(264)	(167)	(251)	(187)

Western-educated viewers to take a more critical stance. It is of particular interest to note that the cutting point of ethnic differences in this respect is not between the American and non-American groups—even if the latter are handicapped by subtitles—but between Russians, Americans and Israeli-educated kibbutzniks on the one hand, and Arabs and Moroccan Jews on the other. That the newly arrived immigrants from Russia—rather than the Americans—are so meta-linguistic, even though they are probably as unfamiliar with American popular culture as are Moroccan immigrants and Arabs, suggests that there may be something to cultural distance after all, but from within a Western tradition of textual criticism which is applicable to other media and genres.

A high ratio of critical to referential does not necessarily mean that the absolute number of statements about life is low. The kibbutz groups, for example, were high in both types of statements. On the other hand, the very high number of statements about life of the Arab group is inverse to the number of their critical statements.

The Keying of Referential Statements: 'Real' and 'Play'

Not only do the ethnic groups vary in the relative frequency of their statements about real life and fiction; they also formulate these statements differently. Most statements have a straightforward, 'serious' character; they are indicative in form. When they relate the story to life, they do so *realistically*. By contrast with these stands another set of statements that take a more *playful* form; they are more 'poetic', in Jakobson's sense, relating the story to imagined situations in life in a subjunctive mood.⁵ They involved the 'trying on' of characters by imagining how wonderful or awful it would be to be like them. Following Goffman, we call these forms keyings, the one 'real' and the other 'play'. (It is noteworthy that most of the 'play' utterances come in the first, more open, portion of the group discussion, and decline sharply as the questions become more closed.)

Consider the following examples. The first is a realistic keying, from a Russian group:

Example Three (Russian group 65)

Sima: Pam feels that Bobby neglects her; he's never home.

Misha: It's true, but what can he do? What's a man busy with? To be occupied only with family is not practical; it's not realistic. Either he has to stop worrying about money and tend to his family all

day long, or he has to be busy with something else— that is, with work. In fact, if a man works 12 hours a day, he can't be occupied with his family the way a woman can.

Here is an example of a ludic keying, illustrating how viewers take an idea from the programme and play with it subjunctively in their minds or in interaction with others:

Example Four (American group 07)

Beverly: I think you have to be a scuzzy person to be able to act like that to begin with. I mean, if I had a million dollars (he's talking about 50 million dollars for just a place to store his damn oil), if I had 50 million dollars I would give it to all my friends, all my kids; I wouldn't connive and cheat just to get more.

Don: Give her a hundred bucks and she splits five ways (ha, ha). Twenty to each kid.

The American and kibbutz groups specialize in this kind of ludic keying (though, as we shall see, even they make many more serious than playful statements). Thus, in discussing the almost-collusion between Miss Ellie and her son JR in his diabolical plot to kidnap his son away from his estranged wife, an American woman said, 'If my son robbed a bank, would I drive the getaway car?' The subjunctive and ludic character of this kind of 'trying on of roles' fictionalizes life, almost making the speaker a character in a story.

Example Five (Kibbutz group 84)

Noah: He (Bobby) seems to me the most balanced, the most considerate of the lot.

Yigal: It reminds me of our kibbutz Admissions Committee. Truly, I swear (laughs).

Noah: I'm the Admissions Committee. It's OK.

Dina: In short—you'd accept him.

Noah: He might not achieve what he wants but ... in stages, what's called slowly but surely, he gets there somehow.

Gila: Zehava, what do you think of Bobby?

Yehudit: When her husband is in the army—then she thinks about him ... (laughter).

Zehava: I'll compromise on him too. (To Yehudit) You're disgusting.

The statistical summary of the proportion of the two kinds of keying is presented in Table 2, which makes clear that the Americans and the kibbutzniks engage in ludic keyings more than the others. The Russians, who make critical statements more often than the Americans and kibbutzniks (Table 1), do not distance themselves when it comes to keyings. Their statements about the relationship of the story to life are as serious as those of Moroccans and Arabs. From other data, not presented here, we know they treat the programme more didactically, as if it contained teaching materials, however manipulative. Even when they speak critically, they are more likely to be concerned with the ideological implications of the programme than the other groups.⁶

About Whom: The Referents

More light can be shed on ethnic differences by examining the sociolinguistic patterns in which

TABLE 2
'Real' and 'Play' Keyings in Referential Statements, by Ethnicity
(percentages)

	Americans	Moroccans	Arabs	Russians	Kibbutz
Real keyings	79	87	87	92	75
Play keyings	21	13	13	8	25
No. of referential statements (100%)	(213)	(236)	(147)	(145)	(135)

the subjects of these utterances reside. We classified each statement by referent, or in other words by the pronoun employed by speakers in transferring a story reference to real persons.

The Referent categories divide into 'primary references' to self and family; references to ethnic group and the nation; and 'universal' references—distant from self—to abstract social categories such as 'businessmen' or 'women'. We call these 'I', 'We' and 'They'. As Table 3 shows, the universal 'they' is the dominant referent for all groups, but the Russians far exceed the others in reference to universals: three-fourths of their referential statements are of this more abstract kind. To continue an example (Example Three) referred to earlier.

Example Six: (Russian Group 65)

Marik: Woman was created for the family, and I think that for her, 'child, kitchen and church' as the Germans say, is the most important thing,

Marik: A woman who has a lot of leisure and doesn't use it as is necessary, that is, it's important to find her some specific occupation. I don't mean she has to have a job, but something specific for her.

Misha: Something to fill the free time, otherwise she has a real problem. Why do they write about Princess Diana who also has a tough problem. Her husband is occupied with sport, government affairs, and is very little at home.

Marik: Let's compare her (Sue Ellen) with Princess Diana.

Misha: Same thing.

Marik: I think that, when a woman marries somebody like JR, she ought to know how a man like that occupies himself, what he can give the family and what he can't give the family. That is, can he give time to the family as Sue Ellen imagines?

By contrast, the American and kibbutz groups are lower in 'they' references and high in references to self and family. For example:

Example Seven: (Kibbutz group 81)

Sarah A: The funniest was when they tried to kill him. Her (Sue Ellen's) behaviour was simply.... How could she suddenly...? True, you feel guilty; then you worry about a person, but to suddenly love him

....

Daughter: It was because she was feeling guilty she was afraid.

Sarah A: What, then, because I think I'm guilty I should suddenly sell myself my personality.... In the beginning when what's his name, the father, got a heart attack she looked at the house as if it would be hers and then her mother-in-law said, 'Don't worry, you will not be here.'

Sarah B: But that's how people are.

Sarah A: It's not true. You hated her for this behaviour.... The way she used to despise her sister-in-law.... Now you feel sorry for her.

Amalia: Because she was jealous.

Sarah A: What did she have to be jealous about?

Shaul: If they would have shown the good things about her in the beginning

.....
Sarah A: Then I have to be nasty! I can be jealous inside myself.

Amalia: Situations in life can cause you to be nasty, frustrated.

Aharon: No, no, I don't accept that.

Sarah A: I don't accept it.

Aharon: I believe that if you would be in her situation and were living with someone like JR you might have behaved in the same way. You forget she's living with someone I would not be prepared to live with for one minute and she lives with him. And she was watching all the time him being unfaithful. It isn't *her* who started being unfaithful. It's *him* who did.

Sarah A: No, I don't have to descend to the other person's level. I have to rise above it. Why didn't she run off?

Aharon: Where would she run off to? Did she have anywhere to go ...

Sarah A: To live all this luxury. I would throw everything behind me and become a servant in someone's house in order not to have to live that kind of life.

Aharon: You have not been in such a house yet. Don't say you would throw it all away.

Sarah A: I think so.

Far more than the other groups, the Arabs use 'Arab society' as a frequent reference.

Example Eight: (Arab group 42)

Ravia: Sue Ellen as well — I agree she's rebellious and stubborn. Tries to get revenge against her husband. In all the ways he was unfaithful to her, she's unfaithful to him. In our Arab society it's different. In our society the man will do anything and the woman wouldn't (laughter). Because that's the way we were brought up. It's difficult to change.

Moged: (to Ravia) You think all men in our society are JRs?

Ravia: Almost, yes (laughter).

Moged: A small JR.

Ravia: JR's sons.

Kibbutzniks and Moroccans sometimes invoke Israelis and Jews as referents.

Example Nine (Moroccan group 20)

Yossi: The same story all the time. He (JR) feels himself strong with his money. I can tell you, who in Israel could get away with that?

Elihu: Can I do it?

Machluf: Akiva Nof, the member of Knesset, had a similar story with his wife. The journalists have shaken the whole country with Akiva Nof until now. In Israel he (JR) could not possibly behave in such a way. He and his money. He would be put in prison. He and his money. They would confiscate it.

Table 3 summarizes the distribution of referents by ethnic groups, showing, indeed, that the Americans and kibbutzniks are highest in the use of personal and primary

references ('I'); the Russians are highest in the use of abstract referents ('they'); while the Arabs are the only group to make substantial use of 'we' categories referring to ethnic or national identification.

Comparing these different uses of the referent form suggests that the abstract referents of the Russians ostensibly reiterate the kind of distance from direct personal involvement in the story which we observed in their predilection for the critical over the referential. Here we see that, within the referential, the Russians again choose to distance themselves by alluding to general social categories rather than to themselves. On the other hand, such abstract generalization betrays an almost believing attitude in the 'truth value' of the programme, of the sort we have seen in the Russian use of 'real' keyings. They are less likely to say, 'I have an uncle who is like JR' than to say 'capitalists have to act that way'.

TABLE 3
Referents of Referential Statements, by Ethnicity
(percentages)

	Americans	Moroccans	Arabs	Russians	Kibbutz
Primary ('I') referents	44	24	18	14	38
'We' referents (ethnicity, nation)	2	13	18	10	11
'They' (abstract)	54	63	64	75	51
No. of referential statements (=100%)	(213)	(236)	(147)	(145)	(135)

If abstract categories imply distance, then the Americans and the kibbutzniks may be said to be more involved in the programme because their references are personal. There is room for a counterargument, however. It might be argued that the abstract generalizations of the Russians— 'women belong in the kitchen'— leave no room for distance between story and behaviour, while the personal references of the Americans and kibbutzniks may create distance at least in the sense of leaving room for myriad other possibilities. Thus, it is possible that, by bringing story and themselves closer together in this way, the Americans and kibbutzniks may be distancing the truth value of the story, while the Russians, in their universal truisms, may be bringing it closer.

Even if this counter-argument is correct, however, it should be made clear that it is *our* argument, not theirs. From the speakers' point of view, surely 'they' is more distant than 'I' or 'we'. It is only from the observers' point of view that the question can be raised as to whether this is not simply rigid stereotypization. Since this article deals with referential statements from the viewers' vantage point, we shall rank 'they' as more

distant than 'I' or 'we'. Proceeding on this line, we will also maintain that 'we' is more committed than 'I' because the 'we' invokes a role, a public persona, taking an official stance on behalf of a group, whereas 'I' is lighter, less committed, less consistent.

The Arab groups, we would say, are most engaged. They do not simply analyse the programme, as do the Russian users of 'they', or simply personalize, as do the Americans and the kibbutzniks: they actively argue. They read the programme as a challenge to their own values and experience the need to dissociate themselves. They reassert their own opposing values.⁷

Value Orientations

Continuing this exploration of the rhetoric of the referential, we distinguish between statements that are interpretive without being judgemental (which we call 'value-free') and statements that are both (which we call 'normative'). The latter include interpretation but go on to take a stand in favour or against the behaviour being interpreted. We apply this distinction to all statements that were keyed as 'real'.⁸

Consider an example of an interpretive value-free statement:

Example Ten (American group 04)

Jus: I would imagine that some of those wealthy families are kinda like that; I bet the Kennedys were.

N: No, they went East.

J: I don't think you have to be wealthy to be like that; you can have a stinker in any family.

Jus: Yeh, but look at the old man; he chased Gloria Swanson and all those girls.

J: Who are you talking about? The Kennedys or *Dallas*?

Jus: Kennedys.

W: Fitzgerald, the old man Kennedy.

N: Joseph Kennedy.

Jus: She just asked do you think they are real people.

J: Yes, of course, but I said you don't have to be a powerful, wealthy family to give birth and raise a stinker, a lot like JR or Kennedy.

Jus: That's true.

N: You may not be like that, if you didn't have that money.

J: C'mon.

All groups have far more value-free interpretations than normative utterances. The Arabs, however, differ from the others in their relatively high use of the evaluational:

Example Eleven (Arab group 43)

Anise: Sue Ellen is JR's wife, but Arabs believe that she is a bad woman, she's too free and has gone astray.

Sherifa: A bad woman. Considering the behaviour of her husband, there may be some justification for what she does, but I wouldn't behave that way.

Anise: I think so too. According to our norms, she is forbidden both to drink and to smoke. In the final analysis, I pity her.

An examination of Table 4 makes clear that the Arabs are the only group that makes substantial use of the evaluational orientation. They are more likely than the others to add a 'normative' verdict— approving or condemning, often with some degree of

passion— to their interpretations. The Moroccans, too, may be said to be slightly more normative than the three Western groups.

Patterns of Involvement in Television Fiction

Up to this point, we have analysed four rhetorical forms in which viewers of differing ethnicity couch their statements about *Dallas*. Implicitly, we have been arguing that each of these forms is a measure of involvement in, or 'distance' from, the programme. Let us now make this argument explicit by examining the four rhetorical forms typologically.

Table 5 positions each ethnic group on each of the four dimensions.⁹ It will be recalled, for example, that Americans and kibbutz members tended towards 'play' keyings, while the other three groups tended towards the 'real'. Accordingly, in the 'Keyings' column, Americans and kibbutzniks are labelled B2 ('play'), while the others are labelled B1 ('real') because they take the reality of *Dallas* for granted. Similarly for the other three dimensions of rhetoric. A high proportion of 'we' statements (A1) is considered more involved, while a low proportion is ranked more distant.¹⁰ The 'referential' frame (C1) is more involved than the 'critical' (C2); and the 'normative' orientation (D1) is more involved than the 'value-free' (D2).

The table makes clear that the Arabs and the Americans stand at opposite extremes of this scale of involvement/distance. Thus, the Arabs speak most 'referentially' (C1), hardly using the 'critical' frame at all (see Table 1). They talk 'real' (B1) rather than 'play'

TABLE 4
Value Orientations in Referential Statements, by Ethnicity
(percentages)

	Americans	Moroccans	Arabs	Russians	Kibbutz
Value-free: interpretation	90	85	60	92	90
Normative: inter- pretation and evaluation	10	15	40	8	10
No. of referential statements, 'Real' keyings only (= 100%)	(169)	(204)	(127)	(131)	(102)

(see Table 2). They speak for their group and their culture in the language of 'we' (A1; see Table 3). Their interpretations are also more engaged; they are the only group that speaks 'normative' evaluations (D1; see Table 4).

The Americans and kibbutzniks are most 'distant'. They use the 'critical' or 'meta-linguistic' frame to a high degree (C2); their keyings are 'playful' (B2); their referents are to the less committed 'I' (A2); their value orientations are neutral (D2) rather than normative.

There are a variety of in-between patterns. In a sense, the Russians take even more distance than the Americans in that they use the 'they' referent most and the proportion of their 'critical' statements is highest of any group (see Table 1). On the other hand, they take the programme seriously; they use 'real' keyings (B1) rather than 'play' keyings.

TABLE 5
Patterns of Involvement, by Ethnicity

	A Referent	B Keyings	C Frame	D Value Orientation
Arabs	1	1	1	1
Moroccans	1	1	1	2
Russians	1	1	2	2
Kibbutz	1	2	2	2
Americans	2	2	2	2

Notes

A = referent": A1, more involved: high proportion of 'we'
A2, more distant: high proportion of 'I'

B = keying: B1, more involved: low proportion of 'play' keying
B2, more distant: high proportion of 'play' keying

C = frame: C1, more involved: low proportion of critical statements
C2, more distant: high proportion of critical statements

D = value orientation: D1, more involved: high proportion 'normative'
D2, more distant: low proportion 'normative'

* See rationale for this order, pp. 162-164 and footnote 9.

The Moroccans are also in between, but they are more difficult to position. They are as involved as the Arabs in frame (C) and keyings (B), but they are not as normative (D) as the Arabs.

In sum, measuring the degree of involvement of the five ethnic groups in terms of use of rhetorical forms finds the 'Western' groups with the most complete set of distancing mechanisms, as if they were issued defensive equipment together with the remote control of their television sets. The Americans and the kibbutzniks— nativeborn, and

most 'modern' of the Israelis—address *Dallas* more 'critically', personally and playfully. Although the Russians are even more 'critical', invoking most meta-textual references, they are not so lighthearted about the programme; they seem to take it very seriously, at both the referential and the meta-textual (critical) level. Indeed, we know— from data not presented here— that the Russians use 'normative' criteria not in the referential frame but in the critical frame.

Ironically, the groups whose cultures seem most remote from the culture of *Dallas* seem more involved in the programme. Perhaps traditional culture is not so remote, given its concern with extended family, which is also the locus of political and economic power! Indeed, this is implied in a study of *Dallas* in Algeria (Stolz, 1984). This argument suggests that the programme is more referential for the more traditional groups. More likely, however, is the probability that the Arabs and Moroccans are challenged by the programme to 'defend' themselves, to respond reflexively by examining their own values in the light of what they perceive to be the 'real' but threatening option of 'modernity'.

Conclusions

This article originates in discussions of an episode of the American television series, *Dallas*, by small, quasi-natural groups from four ethnic communities in Israel and matched groups of second-generation Americans.

The article—part of a larger project —examines cultural differences in patterns of talk about the programme, with particular reference to the rhetorical mechanisms by means of which viewers 'involve' or 'distance' themselves from the story as depicted on the screen.

Four such mechanisms are analysed: (1) *framings*, the context to which viewers' statements about the programme are assigned: 'referential' (dealing with real life) and 'critical' (dealing with the story as an artistic construction); (2) *keyings*, the register in which referential statements are made: 'realistic' or 'playful'; (3) *referents*, the real-life object to which some element of the story is connected, defined in terms of the pronouns, 'I', 'we', 'they'; and (4) *value orientations*, the extent to which a 'realistic' statement is purely interpretive or evaluational as well: 'value-free' or 'normative'. The five ethnic communities were compared in terms of each of these rhetorical mechanisms separately, and then an effort was made to discover patterned variations in 'involvement' or 'distance' by scoring the groups in terms of a single, multidimensional scale made up of all four mechanisms.

All this seems to add up as follows. First, most statements, in all groups, are based on perception of the programme as real. That is, there are far more referential than critical (meta-linguistic) statements, and, within the referential, far more keyings to the 'real' (serious, indicative, familiar) than to 'play' (fantasy, subjunctive, hypothetical). Moreover, most statements, in all groups, refer to people in general or general categories of people ('they') and fewer statements are in the 'I' or 'we' form. These statements are interpretive in character—observations and explanations of behavior— without value judgements; evaluational ('normative') statements are far fewer. 'Pragmatic' may be a

good name to describe this overall tendency to the 'real' and the 'value-free'. Overall, then, one may say that discussion of *Dallas*—presuming that we have successfully simulated such discussion—accepts the programme as real and as morally unproblematic in spite of the back-stabbing and corruption which underlie the human relations that are the subject of the referential statements.

Second, the subjects of the statements are similar enough among the ethnic groups to suggest that a programme like *Dallas* may indeed set agendas for thinking and talking, not so much by imposing these subjects, but by evoking primordial concerns and perhaps even by offering opportunities for discussing them. This may be a clue to the world-wide comprehensibility of such programmes and their popularity. Ostensibly, it would seem likely that the social world of *Dallas* would be more readily recognizable in the modern Western societies, where 'immorality pays'. This, however, may be incorrect, both because Western viewers may discount the programme as unreal, and because some of the characteristics of the Ewing family may indeed be more traditional than modern.

Patterned deviations from the dominant pragmatic pattern ('real' and 'value-free') are the concern of this paper. On the one hand, we are interested in use of the 'critical' (meta-linguistic) at the expense of the 'referential' and in use of 'play' keyings at the expense of 'real' keyings. That is, we are interested in identifying those groups, and those situations, in which the viewer distances himself from the reality by using meta-linguistic frames and ludic keyings. On the other hand, we are equally interested in the move from the abstract 'they' and the 'value-free' in the direction of more intimate referents ('I' and 'we') and more evaluative, therefore more emotionally loaded, orientations.

Examining cultural differences in these terms, a third conclusion can be drawn. We find the Arabs at the one extreme that appears to maximize involvement: they talk in referential frames, with real keyings, and make moral judgements about the programme in terms of the opposing norms of their own society ('we'). At the other extreme stand the second-generation Americans who appear to have all of the mechanisms of distancing and discount at hand. They speak 'critically' of genres and production problems; they speak playfully and pragmatically of the real-life implications of the programme for themselves ('I') and each other. The Russians differ from the native Americans and Israelis in generalizing the programme to 'they', but balance this distancing with a belief that the programme is 'real' and, consequently, dangerous.

Fourth, arraying the cultures on the multidimensional scale of 'involvement' or 'distancing', the ostensible conclusion must be that the more 'modern' groups are less involved in the programme, knowing the mechanisms of distancing and discount, while the more traditional groups are more 'involved'. If this is indeed so, as the data strongly suggest, the explanation is easy: the Western groups, certainly the native Americans and kibbutzniks, have been socialized in the genres of television (Hall, 1980), have good reason to question its reality, and know how to relate to it lightheartedly

(Stephenson, 1967), not considering it worthy of moral outrage. (Only the Russians indicate concern for the possibility of ideological manipulation.)

Two caveats need mention here. There is the possibility that the ludic may be no less involving than the real— more distant and more serious— keyings. Once entered, play can be very absorbing, of course, and one's only protection is to remember that it is a game. Some of the ludic interactions we have analysed end in intimate revelations of the real. The other caveat is that the generalizations that follow the referent 'they' may be so all-embracing to those who speak them that the lesser involvement which we attribute to 'they' may be incorrect. If this is the case, the Russians, who specialize in interpreting the 'they' almost as participant observers, may be more enveloped than those who speak of 'I' and 'we'. Both these caveats need to be borne in mind.

Finally, presuming, nevertheless, that we have successfully arrayed the several cultures in terms of their distance from the equation of story and real, we must push harder on the central question of this article and ask whether the mechanisms of distance inoculate against the influence of the programme. The answer appears to be 'yes'. The more traditional groups, lacking the rhetorical mechanisms of defence, seem to be more vulnerable. In the absence of discounting mechanisms, the admission of the agenda of the programme to the most intimate circles —even women are gradually infiltrating the traditionally male audience, sometimes even sitting together—poses a competing paradigm which cannot but shake the system.

But again, we must propose a caveat in that the Western groups lack a *normative* defence. Along with the variety of mechanisms for cognitive discounting of television fiction, the fact is that their moral defences are down. Even in 'play', moral nihilism may have an effect. In the absence of the Arab moral shock, and the Russians' ideological suspiciousness, exposure to a steady stream of programmes, each one of which pushes the boundaries of conventional morality one step further back, may, in the last analysis, make Western audiences as vulnerable as the others.¹¹

These conclusions, we repeat, are based on two sorts of assumptions which must be borne in mind: (1) that we are correct in our decisions about what is 'high' and 'low' involvement; and (2) that the more highly involved are more likely to be affected. Thus, we believe we are correct in assigning 'ludic' and 'they' keyings to low involvement and 'real' and 'well' keyings to high involvement, but we may be wrong.

We also may be wrong in assuming that involvement makes for vulnerability. 'Normative' rebuttals, as we have said, may make Arab viewers *less* vulnerable by virtue of their higher involvement. By the same token, 'ludic' viewers— if they are properly coded as less involved—may be more influenced by virtue of their lowered defences. These are the points at which mass communications research has need of a psychology of drama.

Notes

1. This is a revised version of a paper presented at the International Television Studies Conference; British Film Institute, in London, July 1984. The article is part of a project on cross-cultural diffusion and decoding of US television fiction. Data and analysis are from the doctoral dissertation of Tamar Liebes for the Communications Institute of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1986. The Annenberg School of Communications at the University of Southern California provided funding for the research.

2. The focus group method is widely used in the commercial pre-testing of films, programmes and products by marketing and communications research organizations. It would be very useful to have academic access to these data.

3. Questionnaires were administered to group members following the discussion. It is quite clear from the response that the programme is typically watched in a social setting, and typically talked about afterwards. The protocols of the discussions themselves contain references to conversations about *Dallas* that took place prior to the meetings organized by us. It is safe to say that viewers of *Dallas* discuss the programme and that our constructed groups often coincide with natural groupings of viewers and discussants.

4. The subjects of the referential and critical statements were coded twice: once as abstracted statements, and again as subjects of interaction within the group. We refer to the latter coding in this paper. For details see the PhD dissertation of Tamar Liebes, The Communications Institute, Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

5. These keyings are applicable also to the 'critical' frame. One can speak of genre, for example, seriously or playfully. One of our respondents defined *Dallas*, poetically, as 'Big House on the Prairie', alluding to another popular American soap.

6. The 'messages' perceived by viewers are discussed in Liebes and Katz (1985).

7. This is not quite Hall's (1980) 'oppositional' reading, in that the message is decoded as intended even if disagreement follows.

8. Statements keyed as 'play' are omitted. They may be assumed to be value-free, and their inclusion does not affect the analysis.

9. The columns have been arranged to display the scalar patterns. A more 'logical' order, of course, would show 'Frame' as the first column, since it makes the major distinction between referential and critical.

10. Since the majority of all groups spoke in 'they' statements, we here drop the more universal 'they' and compute the ratio of 'We': 'I'. Thus a high proportion of 'We' will be labelled A1, and a high proportion of 'I' A2.

11. The creator of *Dallas*, David Jacobs, told us that escalating immorality, and proposing its acceptability, is one of the secrets of the success of the series.

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