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INTERACTING WITH "DALLAS": CROSS CULTURAL READINGS OF AMERICAN TV *

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ABSTRACT

Decoding by overseas audiences of the American hit program, "Dallas," shows that viewers use the program as a "forum" to reflect on their identities. They become involved *morally* (comparing "them" and "us"), *playfully* (trying on unfamiliar roles), *ideologically* (searching for manipulative messages), and *aesthetically* (discerning the formulae from which the program is constructed).

La façon dont les auditoires étrangers décodent la populaire série américaine "Dallas" montre que les téléspectateurs s'en servent comme d'un "forum" pour réfléchir sur leurs identités. Ils s'engagent *moralement* (en comparant "eux" et "nous"), *de façon ludique* (en prenant des rôles inhabituels), *idéologiquement* (en décelant des messages manipulateurs) et *esthétiquement* (discernant les formules selon lesquelles le programme est construit).

We know how easily American movies and television programs cross cultural and linguistic frontiers, and we assume blithely that everybody understands them in the same way. We almost never entertain the equally plausible proposition that a product so essentially American as "Dallas" might not be understood at all, let alone in dubbing or subtitles. And it's not enough to argue that the story is so simple-minded or so visual that anybody in the world can readily comprehend it. In fact, the story is *not* understandable without its words, and in some ways—kinship structure, for example—it is quite complex.

Part I of the paper will ask why we know so little of the meanings and messages that overseas viewers find in American television fiction. It points to a growing effort towards an understanding of viewer decodings and reviews studies by critics and researchers of the meaning of "Dallas"—probably the most studied TV program to date. Part II presents findings from our own attempts to do so in a comparative study of the readings of "Dallas."

I.
AMERICAN TELEVISION ABROAD

A number of studies (e.g., Tunstall, 1977; Lent, 1978; Head, 1974; Dorfman and Matelart, 1975) deal with the transfer of the technology, the organizational forms, the ideologies and the programs of Western Broadcasting to the capitals of the new nations of Asia, Africa and South America. Like the others, *Broadcasting in the Third World* (Katz and Wedell, 1977) dwells at some length on the irony of a process whereby television is introduced, in part, to promote culturally authentic self-expression but rather quickly finds itself transmitting what then was called "Kojak,"what today is called "Dallas." The process begins from the moment at which the Prime Minister announces that the great day of the first broadcast is at hand, thanks to the combined efforts of the Treasury, Western technical assistance and local talent; to the realization that most of the promised 4-5 hours of broadcasting per day must be purchased abroad; to the odyssey of the Director of Programs charged with purchasing material that will "open a window on the world;" to the realization that the only programs available to fill the voracious appetite of a television station are mass-produced, long-running American series and serials. At about the time of the study, British broadcasters were beginning to realize that one-off programs or short series of four or five—the pride of British television—could not hope to compete in the export market. The Director of Programs needs as much time to preview a one-off program as to preview the whole of "I Love Lucy." The one-off solves his problem for a single Monday evening; "I Love Lucy" solves his problem forever.

Focusing on the transplantation of ideas and practices at the level of the organization, such studies assumed that the imported programs were well

understood and that their messages were getting through. There was much specula-
tion about the functions and dysfunctions of such programs for political integra-
tion, for economic modernization and for cultural continuity, but only lip service
was paid to the question what meanings viewers find in them. Even when questions
were asked they remained unanswered "What, for example, are the gratifications
derived from viewing 'Ironside' in Bangkok or from listening to American pop
music in Nigeria?" What is understood of 'Peyton Place' or 'Mission Impossible'
in rural areas where electricity has only just arrived?" (Katz and Wedell, 1977,
p.ix). Today, we still know only little about how imported programs are decoded
in the Third World or in Europe. But there is a beginning. Dutch or French readings
of "Dallas" are as interesting as those of Thailand or Nigeria.

In this connection, there is an ironic similarity between Europe of the moment
and the Third World of ten years ago. Confronted with an explosion in the number
of hours of broadcasting as a result both of the deregulation of national broadcast-
ing systems and new media technology, European broadcasting is feverishly
importing American programs. The Italians—at least in the first phase of deregula-
tion—were scrambling to import whatever lurid reruns they could find, the way
Third World nations did when they realized they were committed to very many
more hours than they could produce. The French, on the other hand, more
constrained by an ethic of authenticity, are more resolved to produce for themsel-
ves, but their most famous self-production so far was an intentional imitation of
"Dallas." Based on careful research into the organization, content and audience
reactions to "Dallas," the French have imported not an American program but an
American concept for a program along with the American way of manufacturing
it. (Chaniac and Bianchi, 1989). This is what the Chianciano Television Festival
of 1983 admiringly entitled "Europe Fights Back."

THE VIEWING EXPERIENCE: WHY SO LITTLE IS KNOWN

Why then do we know so little of the phenomenology of viewing programs? A first
answer is that the research available so far is limited—certainly in the Third
World—to the level of institutions and organizations, on the one hand, and simple
audience ratings, on the other. No attention is given to perceived meanings. In the
best case this is because no adequate method and certainly no adequate supply of
funds are available for doing so, and in the worst case, it is because it did not occur
to anybody to ask. Both the best and the worst reasons leave unchallenged the
assumption that the original message of the foreign producers is getting through.

A second reason results from the division of labor in communications research
such that some of us are studying the texts of popular culture paying little attention
to audience, while others are studying audiences as if they were responding not to
programs but projective tests. Exaggerating only slightly, one might venture that

the former ascribe influence to the text without knowing anything about how the audience perceives it, while the latter, more surprisingly, don't care much about the text. One might say that the students of texts believe that the reader role and reader reactions are determined by the text, while the gratificationists believe that the text exits only in the eye of the beholder.

It is important to note that it was not always this way. Forty years ago, or more, the earliest gratifications studies (Herzog, 1941) pointed out the specific messages of particular soap operas. Employing anthropological methods, Warner and Henry (1948), for example, showed that the housewife listeners who followed the daily affairs of "Big Sister," experienced, through identification, a sense of relief in the discovery that it was not only legitimate to spurn a career outside the household, but that one had access to certain kinds of influence in the community just by staying home.

Gradually we are coming full circle. Students of uses and effects are abandoning "vulgar gratificationism" in favor of an awareness that texts are not as open once as they seemed (Blumler, Gurevitch and Katz, 1985). Not every text can serve every function, is the conclusion of students of the audience who are now reconsidering the dictates of the text. In a convergent development, literary theorists have discovered that, in addition to the reader constructed by the text there is a real reader, who may or may not act as instructed. A recent study of a group of romance fiction fans, for example, finds that these readers read the story somewhat differently than the critics, finding consolation in the domestication of the male by the female (Radway, 1984). Coming from a different direction, critical theorists—led by Stuart Hall (1980) and Dave Morley (1980)—are now arguing that the hegemonic message is not uniformly perceived or accepted, but that alternate and oppositional readings exist, both theoretically and empirically. From these several directions, then, there is a conversence on the idea that the study of audience meaning- making is prerequisite to an understanding of the workings of television effects (Liebes, 1989).

A third, and related, reason for our ignorance of the process of decoding is that we have not had an adequate theory of the nature of viewer involvement. Students of television cannot say much about the experience of viewing television texts, about the ways in which one identifies and tries on unfamiliar roles, or tests oneself and one's culture by comparison with the hero or villain and his or her culture, or about how these processes, in turn, affect decodings, gratifications and effects (Hall, 1985). Television theorists such as Gerbner and Gross (1979) focus on the medium as a seamless supertext and regard the viewer as a victim, disconnected from the sensory experience even of his immediate reality, a captive of the deep message of television that the world is a dangerous place. The text, for Gerbner as well as for Ellis (1982), resides in these intermittent reminders of the danger outside and in the gradual erosion of the evidence of one's own senses in

favor of television's testimony about the legitimacy of the social order. One might have hoped for help from cinema theorists who have, by now, become interested in television. But help is not readily forthcoming, partly because cinema theorists extrapolate to viewers' experience on the basis of dogmatic inferences from their own psychoanalytically oriented theories of reading rather than from the study of real readers, and partly because cinema theorists themselves seem more interested in TV as medium than as text. American cinema theorists have also come to see the viewer as the victim of a super-text, constantly teasing and promising but delivering only products for sale (Houston, 1985).

THE STUDY OF DECODING

Less deterministic approaches, however, find more variety both in television messages and viewing experiences. Thus, Newcomb and Hirsch (1984) argue that television provides a reflection of the real issues confronting viewers, inviting them to a kind of a "forum" that resides not in particular programs but in sequences of programs—the "strips," so called—that constitute an evening's viewing. Students of media events—the live broadcasting of historic occasions—are impressed by how wide-awake, indeed how dressed-up, a television audience can be for a special program (Katz and Dayan, 1980). This is also true for other types of programs which seem to rivet the attention of the world, such as "Dallas," for example. We do not argue that this is the case for all programs, but only that there is no use ignoring those that do work. The key word is negotiation; that is, the object is not simply to analyze content in conjunction with audiences but to explore the ways in which they interact. Audiences differ from one another—and from professional students of popular culture—in their experience of the text and their decoding of it.

These ideas not only liberate viewers from deterministic texts (and theories), they also situate them within interpretive communities (Fish, 1980). They suggest that television viewing or the reading of bestsellers may not be primarily an individual experience but something done—before, during or after—together with others. We know that on the morning after "Dallas"—indeed, on the night itself—there is considerable talk about the program and its implications (Katz and Liebes, 1984).

The image of a reader seeking validation for his reading from significant others implies a multi-step flow of communication, carrying not just short-run persuasion, but television-engendered concepts and values that may infiltrate the soul and the culture. This is the way that mass communications theory joins up with theories of self arising from dialogue, such as those of Mead (1934) and Bakhtin (see Newcomb, 1984). One recalls Stephenson's (1967) neglected play theory and Turner's (1977) liminality which argue that mass communication, like

play, is an interlude—a voluntary step outside reality and responsibility into the all-absorbing world of pretending, and into a time and space set aside for this kind of ostensibly nonproductive and typically social activity.

DECODING SOAP OPERA

The study of reader decoding has focused on the only two genres of television whose texts have been of continual interest to researchers, news and family drama. The news, of course, has long been the subject of students of political communications, although it has recently attracted the interest of students of the sociology of rhetoric and narrative structure as well (e.g. Hartley, 1982). The beginning of analysis of daytime family serials dates to the early days of radio (Herzog, 1985; Arnheim, 1944; Warner and Henry, 1948) and has attracted even more attention in the television era (Katzman, 1972; Greenberg, 1981; Cassata et al., 1983; Cantor and Pingree, 1983; Newcomb, 1974; Braudy, 1971; Cavell, 1982; Booth, 1982; Eco, 1985; Allen, 1985), gradually widening the circle to include sociologists, literary scholars, semiologists, film scholars, etc. The fact that television resides in the bosom of the family and that it was for long considered the daytime companion of housewives (lately augmented by others) makes the soap opera an obvious object of fascination for the study of involvement, decoding, gratifications and effects. The recent upsurg of feminism has added further interest inasmuch as these daytime programs are thought to be relevant for, and to provoke, reflection and debate over issues of family roles (Modleski, 1984).

With the expansion of the American daytime serial into prime time and its subsequent export to other countries, the allegation of cultural imperialism was made, and students of international communication also began to take interest. Looking at the soap opera in this new comparative context, scholars took note of the indigenous development of prime-time family stories in many countries (Livingstone, 1987). For all these reason it was natural that the soap opera and the news should become the focus of the new interest in audience decodings, and that "Dallas"—the first family serial to become a worldwide hit—should have stimulated so much research.

Interestingly, critics and academics differ as to whether the serial is a metaphor for the anomie of modernity (Arlen, 1980), or for the traditional structuredness of patriarchy (Swanson, 1982) and of dynasty (Mander, 1983). Newcomb (1982) sees "Dallas" as a modern Western on the border of modernity, reiterating the frontier values of individualism, gambling and duelling in the boardroom of the corporation.

Taking an overview of this research, it can be said to bear on the relative modernity of the "Dallas" story, and its interaction with the relative modernity of the viewers. The well-known work of Ang (1985) suggests that "Dallas"

contributes a sense of meaning—albeit "tragic" meaning—to the anomie of Dutch viewers. The troubles of the soap opera, adds Ang, recalling the study of Herzog (1941), are especially comforting to occupants of the unfortunate social role of modern woman, Herzog (1986), herself, tends to agree, but sees "Dallas" as compensating, or liberating German viewers from repression through identification with the "id " of "Dallas." Hjort (1986) Largely agrees with Herzog, seeing the Danish "Dallas" as permitting escapist expression of love and hate. These studies explain the attraction of the program in terms of the needs of modernity: as an antidote to the absence of structure or an antidote to too much of it, Stolz (1983) argues instead, for the non-modernity of "Dallas." Reporting on Algerian viewers, she finds that the program evokes images of oil-rich sheikhdoms.

II
DECODINGS OF "DALLAS"

Israel is a proverbial "laboratory" of cultural diversity. Its population varies widely from the most urbane Europeans to newly-arrived immigrants from Ethiopia. Israelis see "Dallas" with Arabic and Hebrew subtitles, and are literate, on the whole, in one of these languages. Not many can follow the spoken English of the original. To perform our own cross-cultural study of viewers' decodings of "Dallas," we recorded 55 small group discussions of the program immediately after the viewing of an episode. Participants were recruited from four subcultures living in the Jerusalem area (Arabs, recent Jewish immigrants from Russia, Jews of Moroccan ethnicity, and kibbutz members), and from among non-ethnic Americans in Los Angeles roughly comparable to the Israelis in being less-than-middle-age and less-than-college-educated.[1] Each group consisted of three couples, all of them friends. An initial couple, contacted by us, invited two other couples into their home to view the program. The Israelis saw the program at regular airtime; the Americans—who were two seasons ahead—were shown a videotape recording of the same episode the Israelis saw. An interviewer led the discussion, the first half of which was largely unstructured: participants were asked to re-tell the story and to describe the central characters and their motives. The second half of the discussion focused on more specific issues such as the "reality" of the characters and on the "messages" and "value conflicts" in the program. A brief personal questionnaire on background and viewing habits was also completed by each participant.

In the absence of a more natural method for study of the extent and character of spontaneous discussions of TV programs, we have to make do with a focus-group method (Kaboolian and Gamson, 1983, and Morgan and Spanish, 1984) that *requires* viewers to interpret and discuss. We have no adequate methods—certainly no unobtrusive methods—for the "mass observation" of how people go about incorporating television into their lives. We do not know how to sample thoughts

without provoking them, or how to sample conversations without constructing them.

Each of the 50-plus conversations (approximately ten from each of the five subcultures was transcribed and translated, and subjected to a variety of quantitative and qualitative analyses. The following is a summary of our main conclusions.

1. Understanding the story

All groups understand the story in a way that would be recognizable to each other and to the producers. This means, first of all, that we found nobody who looks only at the pictures of the pretty cars and the pretty people; everybody—even those few who know none of the languages involved—told a coherent story. Moreover, the stories that were told were not ink-blot interpretations; they can be shown to derive directly from the text. A major reason for this comprehensibility can be attributed to the universality of kinship and to the primordial conflicts implicit in kinship relations. The easy and frequent transition from discussing the narrative to discussing "real" social relations is self-evident in our data. Perhaps there are some groups, somewhere, who are reading an altogether different text, but we have no such evidence in our data. In our groups, those who had difficulty comprehending turned to "experts" who gave assistance (Katz and Liebes, 1984) and a similar process has been observed in Pakistan (Ahmed, 1983).

2. Clues to decoding types

One can distinguish among the "codes" invoked by the different ethnic communities in terms that might be called, respectively, sociological, psychological and ideological. Thus, in retelling the episode (Liebes, 1988), the more traditional groups refer to the characters by their kinship roles—that is *sociologically*—by calling them "the younger brother," "the father," "her husband's father," and appraising their performance in the story as if it had relevance for real life according to rules familiar to, or edited by, the viewer. By contrast, the kibbutz members call the characters by name, attributing their actions not to social norms but rather to *psychological* idiosyncracies such as a difficult childhood. Unlike the others, the Americans sometimes call the characters by the names of the actors, and often attribute motivation neither to familial role nor to psychology, but to the state of the contract negotiations between actors and producers. They are certain that Pam is being written out of the story because Victoria Principal is asking for too much money, but it never occurs to them that this, too, may be part of the press agentry that is engaged in controlled leakage of backstage secrets (Goffman, 1974). The Russians are also interested in what happens behind the scenes, but direct their attention not to the actors' names, but to the names of the producers who control them. Thus, "Leonard Katzman" becomes the hero of the Russian retelling of "Dallas."[2]

Refusing both sociological and psychological codes, the Russians specialize in the *ideological*, which makes the story secondary to the manipulative message underlying it. When asked to retell the story, the Russians—alone among the ethnic groups—dismiss narrative, characters and actors in favor of an analysis of how the program is trying to influence (see point #6 below).

3. Referential and critical decodings

Considered from a broader perspective, these various forms of labelling and decoding can be classified in terms of two larger frames which we call "referential" and "critical" (a variant of Jakobson's 1972, "referential" and "metalinguistic"). Here we are following in a tradition of criticism borrowed from literary theory and applied to popular culture by researchers such as Worth and Gross (1974) and Neuman (1982). Referential statements treat the program as applicable to real life, whether social or psychological. Critical statements treat the program as constructions consisting of messages and narrative formulae and. For example, discussing JR *referentially*, M, an American, says that

M: He's always one step ahead. You know he's not doing anything out of
            the ordinary that a man in his position would have to do where he's at.
            He's the head of a corporation ... You either sink or swim. Other people
            in his position would do the same thing. I have an uncle that's the same
            way. He's my uncle, he's my godfather, he's everything; but business
            first.

A kibbutz member, Shaul, makes equally referential allusions:

Shaul: There is truth in these things.

Shlomo: There is, but it's hard to believe.

Shaul: It's the same with us ... Everywhere people live you've got it. All in
            all this is human nature. If you want to succeed in business, in life
            you've got to bribe; there's nothing doing, that's the way it is ...

By contrast, a critical view, from an American, sounds like this:

Greg: When I watch the show sometimes (he was mentioning Cain and Abel
            and everything) when I watch it sometimes, I imagine I'm just about
            watching wrestling team matches or something like that. The bad guys
            keep squashing the good guys and using dirty tricks and every once in
            a while the good guys will resort to the bad guy's tricks and, you know,
            stomp on the bad guys for a while and all the crowd will go yeah, yeah,
            yeah, and then the next week the bad guys are on top again squashing
            the good guys, so it's just like John Wayne all over again.

In all groups, there were more referential statements than critical ones, but the groups differed significantly in this respect. The Russians, Americans and kib-

butzniks made more critical statements. Proportionately, the Arabs and the Moroccans made more referential statements .

In this respect, one of the most revealing points in the discussion is the response to our question, "Why all the fuss about babies?" The more referentially-oriented groups told us that babies are important as heirs, as foci of family integration, as sources of happiness, while the more critically-oriented groups said that babies are good for soap-operas, because they generate the kinds of conflict that keeps the story going.[3]

4. Defining identity by confrontation

Further subdividing the referential, we distinguish among statements that are primarily interpretive and those that take a moral and evaluationed stance vis-a-vis the program. More than two-thirds of all referential statements were interpretive, but the Russian groups were far ahead of the others, as if further to emphasize the "distance" from the program also implied in the high ratio of their critical-to-referential statements. The Arabs, on the other hand, were most evaluational:

Taysir: There aren't close ties in the American family like we have. There's too much freedom; I don't like that. And likewise, a son's respect for his father and mother—there is no respect ...

Jamal: The Americans have good things and bad things. The bad thing is that there is more freedom than we think right; they're too permissive. But what I'm for is the frankness and understanding at all levels and between the sexes.

Note that the evaluation here is not only of behavior in the story, but of analogous (or opposite) behavior in "our group." Although only a small proportion of all references refer explicitly to ethnicity, the Arabs did so most of all, reflecting, perhaps, the salience of their minority status in Israel. But they raise the larger question of identity-references that characterize the other groups as well, whether they identify positively or negatively. "This mediocre soap opera," Stolz writes, "conceived from the start for American audiences has met, brightened and modified an entire collective imagination concerning the family, social success, the place of women, sexuality. It has brought forth a play of images with which the Algerians confront and identify themselves. It has brought forth an enormous task of collective elaboration in order to distinguish that which is 'us' and that which is 'them.' This is the way such programs enter the "forum" of social issues (Newcomb and Hirsch, 1983), and carry over into dialogues with self, with family and in public space.

The Americans and the kibbutz members discuss the relationship between the programs and the more intimate spheres of self, family, good friends. The Russian

statements are about "general social categories"—such as women, businessmen, parents, etc., protecting their privacy and aesthetic superiority by resisting potential allusions to self, primary group or ethnic status. The Moroccans, like the Arabs, also contrast themselves with the Ewings—more as Israelis or Jews than as Moroccans. Consider the following from a Moroccan group:

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?

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.

5. Types of critical decodings

When viewers discuss the program not by allusion to reality but as an aesthetic construction—identifying "Dallas" as a soap-opera for example—we categorize their statements as "critical." These statements take forms which can be called syntactic, semantic and pragmatic. Critical statements of a syntatic form refer to TV formulae and genres, while semantic statements refer to "themes" and "messages" which figure in the story. Pragmatic criticism expresses the viewer's awareness of his experience or his "position" in relation to the program, and/or an awareness of the functions and effects of the program on others.

6. Types of involvement

Our data suggest that involvement in the television story is not a matter of more or less—though it may be that as well—but of several different dimensions, or types, of involvement. Some people become involved in the reality of the story. They do not necessarily believe that the story is real, but their decodings lead them from the story to the reality they know. They take for granted that the story has something to say about reality. They recognize people or situations in the story that are interpreted, or have implications for their own lives. This would apply as much to viewers of traditional background who may find their conventions called into question (Stolz, 1983) as to a modern-day feminist who sees the women of "Dallas" as dominated (Swanson, 1982).

Another form of involvement results from the referential reading of the program as "play" in which characters and situations are linked not so much with the reality of viewers' lives as with the subjective games they play. This may be the closest that television comes to the identification associated with the experience of viewing classic Hollywood films, except that the soap opera experience is much longer-lasting and more socially shared. It is like guessing and gossiping about the people in the mansion across the street. Some permit themselves the

question whether they will ever be that way. Others, even in the traditional groups, recognize the extended family and a JR-type as part of their own cultures, even if the rest is very strange. Thus there are wedges that make identification possible even in the most resistant cultures. Among the playful kibbutz members and Americans, there is less sense of violation of a sacred boundary in imagining oneself JR or JR's girlfriend. Consider Janet, for example, who love-hates JR (possibly more dislike than like), feels she is unlike him, but would wish to be like him:

Janet: Because he's always so vindictive. He's rotten to his brother; He's ...he's ...

Jus: He flaunts his money.

Janet: He's a braggart, be's an egotist, he's a sadist.

Jus: Yep ... oh yeah ...

Janet: He's just a mean individual. I just don't like him. I'd like to see him get it right up the kazoo.

Lil: But he's a good actor.

Jus: And I like his little grin—like he swallowed the canary.

N: He doesn't go roughshod—things happen.

W: I like him swimming in that pool tonight (laughter).

Janet: Yeah, I like him even though he is a stinker. Everybody I think basically likes a strong domineering—even though we may consider ourselves meek—but I think underneath all our meekness lies something in us that would like to come out strong ...

7. The Critical is also involving

It might be supposed that the referential frame permits involvement while the critical frame does not. But our discussion groups suggest otherwise. Critical statements that betray fascination with the construction of the story, or with its primordial and intertextual allusions, seem no less involved. The decoding of a manipulative message—accompanied, as it is, with remarks of danger or disparagement—is highly involving. Indeed, from a psychoanalytic viewpoint, one might guess that the struggle to resist the program and its message may reflect the fear of surrendering to the teasing charms of television (Houston, 1984).

8. Critical abilities of TV viewers

Viewers are surprisingly good at making critical statements about television. This phenomenon not only speaks to the several competing theories of the television experience, but also to the likelihood that viewers' abilities are seriously underestimated by producers, critics and academics. Studies of the critical abilities of audiences are very few, Hilde Himmelweit's (1983) recent paper on the vocabulary of audience criticism being a rare exception. The findings of Neuman (1983) go even further than ours, suggesting, as they do, that lower-educated viewers may be better able to make intelligent statements about their "own" genres than are educated viewers who may view the same programs but have less to say about them. Research needs to take the quality of the viewing experience and the critical abilities of audiences more seriously.

9. Messages

What messages are perceived? What does the program say about America? On the whole, the Israeli groups think the program *is* about America. The American groups, invoke the 'third person effect' (Davison, 1983) believing that *foreign* viewers will think so. They, themselves, reject the idea, except, perhaps, for the oil-rich in Texas, or the Kennedys. The predominant message—that the rich are unhappy—is a familiar one to students of TV drama (e.g., Thomas and Callahan, 1982).[4]

Some groups—most of all, the Russians—not only identify the above message but also label it a conspiracy or manipulation, meaning that they believe that some sort of cultural imperialism is, indeed, at work in the effort to persuade them that the rich are unhappy. Some say it reminds them of Russian propaganda. Michael Schudson (1985) would say that socialist realism and capitalist realism have a lot in common. Other, related messages that viewers identify include "the rich are immoral " and "Americans are immoral." That "Americans are uncultured," judging from "Dallas" and its inhabitants, is a favorite Russian observation. Many of these messages evoke the response "And we are better off."

10. Interpretive communities

We think—but cannot prove—that an important reason for the coherence, and the shared meanings, echoed within and between these groups is that the program is a continual subject of spontaneous discussion. Evidence that this may be so is to be found in allusions by group members to earlier discussions and in replies on the personal questionnaire indicating that the program is both watched in groups and discussed. In her article on "Dallas" in Algeria, Stolz (1983) reports that "Dallas" makes the Algerians talk; the simple citizens, the press, the intellectuals, and even the power elite which in its fashion 'speaks' by authorizing the broadcast. It is

discussed as passionately as the participation of the national soccer team in the World Cup, and certainly more than support for the Palestinians." One aspect of our analysis is devoted to the exchange of information, interpretation and evaluation within the discussion groups (Katz and Liebes, 1986), hoping that these may be like real conversations after all. As a participant says in one of the American groups, "I think a lot of people watch it because everybody is talking about it at work."

The focus group conversations, at any rate, show how certain members brief the others; there seem to be group archivists who update the others on what they have missed, and who correct misinterpretations based on inadequate information. There are also discussions and debates over interpretation, and considerable negotiation over evaluation of the program, both morally and aesthetically. As was said at the outset, such interpretations may generate more than shared meanings; they may be the mechanism through which ideas from the program insinuate themselves into the culture.

11. Primordiality and seriality as clues to popularity

In reflecting on why programs like this are so much talked about—indeed, why they are so popular—two ideas seem paramount. One of these we call "primordiality" and refers to the universal experience of kinship and conflict around issues such as sibling rivalry, primogeniture, beloved-but-barren wives, incestual relations, and the like. Indeed, the prototypes of some of the complications in "Dallas" are evident in classic sources such as Greek drama and the Book of Genesis (Liebes and Katz, 1988).

Another appeal of such programs is their serial structure. The never-ending, always-suspenseful genre of soap opera has been much discussed (Allen,1985; Newcomb, 1974) as has its connection to other literary forms. Eco(1985) goes so far as to suggest that the Greek dramas may have been written in serial form and that many of the episodes are simply missing. The familiarity of the characters in this format, and the sense of their independent existence even when off-the-air, apparently make for an active and creative viewing experience (Booth, 1982) and an impetus to decoding and gossip.

12. On effect

We did not set out to study effects, but it is appropriate, nevertheless, to ask what our data have to say about them. In the first place, recalling that the program provokes referential associations, it is evident that "Dallas" causes viewers to reflect on their lives.[5] Our evidence, and that of others, strongly suggests, in the second place, that "Dallas" provokes talk. We have already alluded to this, and have suggested why we believe that talk naturally follows in the wake of the

program, quite apart from the constructed conversations that we induced. We believe that "interpretive communities" shape what, if anything, of the program will penetrate the culture.

While we cannot offer direct evidence of a long-range sort, it is apparent throughout these focus-group discussions that the program leads to reflexive talk about self and society. We do not know whether the program thus serves as "the site of gender struggle," as it is now fashionable to suggest—even if we have observed husband-wife disputes about the implications of the program for the division of labor within the family —but it is safe to say, at least, that the program enters the "forum" of social issues. A corollary of this effect is that more broadly defined issues from the public sphere of "real" politics are thereby avoided.

What occupies these thoughts and discussions are the primordial questions of kinship and social relations. People everywhere are asking whether "their" problems aren't a lot like "ours," and how they differ. Despite the exterior glamour, "Dallas" raises problems that are not so different from middle-and lower-middle soaps of American and British (and increasingly other national) origin. More than the message—if there is one—this is what occupies the viewers. Of course, this may be part of some grand design to keep people home and to keep their minds on domesticity. Willful or not, a case can be made that depolitization is one of the consequences of television in general, and soap opera in particular.

But we do not wish to avoid the question of cultural imperialism. As we understand it, the hypothesis of cultural imperialism suggests (1) that the program contains a message, (2) that such a message is received, consciously or not, (3) that it is in the hegemonic interest of the multinational power, and (4) that it is in the active disinterest of the receivers. Does the program contain such a message? Maybe. In fact, it may contain the twin messages (Thomas and Callahan, 1982) of beckoning the able to upward mobility, and consoling the unable with the unhappiness at the top.

Is this message perceived? All groups, except the Americans, believe the program contains the message of "consolation," and occasionally there is also mention of the call to mobility and its glamour. More often, however, the mobility message—considering its immoral mode—is rejected as normatively unacceptable. We know that there is some unconscious identification, nevertheless.

Is the message hegemonic? Is it in the interest of the United States or the producers of the program to purvey this message? Is it in the interests of the national ruling elite? If it delays the revolution against elites, perhaps yes. If it fans the flames of revolution—inducing the frustration of relative deprivation, as Stolz (1983) suggests—then the answer is no. Our data surely favor the conclusion that

viewers find consolation in the message that the rich are unhappy, and, in general, feel that they are better off than the characters.

But more important than the message, in our opinion, is the effect of the program on introspection, reflexivity and conversation of the sorts that we have observed. Because of the program, viewers enter into dialogues with the characters and among themselves.

The thrust of our argument is that the program invites involvement in a variety of ways, and that each way may lead to the others. The text is "open" enough to permit involvement and dialogue at the moral level of "them" and "us", at the playful level of trying on different roles, at the ideological level of uncovering hegemonic manipulation, and at the aesthetic level of finding pleasure in disentangling the semantic and syntatic formulae of which the program is constructed.

FOOTNOTES

1. Given the informal and purposive character of the sampling, we cannot claim that these data are representative of the larger groups from which they are drawn. There are, however, certain striking differences among the ethnic groups, when their discussions are subjected to analysis (both quantitative and qualitative). An example of a verbatim group discussion is reported in Liebes (1984), and quantitative data appear in Liebes and Katz (1986). Also see Katz and Liebes (1986) for further qualitative analysis and the methodological appendix to Liebes and Katz (in press). Subsequent to the analysis reported here, groups of Japanese viewers have also been studied (Katz, Liebes, and Iwao, in press).

2. Assigning a particular type of decoding to one or another of the ethnic groups is based, in general, on quantitative differences among the groups in the making of the types of statements that fit the code. In addition, a rank-ordering of the use of the three codes in the retellings by each discussion group was assigned by two independent judges. When we say "the Russians", therefore, we do not mean every Russian in our sample—not even all Russians in Israel, and certainly not all Russians in Russia—but, rather, that such statements are more numerous in the Russian discussion groups than in groups of the other ethnicities

3. Similar comments—using the Worth and Gross categories—are reported by Thomas (cited in Allen, 1983). Thus, a viewer says, "I think Chuck and Tara will stay together for the sake of the baby. Even if it is Phil's child, Chuck has really acted as the father." A critical viewer responds by saying, "Chuck and Tara will stay together because this way there's always room for complications later on."

4. Thomas and Callahan (1980) would say that this message has another side as
    well. It is better stated as "Come join us, if you can: it's very lush where we
    are. But if you can't make it, be consoled in the knowledge that we are very
    unhappy." If this is indeed the message of family drama, Our own analysis
    of "Dallas" suggests that the mobility ladder has a couple of rungs missing.
    The Ewings are a well-entrenched, exclusive elite—a dynasty, or "house" to
    use the term recently revived by Lévi-Strauss (1983)—which, however bour-
    geois, is not open to admission. It has been suggested (Mander, 1984) that
    the Godfather model is better applicable than Horatio Alger.

5. We do not think that our method induced this kind of bias. The Japanese
    discussions—which we have analyzed separately—appear to be the only ones
    where the ratio of referential to critical is reversed—perhaps for the simple
    reason that these viewers were essentially new to the program, "Dallas" having
    failed in Japan.

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