

# Children, Television and the Environment

David John Gauntlett

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The candidate confirms that the work submitted is his own and that appropriate credit  
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## Abstract

This thesis seeks to explore the impact of the increased coverage of environmental issues on television since the late 1980s, on children's awareness and concern about the environment.

The rise of environmental concern and related media coverage is charted, and then research regarding the effects of mass media on behaviour is discussed. Frequent methodological flaws and oversimplistic approaches are seen to limit these studies.

The theoretical approaches of Adorno, Gramsci, and others are then discussed in some detail in an attempt to renegotiate critical theory and cultural studies for the purposes of the thesis. Paradigms of research on children and the media are discussed. It is argued that research, particularly in psychology, has traditionally disenfranchised young people and not recognised their capacities.

Previous research on environmental issues and media audiences is then considered, and interviews with the producers of three key British environmental TV programmes are discussed. It is found that programmes tend to focus on individuals, rather than social structures, as both the causes and potential solutions to environmental problems.

The new research method developed for this study is introduced, and its methodological foundations are discussed. Children aged 7–11 were invited to make their own videos about the environment. (Total of 53 children, from seven Leeds schools, worked in small groups). Observation of this process, and the videos produced, formed the research data. Findings showed that the children were impressively media literate. Most children had environmental concerns, but these were not necessarily as indicated in preliminary interviews. Concerns were generally local and associated with individuals. It is argued that the children's environmental concern was not a product of simple media 'effects', but that their understanding of the issues had been subject to 'hegemonic bending' by programmes which had emphasised individualistic rather than social accounts.

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## 1. Introduction

As Boris Rosing watched a set of geometric patterns flicker upon a primitive cathode ray tube in his Russian laboratory in 1907, he could hardly have imagined what would have become of his broadcasting innovation almost a century later, positioned at the heart of almost every Western home and at the centre of a million debates. Even had his dreams been of fantastic technological expansion, conversely, it is unlikely he would have foreseen that the phase of scientific exuberance would soon be curtailed, and that individuals might presently protest that resources were being squandered in the quest to produce and power yet more examples of such marvellous machinery. Likewise Jean Piaget, when publishing his first contributions to developmental psychology some twenty years later, could not have expected that he would subsequently be blamed for having given birth to a respected tradition of treating children as limited and inadequate.

This unlikely set of historical strands meet at the hub of this thesis, which considers whether the ubiquitous television set has had an impact on children's understanding of environmental issues, and whether research on children and the media would be capable of detecting if it had. Without wishing to prematurely demolish the gentle unfolding of this narrative, the following chapters will show that the tradition of media 'effects' research, and developmental psychology's approach to the study of children, are both severely wanting since they withhold from young people the opportunity to demonstrate their *capacities*. This is overcome in later chapters by use of a new, more ethnographic research method, employed for the first time in this study, in which video production technology is put in the hands of children themselves, that they may demonstrate their media literacy and approach to ecological issues simultaneously, by making a film about the environment. First of all, however, we must establish one of the premises of this study – that young people today have grown up with an unprecedented amount of mass media coverage of environmental issues.

### **The rise of environmental concern**

A considerable growth in public concern about environmental matters, swelling from the mid to late 1980s, has been widely observed. The issue entered the agenda of the mass media at that time with a renewed vigour, and opinion polls, environmental groups and aerosol manufacturers noted a clear swing in favour of 'eco-friendly' values. Unusually for a political issue, a certain amount of

environmental campaigning was targeted at children by those who recognised the concerns which young people might have about the world and its future – and not without reason. As Gro Harlem Brundtland, chairman of the World Commission on Environment and Development, warned in 1987:

‘Most of today’s decision makers will be dead before the planet suffers the full consequences of acid rain, global warming, ozone depletion, widespread desertification, and species loss. Most of today’s young voters will be alive.’ (Quoted in Frisch, 1990, p. ix).

One year later, in a speech to the Royal Society (September 1988), Britain’s then Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, suggested that ‘the efforts of mankind’ may have upset the stability of the world’s systems and atmosphere, and argued that ‘Stable prosperity can be achieved throughout the world provided the environment is nurtured and safeguarded’. She capped this with the unexpected claim that ‘It is we Conservatives who are the true friends of the earth’<sup>1</sup>.

It was around this time that popular environmentalism really began to gather momentum<sup>2</sup>. Membership of environmental organisations soared, with the number of Greenpeace supporters in the UK rising from just 50,000 in 1986 to 280,000 in 1990, and Friends of the Earth’s supporters increasing from only 42,800 in 1987 to 231,200 in 1991<sup>3</sup>. Support for both organisations – in the form of actual donations rather than mere survey responses – therefore increased by around 550 per cent in the space of four years. The annual publication of British official statistics, *Social Trends*, also notes a ‘dramatic increase’ in membership of environmental organisations between 1981 and 1991, with figures for the early 1990s reflecting relative stability, or slight declines, thereafter (*Social Trends*, 1995, p. 189; 1996, p. 191). A content analysis of coverage of Greenpeace and its activities in British newspapers, by Hansen (1993), reinforces this theme, with there being a notable peak around 1989–1990.

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<sup>1</sup> This represented quite an apparent change of heart, then, from Thatcher’s position at the time of the Falklands War. On 14 May 1982, she told reporters, ‘When you’ve spent half your political life dealing with humdrum issues like the environment, it’s exciting to have a real crisis on your hands’ (Harford & Hopkins, 1984, p. 74).

<sup>2</sup> See Porritt & Winner’s *The Coming of the Greens* (1988).

<sup>3</sup> In a little more detail, Greenpeace’s number of supporters (those who gave donations at least annually) in the UK rose from 50,000 in 1986 to 92,000 in 1987, 175,000 in 1989, to 280,000 in 1990. This figure has remained stable since then to 1996 (source: Greenpeace, London). Supporters of Friends of the Earth (defined in the same way) increased from 42,800 in 1987 to 74,400 in 1988; 168,600 in 1989; 226,300 in 1990; to the high point of 231,200 in 1991. The figure fell slightly to 211,400 in 1992 and has since settled around 200,000 (source: Friends of the Earth, London).

European Community surveys of adults in 1986 and 1988 showed an increase in public concern for all of the environmental issues mentioned in the polls (*Social Trends*, 1992, p. 160). Interestingly, these findings reflected a substantially greater level of concern about national and global issues, such as climate change, loss of natural resources, and disposal of industrial waste, than there was about local matters such as rubbish disposal or local air pollution. Surveys of England and Wales, by the Department of the Environment, found increases in concern between 1986 and 1989 regarding almost all of the issues mentioned<sup>4</sup>, with concern about chemicals put into rivers and seas being indicated by 86 per cent of people in 1986, rising to 90 per cent in 1989; about sewage contamination of beaches and bathing water increasing from 78 to 88 per cent; and about oil spills at sea and oil on beaches from 63 to 84 per cent (*Social Trends*, 1990, p. 146). Furthermore, these surveys showed that in 1989, environmental or pollution issues were suggested – unprompted – as being ‘among the most important the government should be dealing with’ by 30 per cent of respondents in 1989, compared to just 8 per cent in 1986 (*ibid*). Most visibly, in the European Elections of May 1989, the Green Party contested every seat in Britain and took 14.9% of the vote – a (short-lived) burst of popularity which seemed to surprise everyone, not least of all the Greens themselves<sup>5</sup>.

Green consumerism – a term only coined in 1988<sup>6</sup> – swept the supermarkets, with manufacturers battling to see which could get the new ‘environmentally friendly’ versions of their products onto the shelves first. Thinly veiling their motives as a deeply-felt concern for the planet, companies were unsurprisingly keen to capture a slice of the potential market for ‘environment-friendly products and services’ estimated by the Confederation of British Industry to be

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<sup>4</sup> The single issue which saw a marginal decline in concern was that regarding radioactive waste, which slipped from 82 per cent in 1986 to 80 per cent in 1989. These levels of concern are obviously very high nevertheless. It is possible that the 1986 figure was increased by greater fears about a nuclear escalation of the cold war (which had warmed considerably by 1989), and the BBC1 repeat of *Edge of Darkness* may have contributed to concerns about this particular issue.

<sup>5</sup> For evidence of this, see any of the media coverage of that election result. Despite polling over two million votes, the British Green Party took no seats in the parliament because Britain was the only country in Europe not to have some form of proportional representation.

<sup>6</sup> See Button, 1990, p. 250. John Elkington & Julia Hailes’s *The Green Consumer Guide* (1988) sold over a quarter of a million copies in less than two years. The same authors quickly followed this with *The Green Consumer’s Supermarket Shopping Guide* (1989), although by that point Friends of the Earth had published Sandy Irvine’s equally swift response, *Beyond Green Consumerism* (1989), which drew attention to the potential for superficially ‘green’ products to be little more than a major new market for industries who could exploit the ‘green consumer’ trend in order to accrue both credibility and profits.

worth £100–£150 billion worldwide (Irvine, 1989). If it is the case, as Peter Hitchcock (1996) has argued, that ‘The exponential interpellation of workers as consumers in the latter part of the twentieth century has been a major motor (if not *the* major motor) of capitalist expansion’ (p. 82), this is perhaps nowhere better illustrated than in the paradox of industries being able to twist ‘green’ concerns into an pretext for selling further products.

Publishers quickly caught onto this wave of interest, and by the summer of 1990 bookshops were prominently displaying books on all aspects of the environment, most particularly those emphasising individual action such as John Javna’s ‘50 Simple Things Kids Can Do To Save The Earth’ (1990), Bernadette Vallely’s ‘1001 Ways To Save The Planet’ (1990), and John Button’s ‘How To Be Green’ (1989). Revising his 1988 directory ‘Green Pages’ for its second edition two years later, Button found it necessary to add ‘nearly a hundred reviews of important books published since the first edition appeared’ (1990, p. 8). The new-found popularity of environmental magazines and books in Britain was matched by a parallel rise in the United States (Friedman, 1991). Surveys of American public opinion also showed environmental concern at an all-time high (Dunlap & Scarce, 1991), and a corresponding increase in opposition to the construction of nuclear power plants (Rosa & Dunlap, 1994).

Studies have also suggested that, whereas concern about environmental issues in the late 1970s and early to mid-1980s was associated primarily with younger, better educated, urban-dwelling liberals, in the 1990s ecological concern can no longer be predicted by socioeconomic and demographic factors (Wall, 1995). In other words, the rise of interest in ‘green’ issues has apparently spread through the population, breaking through the previously quite strong age and class distinctions. Nevertheless, whilst concern has increased generally, young adults remain substantially more concerned about global issues such as depletion of the world’s natural resources and the ozone layer, global warming, and loss of tropical rainforests (*Social Trends*, 1996, p. 190).

This pro-environmental trend was also, of course, reflected in television programmes – particularly those made for children. *Blue Peter* noticeably shifted its attention away from historical stories, human achievement and home-made toys, and launched itself upon a previously rather unexplored range of environmental concerns, which were underlined by the *Blue Peter Green Book* (1990). At the same time, *Newsround* stepped up its green coverage to the level of almost one environmental story every day, which it has maintained since. Other programmes such as *Go Wild!* and *The Really Wild Show* provided further factual material about the environment for children. In addition, fictional series

emerged, such as *Captain Planet and the Planeteers*, *Toxic Crusaders*, and *The Animals of Farthing Wood*, which highlighted the perils of pollution and the value of wildlife, and many other series incorporated environmental elements<sup>7</sup>. Organisations such as Greenpeace have kept abreast of media innovations, from television trends to the internet, using ‘the media tactics of Hitler and Madison Avenue’ in their generally successful campaigns to keep environmental issues in the public eye (Pearce, 1996). These phenomena are discussed in full in chapter six.

Within a few years, however, media coverage of environmental issues had fallen off to a considerable extent, and there have even been a certain number of ‘backlash’ stories, such as those suggesting that recycling is ‘a waste of time’ (Hill, 1996)<sup>8</sup>. Surveys have shown that the public’s concern about the issues is correspondingly on the wane (Linton, 1994; Irwin, 1994) – although there is little reason to believe that the environmental problems themselves have become any less serious. Surveys indicate that between 1989 and 1993, the number of people in England and Wales who were ‘very worried’ about ozone layer depletion fell from 56 per cent to 41 per cent; about global warming from 44 per cent in 1989 to 35 per cent in 1993; and about acid rain from 40 per cent to 31 per cent in the same period (*Social Trends*, 1995, p. 188). However, concern about some issues remained at a similar level, or increased slightly – for example those ‘very worried’ about radioactive waste rose from 58 per cent in 1989 to 60 per cent in 1993, and about the loss of ‘green belt’ land from 27 per cent in 1989, to 35 per cent in 1993. Given this general context, the coverage of

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<sup>7</sup> Hollywood movies also kept more-or-less abreast of the trend, with notable examples including the Starship Enterprise crew time-travelling to avert the extinction of whales in *Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home* (1986). Whales were also triumphantly saved in *Free Willy* (1993) and its sequel (1995) – although environmentalists were quick to observe that the treatment of the whale star in real life was far from satisfactory – and the animated *FernGully: The Last Rainforest* (1992) brought the plight of tropical forests to a reasonably large child audience. Even *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991) was centred around the aversion of a nuclear apocalypse – graphically illustrated in a dream sequence – and the director James Cameron had also shown aliens trying to teach humans the error of their anti-environmental ways in *The Abyss* (1989, a theme made clearer in the extended *Special Edition*, 1993). Environmental elements have shown up in a variety of other places, from Max Shreck’s polluting and energy-grabbing schemes in *Batman Returns* (1992) to the post-global warming Earth of *Waterworld* (1995).

<sup>8</sup> Dave Hill’s cover-story article in *The Observer*, ‘What a Load of Old Rubbish’ (28 July 1996), was presented as if it showed that recycling was more environmentally damaging than the traditional waste disposal methods. Closer inspection of the article shows that recycling only costs more in *economic* terms, however, and indeed Hill eventually reaches the conclusion that a sustainable future would require both more recycling and greater conservation of trees.

environmental issues in children's television programmes – as will be seen in chapter six – has remained relatively strong.

### **Children, environmentalism, and media influence**

With coverage of the environment appearing in children's television and books, popular culture, and in schools, young people could not really have failed to notice the issue. Indeed, research has shown that pre-schoolers as young as three years old respond in eco-friendly ways to simple symbolic tests (Cohen & Horm-Wingerd, 1993). The role of television in fostering this awareness is of obvious interest. As Maurice Roche (1995) has observed, the ecology movement cuts across the national interests which usually define political problems, and involves aspects from the highly particular and local, to the global and universal. There is therefore a need to investigate, if possible, whether television has had greater success in stimulating all or just some of these concerns. However, the amount of research on the impact of mass media environmental material upon the audience has been extremely limited. As will be seen in chapter six, research has generally focused on how environmental lobby and campaign groups have sought to have their messages relayed in news and non-fictional media formats, thereby ignoring large areas of media content and, even more centrally, the people who receive that media.

In addition to its inherent interest, the environment is a pertinent subject for the study of the impact of the mass media upon perceptions of contemporary social issues for two other reasons. Firstly, it is not likely to be a topic which has been negatively influenced by parents – unlike racism, for example. Whilst children may have grown up in homes where ethnic minorities are denigrated on a regular basis, households where the environment is subjected to the same kind of verbal mauling could be expected to be few and far between. Secondly, the environment is a relatively gender-neutral subject. Whilst the caring aspect of environmentalism may be characterised as 'feminine', the subject also relies upon scientific information to account for ecological problems, providing a 'masculine' counterbalance. Whilst ecofeminist writers such as Andrée Collard (1988), Susan Griffin (1984) and Carol Adams (1990) have made disquieting arguments about the masculinist-capitalist domination of nature, we have little reason to fear that this will be embodied by individual primary-age boys. In addition, reviews of the empirical research on gender and environmental concern (Mohai, 1992; Stern, Dietz & Kalof, 1993; Lyons & Breakwell, 1994; Davidson & Freudenburg, 1996) have noted that the relationships tend to be varied, inconsistent, issue-specific, or just nonexistent. Women appear to express

somewhat more concern about local environmental issues than men, but the difference is less pronounced for national or global issues. The surveys suggest that men, on the other hand, are more likely to take political action to protect the environment. These findings seem sufficiently mixed for us to assume that gender is not a primary determinant of environmental concern and related action.

We can also note that environmentalism is distinct from other matters which children may be interested in, such as music, fashion, football or computers, due to its inherent moral dimension. It has the unusual distinction of being a part of popular culture which also furnishes young people with a moral 'high horse'. Judgements about the treatment of the environment are moral judgements, and the impact of this outlook upon children's cultures is worthy of exploration.

### **Something old, something new: fashions in sociology**

Whilst there is a noted sociological tradition of the study of youth subcultures – in particular the music, drug and sport-related interests of adolescent males – there has been a conspicuous lack of research dedicated to the study of the lives of younger children (Brannen & O'Brien, 1995). Developmental psychology has tended to be the dominant sphere for such research, and the discipline has seen the construction of paradigms which, as I shall argue later in this thesis, have not always been of benefit to a full understanding of children. However, research elsewhere has only relatively recently enabled children to emerge as research subjects in their own right, rather than as 'adults in the making' (Halldén, 1994). Such material – the sphere into which my own work falls – seeks to credit children with abilities, rather than enumerate their limitations or the ways in which they fail to meet adult norms; the platform produced by such research is therefore more of a springboard than a straightjacket for its participants.

Aside from its emphasis on new child-centred 'creative methodology', this thesis could appear out of step with the most fashionable approaches to culture available today – and in some ways it is. With its deliberations about the meanings of effects research, its theoretical debate spinning off from a brand of critical theory born over sixty years ago, its obvious affection for *early* cultural studies, as well as a tension drawn between rather homogenised definitions of 'sociology' and 'psychology', and ultimate emphasis on empirical research, the worlds of 1990s cultural studies and postmodernism seem to barely get a look in. To understand this we need to briefly examine a fundamental debate, centred

around two contrasting views of the contemporary social world<sup>9</sup>. One side sees fragmentation in culture and politics, and reads this as evidence of a major historical transformation. The collapse of communist states, and ethnic conflicts such as the war in the former Yugoslavia, are aligned (in this view) with cultural movements in developed Western countries such as the rise of feminism and the politics of identity, then are thrown in with new communications technologies, the internet and the prospect of virtual sex, and bundled together with various aspects of mainstream popular culture such as sampling and Madonna<sup>10</sup>, in a bid to demonstrate that we now live in a postmodern era.

On the other hand there is the view that to find the social world refracting and reflecting upon its own internal differences is nothing new, and whilst both social complications and public sophistication seem to continually escalate, the argument that the present age is somehow an all-new era bears little substance. Furthermore, it can be seen that, as Lemert has put it, 'the postmodern fad plays light and easy with the precious property of modern culture' (1995, p. xxiv),

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<sup>9</sup> This draws upon Charles Lemert's (1995) characterisation of the basic debate, useful because it is sensibly distanced and cautious enough to contrast those who argue in favour of the postmodernist vision, with those who contest the view that it constitutes a fundamental new category. This is a welcome relief from those writers who have become so caught up in this supposed new era that the only arguments they can see are between different conceptions of postmodernism. (Unfortunately Lemert, although sympathetic to those who question the whole idea of postmodernism, labels this latter group the 'modernists', a term too bound up in other meanings to be appropriate in this context).

<sup>10</sup> These are both, of course, decade-old examples which postmodernists have been slow to revise. To play the game, examples for the mid-1990's would include: (i) Oasis releasing music which sounds like The Beatles, whilst The Beatles counter-attack with 'new' singles which sound like Oasis, in 1996; (ii) The ever-increasing complexity in TV drama's manipulation of serious social questions of our time, such as *NYPD Blue* (Fox/C4) portraying one of its two leads as a casual racist whose 'bad guy' status is ambiguous to say the least, *Cracker* (ITV) elaborately dabbling with issues of race and the criminal justice system which hit common assumptions head-on, and *Our Friends in the North* (BBC2) tightly knitting 650 minutes of British post-war housing policy with devastating takes on the miners' strikes, anarchy and party politics, and police and political corruption, all held together with an emotionally involving storyline; (iii) The rise of almost incomprehensibly self-referential TV advertising; and (iv) The increasing visibility of cultural debate itself, with *Late Review* (BBC2) spawning *Bigmouth* (C4) and other imitators to join *Without Walls* (C4) and yet others on television, and in print the late *Modern Review* exploded into the Sunday Times' *Culture* section, joining numerous magazines, which from *The Idler* to *The Face*, and even *Loaded*, could all claim to be a form of popular cultural studies. Finally, the very backlash against postmodernism is no doubt postmodern itself.

This cataloguing of the supposedly 'postmodern' can be interesting, and is fun, and some of it – particularly the popular and widely-disseminated, such as the case of *NYPD Blue*'s treatment of racism – can be seen as culturally significant and worthy of exploration. However, to align such trends in (relatively bourgeois) popular culture with world events such as the conflict in Bosnia is more readily seen as both meaningless and perverse.

with some types of postmodernism ‘flirting’ with differences in a way which produces ‘a debilitating relativism that eliminates all prospects of action and debate on principles of good societies, just legal orders, and emancipatory politics’ (*ibid*). As will become apparent in the chapters which follow, for these and other reasons, it is on the latter side which my own perspective necessarily falls.

### **Structure of the thesis**

Chapters two and three seek to review the mass of literature regarding the impact of the mass media, and find the tradition of ‘effects’ research to be inadequate in numerous respects, from the broadest paradigm assumptions to specific methodological issues. Having found little theoretical basis for a serious consideration of media influence in those studies, chapter four begins a reworking of some established ideas, taking in discussions of Adorno and critical theory, the contribution of cultural studies, and Gramsci’s theory of hegemony. Chapter five focuses on the way in which children’s relationship with the mass media has been studied to date, establishing the need to give young people an opportunity to demonstrate their intelligence and creativity, which research has traditionally buried. Chapter six considers previous studies of media audiences and environmental issues, and then discusses particular television programmes which carry pro-environmental material, making reference to interviews conducted with their producers. Chapter seven introduces the group video-production method used in this study, discussing its methodological foundations and practical benefits. Chapter eight describes the videos produced by groups of children in seven Leeds primary schools, including notes on the processes of their production, whilst chapter nine analyses this data from a number of angles. The conclusion draws together the themes and findings of this particular study, and the thesis more generally, presenting an argument constructed in the space of the *silences* contained in both the media’s environmental coverage, and in previous research on children and television.

## 2. Media ‘effects’ I: Methodological flaws and the violence research

Since it is concerned with the impact of media content on children, this study must necessarily begin with an overview of the research literature into the ‘effects’ of the media – an area which dominated mass communications research for several decades. Public concern about the impact of screen images on individuals, and children in particular – most obviously in relation to dramatic depictions of violence – remains high, and is reflected in statements by politicians of all parties<sup>11</sup>. Nevertheless, the mountainous research effort has signally failed to produce convincing evidence of direct effects of the media upon behaviour, or a coherent theory to explain why these may occur. Moreover, its contribution to our understanding of the place of the mass media in the lives of young people, and how they interpret and use its content, has been – at best – inadequate<sup>12</sup>. Recent reviews of the media ‘effects’ field by Jensen (1996) and Lund (1996) have agreed that the most basic kind of behavioural psychology studies (which occupy part of the discussion below) are now well recognised as characterising a redundant approach. At the same time, however, whilst these reviews claim to see increasing progress and ‘convergence’ in the field, they do little to dispel the contention most obviously suggested by these texts, that communications research has failed to replace the deficient former paradigm with solid, workable theory and practice by which we can explore this still pressing issue.

Whilst these two chapters will elaborate arguments which suggest that the effects paradigm has produced sufficient evidence to confirm its redundancy, it is important to note that these should not be taken to mean that television does not have an *influence* upon the thoughts and perceptions of its viewers. With the medium being consumed by such a large proportion of the Western population at some length on a daily basis – the average UK resident, for example, watching

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<sup>11</sup> For example, Virginia Bottomley, Britain’s Secretary of State for Health, said in May 1996: ‘If you can sell baked beans by showing people pictures of baked beans on television, then you can’t deny that violent material affects people’s behaviour’ (quoted in *The Guardian – Weekend*, 18 May 1996, p. 5).

<sup>12</sup> For a full consideration of a broader range of effects studies, their methods, conclusions and flaws, see *Moving Experiences: Understanding Television’s Influences and Effects* (Gauntlett, 1995a). [This book is a full literature review which was produced within the first 18 months of the three year period within which this thesis was completed].

over three and a half hours per day<sup>13</sup> – it would be startling if television did not *feed into* their attitudes to life and relationships, their opinions and knowledge, and their expectations about the world. Mass media content is however only one of the multitude of influences – from family, peers, friends and colleagues, as well as local and alternative media – which people are likely to encounter every day, and all of which is processed selectively by each individual. A sensitive understanding of how these influences and processes may come together is not even sought by most of the effects studies, as will be shown below.

The subject of screen violence clearly appeals to popular concerns, and is never far from the headlines, with fears about the impact of films such as *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) and *Natural Born Killers* (1994) emerging around the time of each respective theatrical and video release. (An account of these controversies as forms of moral panic is included in Gauntlett, 1995a, pp. 105–114). Since public expressions of concern almost always relate to the effect of such material upon young people, it is worth opening this discussion with a study of the viewing habits and preferences of frequent young offenders in Britain, conducted by Hagell & Newburn (1994). Whilst unable to provide results about effects, the study casts an interesting light upon the assumptions that delinquents are liable to have spent unusual amounts of time in the company of violent media. The research, commissioned by the British Board of Film Classification in association with the BBC, the Broadcasting Standards Council and the Independent Television Commission, involved interviews with 78 juvenile offenders aged between 12 and 18, and a survey of a representative sample of 538 school students in the same age range. The offenders had all been arrested at least three times within one year, and had or were alleged to have committed an average of ten offences in 1992. Most of them (83 per cent) were living at home, and for the minority in custody the questioning was directed at their previous experiences outside; the findings therefore do reflect self-selected habits, rather than those produced in detention.

The study found that the offenders and the schoolchildren had similar tastes, with the top five programmes for both groups being uniformly ‘family’ shows, both sets including *Home and Away*, *The Bill*, *Neighbours* and *EastEnders* (pp. 26–27). However, 16 per cent of male offenders were unable to name a favourite programme. The two groups watched the same amounts of television between 9pm and 11pm, when most of the programmes containing the kind of violence

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<sup>13</sup> This figure is for all people aged four years and over in the United Kingdom, in 1993. Source: *Social Trends* (1995, p. 216). Children aged four to fifteen watched two and three-quarter hours of TV per day on average.

which is complained about are screened, although the offenders were more likely than the schoolchildren to watch after 11pm, when of course rather than necessarily becoming more 'adult' or 'violent', television programming tends to fall back on cheap imports and music shows, plus the old Australian soap *Prisoner Cell Block H* which was the male offenders' fifth favourite programme. The offenders tended to report slightly more television viewing overall, but this was balanced by the larger proportion of offenders who reported watching none at all (such as 14 per cent of offenders at the weekend). Furthermore, the offenders had noticeably less access to television, with over a third having only one television set in the house, compared to just three per cent of the schoolchildren, and less than half having a set in their bedroom, compared to 78 per cent of schoolchildren (pp. 21–22). Therefore the repeated concern that parents 'just don't know' what children have been watching on bedroom TV sets would appear to be less rather than more applicable to the offenders. It should also be noted that the habits and preferences of those who had been convicted of *violent* offences were no different from those of the group as a whole.

Furthermore, the study found that whilst most of the schoolchildren were able to nominate television characters whom they identified with, the offenders were not:

'Thus, for example, they were asked 'If you had the chance to be someone who appears on television, who would you choose to be?'. In the main the offenders either did not or felt they could not answer this question. The offenders felt particularly uncomfortable with this question and appeared to have difficulty in understanding why one might want to be such a person... In several interviews, the offenders had already stated that they watched little television, could not remember their favourite programmes and, consequently, could not think of anyone to be. In these cases, their obvious failure to identify with any television characters seemed to be part of a general lack of engagement with television' (p. 30).

One third of the offenders hardly ever or never hired films on video, and over half rarely or never went to the cinema (pp. 32–33). Of the most common films viewed most recently, the schoolboys' selections were if anything more violent, including *Lethal Weapon 3* and the 18-rated *Universal Soldier*, whilst the top five for male offenders included romances such as *Groundhog Day* and *The Bodyguard* (p. 34). The 'new brutalism' films which had caused alarm in the press were clearly irrelevant to the offenders' lives, with *Reservoir Dogs* and *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer* seen by only one offender each, and *Silence of the Lambs*, *Man Bites Dog* and *Bad Lieutenant* not mentioned at all. This research, then, provides background information which is simply assumed in many other studies, and its findings are just the opposite of what is usually anticipated. Rather than corrupting themselves with non-stop horror videos and

the most violent TV, young offenders had viewing preferences just the same as (and no more violent than) any other young people, but had less access to television sets, video recorders and satellite television, and they rented videos and went to the movies less often. Profiles of the most frequent offenders reflected lives of deprivation rather than depravation, and problems with causes far more complex than television, and indeed nothing to do with it.

### **Weak methodological foundations**

In *The Effects of Mass Communication* (1960), Joseph Klapper made a number of powerful methodological criticisms of previous effects research, and some prescriptions for the future. He noted the shortsightedness of the view of the mass media as a 'necessary and sufficient cause' of audience effects, and recommended that researchers should regard the media more 'as influences, working amid other influences, in a total situation' (p. 5). He also criticised studies which simply counted up instances of portrayals of violence on television, noting that they almost all enumerated instances in television fiction, whilst ignoring portrayals of real violence in news or documentary programmes, without any apparent basis for this distinction. It was observed that these studies implied that more frequent depictions of violence would intensify their effects, without any basis for this assumption (p. 163). Unfortunately, Klapper's prudent reproaches apply just as squarely to many studies produced *since* his 1960 publication. Klapper expressed the hope that researchers would move on from simply counting up instances of violence (or other kinds of depiction) and making assumptions about effects from the offending material alone, and would develop much more sophisticated approaches. However, in the time since Klapper's work appeared, over 35 years ago, significantly improved studies have only occasionally been produced, and as will be seen, some researchers, in common with the popular press and politicians, are still quite happy to 'read off' effects from all kinds of televised fiction. Klapper, then, was over-optimistic about possible research progress, and his dismay at the wealth of inconclusive, contradictory studies providing 'evidence in partial support of every hue of every view' (1960, p. 2), would be just as warranted today.

The great majority of effects research is based on methods and assumptions which are inherited from the natural sciences, and are therefore of questionable applicability to the study of such complex systems as human psychology,

behaviour and social life<sup>14</sup>. The fact that media audiences are comprised of reflexive individuals rather than inert receivers means that the status of researchers' claims about those people is further complicated. As Michael Mulkey (1985) argues, natural scientists are supposed to have privileged and reliable knowledge about particular phenomena, the *objects* of study, which the lay person is not usually in a position to question; however, when transplanted to the realm of social action, 'the object of study, that is, meaningful action/discourse, is not only available to but is actually provided by those social actors to whom the sociologist may try to give practical advice' (p. 14). The lay person in these cases is already aware of their own meanings and responses, and as such can talk back to the researcher with considerable justification. However, whilst effects researchers have relied upon their subjects to be accurate reporters of their own behaviour, they have rarely sought to ask these individuals about their own interpretations and meanings derived from the screen, let alone its relationship to their actions. As will be demonstrated at a number of points below, researchers have often implicitly insulted and patronised the audience, who appear from their texts to be passive and undiscerning, absorbing the televisual spectacle with little thought or understanding, and even less a critical or ironic eye. When viewers do get the opportunity to offer alternative suggestions about television's effects and the causes of behaviour, researchers are faced with the problem of how to explain why these viewers, or indeed the researchers themselves, have been apparently unaffected by the television 'stimulus' – a problem which has generally been side-stepped or ignored altogether. Furthermore, whilst young people are almost always used as subjects in the search for effects, the assumptions that childhood equals dependency (Barker, 1993) and greater susceptibility to televisual influence are rarely reflected upon or accounted for. Indeed, there is a developmental theory implicit in the assumption that children will differ from adults in their responses to television, which is almost never examined (Hodge & Tripp, 1986, p. 73). Effects researchers therefore often seek to confer their work with 'scientific'

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<sup>14</sup> Whilst natural scientists would traditionally expect to be able to observe stable and verifiable effects of one substance or object on another, similarly straightforward predictions about social action obviously cannot be made, although the quest for such simple forecasts seems to underlie many of the studies, even where a more sophisticated view is protested. It can also be argued that the approach of most studies to television programmes and films is to take a correspondingly inappropriate 'scientific' view of what is basically artistic or entertainment material, intended for consumption by conscious audiences rather than content-counting analysts.

status on the one hand, but ignore highly confusing inconsistencies, which we might expect would undermine such claims, on the other.

The integration and connection of television with the rest of social life presents another serious problem for effects research: does the medium present viewers with new attitudes and behaviours, or merely reflect these as they already occur? The world portrayed in television programmes is obviously not entirely separate from the social world inhabited by the audience, and so the desire to measure the influence of television on a particular social problem is almost bound to be frustrated by the embeddedness of the problem within social culture, where it will be fed by many other contributory factors. The search for direct or immediate effects has continued largely by ignoring this problem, and brings with it its own flaws, leading to neglect of other areas such as the less obvious impact of mass media on general consciousness and culture over long periods of time (Philo, 1990).

Guy Cumberbatch (1989a, 1989b) has outlined further important flaws in the dominant approach to 'effects'. First, there is the general assumption that individuals will respond in similar ways when they see the same media, and Cumberbatch emphasises that this criticism draws our attention not simply to the fact that individuals differ in their responses to the media, 'but that the starting point for almost all effects research rests on a set of assumptions [that all people's responses to television will be identical] which are not supported by the facts' (1989a, p. 9; see also Dorr & Kovaric, 1981). Second, researchers frequently state a statistic for the amount of time children apparently spend watching television, to illustrate the sheer quantity of children's viewing and with the implication that this is at the expense of other, more interactive or otherwise 'wholesome' activities. However, the notion of children 'glued to the box' has come under attack in recent years, and it has been found that half of the time the television is on, the audience is doing something else (1989a, p. 9). Third, Cumberbatch asks *why* it is thought that children (or any viewers) will imitate criminal or violent acts simply because they have seen them on the screen. The viewer may learn how to commit certain acts from television (although most people should be able to devise techniques without such help) but lack the desire to enact them; the barrier which stops most of us from committing such acts is more motivational than knowledge-based (1989b, p. 36). One could add that since television most frequently shows police and crime-fighting action as positive and worthy of reward, if the imitation hypothesis had any substance then children would be significantly more likely to imitate that

prosocial behaviour than other genuinely antisocial acts, which are rarely rewarded on screen.

Further to this, Cumberbatch notes that effects research has largely failed to look at psychological processes in any sophisticated manner. Effects are crudely assumed to be likely to occur, without any consideration of why or how they might do so (1989b, p. 49). It is arguable that a theory is not always necessary to explain why findings might appear; however, the particular hypothesis that simply watching television will have consequent or predictable effects on behaviour is sufficiently abstract and without obvious reason, that we can justifiably demand that some explanation should be proposed as to what the particular mechanisms held to cause imitation or other effects might be. The effects studies consistently fail to address this important question. Finally, Cumberbatch draws our attention to the way in which results are filtered and selected before they enter the public realm: psychologists and other researchers have a tendency to only regard studies with 'significant' findings as worthy of consideration, and journals (particularly in the field of psychology) will only publish studies with 'positive' findings (1989b, p. 48). The consequence for effects research is that we cannot know how many studies have found that effects do not occur, let alone the details of such studies. It is therefore possible that a number of studies of good quality have failed to find effects, but as a consequence have not been published, despite being just as valid as studies which do claim to have found significant results. Obviously, it will also follow that researchers will attempt to avoid 'wasting time' by producing studies which do not show effects – a contingency which may help to explain some of the rather desperate measures used to produce 'positive' results, which will be discussed below.

### **Ignoring meanings**

'Effects' researchers all too often fail to define, examine and reflect upon precisely what it is that they are concerned about. The question 'what is the effect on viewers of the violence on television?', for example, is asked as if it were just as clear-cut as any other scientific problem about the response of a liquid to heat, or the role of a component in an electrical circuit. Such an approach completely overlooks the need to define the precise nature of the viewers under consideration, as well as the violence in question – which almost invariably will occur in a particular dramatic situation between particular characters for a particular reason, all of which should be clear to viewers of the text. Hodge & Tripp (1986, p. 2) note that the very term 'effects' is problematic

because these 'effects' of television, if they exist at all, are 'self-evidently not effects of the same kind as that of a bat hitting a ball'. Any effect which may occur could only do so very indirectly, as television merely sends out information which is perceived and interpreted by individuals who are responsible for their actions; television can suggest meanings and values, but the influence of these has to be far removed from the usual definitions of 'cause and effect'.

The terms 'violence' and 'aggression' have been misused and abused in a similar way, but with even greater variety, in many of the studies. Most obvious are the varying definitions of 'aggression' in television content, which may include or omit the depiction of heated conversations or the aggressive treatment of inanimate objects, along with the more widely accepted elements for inclusion such as person-on-person physical assault, in their analysis. Measures of the behaviour of human subjects vary even more widely, as will be discussed below, at times treating questionnaire responses, or actions against dolls and toys, as analogous and identical to physical assault against another person. More subtly pernicious is the way in which many researchers write about 'violence' as if its portrayal in a programme defines that entire programme, regardless of context (Hodge & Tripp, 1986). Many reports classify programmes as 'violent programmes' or 'aggressive programmes'<sup>15</sup>, a highly reductive label to apply to entire shows which contain some scenes where acts of violence are depicted in a particular context, most usually as 'bad' acts committed by the villains, or as justifiable acts perpetrated by the heroes in their attempt to bring the 'baddies' to justice<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>15</sup> For examples of this, see Friedrich & Stein (1975, p. 28); Coates, Pusser & Goodman (1976, p. 138); Johnston & Ettema (1986, p. 144); Rushton (1982); Huesmann, Lagerspetz & Eron (1984, p. 753); and most other effects studies mentioned in this review treat programmes in this way to some extent.

<sup>16</sup> Singer & Singer (1983, p. 211), for example, mention the 'violent programs' which are the focus of their research, and are typical of those considered by others: *The Rockford Files*, the listless detective show; *Quincy*, the series about an overconscientious but hardly violent Chief Coroner; and *Wonder Woman*, *Starsky and Hutch* and *The Incredible Hulk*, all rather 'comic-book' in their outbreaks of violence. All of these are transparently fantasy programmes, most involving humour and a generally moral message. To dissolve such shows to the tag of 'violent programme' is not only unreasonable, it also distorts that which is being reported – suggesting that violence is the only meaningful material provided by the programme – and implicitly castigates those children who prefer to watch such shows. The 1970s *Batman* and *Superman* animations, to take another example, are categorised as 'aggressive cartoons' by Friedrich & Stein (1972, 1975), yet show highly moral heroes strongly opposed to crime and mindless violence, and include some of the most explicit messages to be found on TV that the law is right and should be respected. The implication that those who enjoy these cartoons are mere violence addicts with dubious moral integrity, and that the content of the cartoons is inimical to dominant social values, is wholly

In addition, a carefully-designed and detailed three-year study of over 350 children in the Netherlands, which recorded viewing of both violent and prosocial television content, found a very high correlation between the two – in other words, children who saw a great amount of violence also saw a great amount of prosocial behaviour (Wiegman, Kuttschreuter & Baarda, 1992). There were no children who only watched predominantly violent television, which would have been difficult in any case since a content analysis (of all drama serials being transmitted in the country over the three years) showed that programmes rarely contained violent acts without prosocial ones, and vice versa (p. 152, 159). Other studies, in contrast, have tended to assume that ‘violent programmes’ are both distinct and common on television, and this recurrent flaw in the analysis and categorisation of programme content is one with serious repercussions for almost all studies of the effect of ‘violent’ or ‘prosocial’ content, but one which is ignored by most reviewers of this area. The common treatment of television entertainment programmes displays not merely a lack of sympathy for the programmes, but a fundamental lack of understanding. It is this misunderstanding which leads, for example, to programmes being divided separately into those with ‘prosocial’ and those with ‘antisocial’ content. More surprisingly, even reviewers of the literature have failed to criticise this specious categorisation of programmes (see, for example, Sprafkin & Rubinstein, 1979, and Gunter & McAleer, 1990, pp. 100–101). I would argue that programmes which could reasonably be called an ‘antisocial programme’ are very rarely shown on television. As mentioned above, some parts of scenes may include the portrayal of antisocial actions, but the context of the programme will very rarely celebrate such actions; the exceptions to this will generally be where the (abstractly) ‘antisocial’ acts are a means to a ‘good’, prosocial end, where their portrayal cannot be seen as promoting ‘antisocial’ goals or actions in any case.

The idea that programmes can be sorted into ‘antisocial’ and ‘prosocial’ categories fails to recognise that such acts do not feature in distinct and separate types of programme. In fact, it is often those dramatic programmes with more ‘antisocial’ content – for example, with a murderer on the loose – which will also contain the stronger moral condemnation of such acts, and an emphasis on law and order. ‘Antisocial’ acts with no point, no moral justification, are almost *never* portrayed as good, or their perpetrators left unpunished. This is clearly

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misplaced. Research has shown that viewers’ perception of a programme as violent is not dependent on the actual number of violent incidents portrayed, and cartoons in particular, whilst scoring very high on researchers’ content analyses for violence, are not regarded as particularly violent by the audience (Gunter, 1987, p. 50).

shown by Belson (1978), whose study involved a sample of 139 television series from 1970–1971 being assessed and categorised by 74 independent judges, who were all school teachers. Only *one* of the 139 titles was found to fall into the category ‘A fictional programme in which the violence tends to go unpunished’ (p. 108). It can be noted, in addition, that this series, *Callan* (1967–72), was also categorised as ‘A programme intended for adults’. There is no evidence to suggest that audiences in general would favour portrayals of unjustified and unpunished violence, and critics who infer that broadcasters transmit a diet of amorality which the audience is happy to consume, display a pessimistic view of humanity which is not supported by research.

‘Violence’, like any other content category from ‘swearing’ to ‘stereotyping’, is not one clear-cut thing which is either present or not present in particular television programmes (Morrison, 1993); there is not simply ‘violence’ on television, but rather ways of showing violent encounters (Barker, 1993), which can cover an enormous range of possible acts and their associated meanings, intentions and motives. The view of many researchers that violence on television is something which can be simply counted up – an assumption shared by the popular press – has been of little help to the progress of meaningful research. As David Buckingham (1993, p. 12) has commented, ‘By isolating “violence” from other aspects of television, and “aggression” from other aspects of social life, researchers have effectively failed to explain either phenomenon’.

## **Television and violence**

The numerous studies which seek to find whether depictions of violence on screen lead to greater real-life aggressivity in viewers are considered in this section. The studies are grouped by their type of method used, from the least naturalistic, laboratory experiments, through ones of varyingly greater sophistication, to those which are most grounded in unmanipulated everyday experience, longitudinal panel studies.

### **Laboratory experiments**

The innumerable laboratory experiments which have been conducted in this area have, on their own terms, frequently produced positive results (see, for example, Bandura, Ross & Ross, 1963; Bandura, 1965; Berkowitz, 1962, 1965;

Donnerstein & Berkowitz, 1981)<sup>17</sup>. However, the serious doubt which has been cast on the status of such results is by now well-known. The details of the experiments themselves are reviewed elsewhere (for example, Andison, 1977; Freedman, 1986), and do tend to show that violent films shown in the laboratory increase aggressive responses in the laboratory, although there can be necessary preconditions, such as that the subjects should be first angered or frustrated (as in studies by Berkowitz, Geen and colleagues, 1966–1973). The problems with these non-naturalistic studies, however, are sufficient for us to consider the findings of such research irrelevant to the question of whether effects occur in natural settings, as a consequence of people watching television in their homes (or, say, films at the cinema). The main flaws are as follows.

First, aggression is generally measured through observation of actions which are only surrogates for genuine violence, such as the aggression towards an inflatable plastic ‘Bobo’ doll in the studies by Bandura and colleagues. Such behaviour is clearly quite removed from the sort of violence which the public and broadcasters are generally concerned about (Milavsky, Kessler, Stipp & Rubens, 1982a, p. 2), and actions directed at toy-like inanimate objects can hardly be equated with social behaviour; indeed, research has tended to support the opposite view, that children will express to inanimate objects feelings which they would never display to people (Cumberbatch, 1989b, pp. 35–36).

The second problem is that of experimenter expectation or demand. If a researcher shows the experimental group of children a film of someone attacking a Bobo doll, without critical comment, and then leads them to the room just shown in the film, containing an identical Bobo doll, the expectation of what the children should do next could not be clearer. The sequence of events could seem to suggest that aggressive responses are acceptable, or even desirable (Freedman, 1986, p. 373). As Noble (1975) memorably comments:

‘the very young child is usually anxious to please the experimenter and does what he [or she] expects the experimenter wants him [or her] to do – one four-year-old girl was heard to say on her *first* visit to a Bandura-like laboratory, “look, Mummy there’s the doll we have to hit”’ (pp. 133–4).

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<sup>17</sup> In the laboratory experiment, subjects are randomly divided into two comparable groups, and in a specially prepared setting, one (experimental) group is exposed to a particular treatment, whilst the other (control) group receives a similar but different treatment, or no treatment at all, and then observations of the subjects’ subsequent actions or behaviour are made. Differences in these responses are presumed to be attributable to the effects of the treatment given to one group and not the other.

Subjects who are treated to the quite bizarre and unusual experiences common to laboratory experiments are likely to realise that *something* is 'going on', and although the researchers should be well aware of the possible effect of experimenter demand, their methods show a surprising ignorance or indifference to it (as discussed by Howitt, 1989). Studies have demonstrated that subjects will increase or limit their displays of aggression in the laboratory as a direct consequence of the appearance and sex of their observer (Borden, 1975). This has obvious implications for all of the laboratory experiments into television violence effects, since a researcher who exposes children to films showing violence or aggression, without criticism or comment, would be likely to appear in favour of such aggression, thereby making the children feel less inhibited and more disposed to aggressive acts; and this factor alone could account for the differences between control and experimental groups in the studies. On the basis of such arguments, Freedman (1986, p. 373) suggests that a major reason why laboratory experiments find larger effects than field studies is simply the relative absence of experimenter demand in the field studies.

Third, for many of the studies there is the artificiality of the specially-made films shown to subjects, and their direct connection to the situations which the children are placed in afterwards. The screened material is often not regular TV or even cinema fare (Milavsky, Kessler, Stipp & Rubens, 1982a, p. 2), but unique scenes filmed by the experimenters, with no context or narrative, and often in the setting in which the children themselves will soon be placed<sup>18</sup>.

All of these factors make the experimental situation highly unusual, and quite separate from viewing as it occurs in natural settings. Such studies only measure very short-term effects, and direct imitation, providing little evidence that the results can be generalised across different situations and over time (Friedrich & Stein, 1975, p. 28). Furthermore, Jonathan Freedman (1986), from a detailed examination of the results of many laboratory experiments, observes that their findings have been less consistently positive than is often assumed, and not only because those studies which have not achieved such results are less likely to be published. Some experiments have found that children only produce aggressive

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<sup>18</sup> Although Friedrich-Cofer & Huston (1986, p. 364), in their defence of the laboratory experimental method, draw attention to some studies where real television programmes or films were used, even these are generally edited, or simply violent excerpts, and so the effect may not be the same as that of viewing full programmes. This point is demonstrated in a study by Zillmann, Johnson & Hanrahan (1973, reported in Comstock, 1981, p. 131), which found that mildly provoked college-age experimental subjects were less aggressive to a tormentor after seeing a violent portrayal with a happy ending, than after seeing the same portrayal without such a resolution.

responses in cases where they have been previously angered or frustrated (for example, where the children were briefly allowed to play with attractive toys, but then the toys were taken away). Experimenters have tended to ignore or gloss over the confusing and inexplicable inconsistency between these studies, and those which found aggression could be produced without prior anger or frustration. As Freedman observes,

‘Ordinarily to be confident of a phenomenon we require either that we obtain consistent results, or that we can explain the lack of consistency on methodological or theoretical grounds’ (p. 373).

Other experiments which have included measures to detect possible effects other than just imitated aggression, confuse the issue even more. A study by Mueller, Donnerstein & Hallam (1983), for example, found that subjects who were treated kindly and then shown a violent film subsequently acted in a more *prosocial* manner than subjects in any other condition. Whilst this result cannot be taken as proof that television violence promotes prosocial actions, it does demonstrate the complexity of its relationship to behaviour (Freedman, 1986, pp. 372–373). The result suggests an arousal effect, and implies that almost any response can be engineered in the laboratory as an ‘effect’ of screened violence, a possibility which would negate the experimental findings of a link between televised violence and aggressive behaviour. Further support for this hypothesis is provided by Tannenbaum’s studies (1971, 1975, cited in Cumberbatch, 1989b, p. 38), which suggest that all kinds of results can be found when a study looks for them: humorous films produced more subsequent aggression than did control films, whilst violent films increased humorous responses to humorous material shown to subjects afterwards, and non-aggressive erotic films increased subsequent rewarding behaviour. This assortment of findings suggests that the arousal produced by watching television may be a more salient ‘effect’ than any of the more specific ‘effects’ which are ‘found’ by tests which, by their design, are incapable of revealing any potential effect other than the one which they seek to measure. As Freedman (1988) argues, any evidence that effects are due to arousal represents a significant alternative to the usual account of the apparent laboratory effects of violent programmes, which are couched in terms of social learning or imitation – that the viewer learns or copies aggressive actions. The possibility that the recorded short-term laboratory effects may be due to arousal is important, since it suggests that *any* exciting programme would have the same effect (Freedman, 1988, p. 147), and the differences in experimental results may derive simply from the difference in arousal of those children who have just watched exciting scenes, compared to those who have watched the bland control film. Whilst this line of argument suggests that television can have a direct effect

on viewers in the laboratory, the potential effect would be produced by *any* programme containing material which excited or interested the viewer.

Furthermore, Cook, Kendzierski & Thomas (1983) make some important observations on the very nature of experiments. They note that whilst aggression in real life is a relatively rare event, laboratory experiments have to produce it to discriminate between the outcomes of different treatments. Therefore experiments are designed:

‘(a) to minimise internal inhibitions against aggression, (b) to minimise external cues [censuring] aggression, and (c) to maximise the clarity and intensity of short-term experimental treatments that have been deliberately chosen because they are likely to foster aggression’ (p. 180).

Although arguably necessary to produce measurable results, such a situation is quite the opposite of that found in the natural setting of home television viewing, where children are generally likely to feel more inhibited, and are more liable to be chastised for aggressive outbursts. In addition, the maliciously aggressive characters seen on television at home, unlike those in the specially prepared laboratory films, would most usually be shown to be punished by ‘hero’ characters with prosocial qualities which would themselves presumably be worthy of emulation, although few commentators seem to recognise this. In ‘controlling out’ all of the conflicting factors which may influence or discourage the aggressive response in natural settings, laboratory experiments effectively destroy their own claim to tell us anything about the relationship between television and behaviour in those normal settings. Friedrich-Cofer and Huston (1986), in an attempt to defend the method, state that the laboratory setting may enhance or decrease the effect of television violence, implying that the reported effects are probably about right. However, as Freedman (1986, p. 373) notes:

‘This view is contradicted by the research on many issues other than television violence, which shows that effects are typically greatly magnified in the laboratory. For example, decades of research showed that although it was easy to produce attitude change in the laboratory, it was exceedingly difficult to produce an equivalent change in natural settings... In addition, as difficult as it is to affect attitudes outside the laboratory, it is generally acknowledged that it is far more difficult to affect behavior.’

The laboratory setting, then, is unlikely to produce convincing results which are generalizable to the world outside of the laboratory, and the method is crippled by its flaws and assumptions. The removal of as many external variables as possible creates a rarefied situation which is as clearly distinct from ‘real life’ for the subjects taking part as it is for readers of the studies produced, and which cannot therefore be relied upon to inform us about effects as they may occur in the real world.

## Field experiments

Field experiments have the virtue of not removing their subjects to unfamiliar locations, although the settings used in some cases are not representative of most natural viewing situations, and the implementation of an experimental method immediately makes the study non-naturalistic. These experiments (reviewed in greater detail by Cook, Kendzierski & Thomas, 1983, and Freedman, 1984), often conducted by means of controlling the viewing diet of different experimental and control groups in residential schools, cannot boast the internally consistent 'positive' results found by many laboratory studies. An early study by Feshbach & Singer (1971), which randomly assigned 625 boys living in seven residential schools to watch either 'violent' or non-violent television programmes for six weeks, was originally believed to suggest a 'catharsis' finding, since some of the boys who watched non-violent programmes were observed to be more aggressive in social relations with their peers, whilst the behaviour of those watching violent programmes was unaffected. However, whilst some commentators have found this finding plausible (Noble, 1975), it has been strongly argued more recently that the result was due to the fact that many boys in the groups confined to 'non-violent' programmes were thereby denied access to their favourite programmes, and that it was the frustration caused by this which led to the increase in aggression (Milavsky *et al*, 1982a, p. 4; Freedman, 1984, p. 230); followers of *Batman*, for example, were particularly annoyed, to the extent that the experimenters were eventually forced to allow them to watch it. The same general result was found in a replication of the study by Wells (1973, cited in Milavsky *et al*, 1982a), and in a similar but smaller study by Sawin (1990). Sawin suggests that in his study, boredom with the programmes which were not categorised as 'violent' induced the aggressive activity, although we cannot, of course, presume that it was the lack of violence *per se* that made those programmes less interesting. Whilst it cannot be assumed that the behaviour of the experimental and control groups in these studies was a direct product of the content of their television viewing within the experimental period, then, Feshbach's reasonably large-scale study nevertheless clearly showed that the groups shown a diet of violent programmes over six weeks were not affected. It also demonstrated that the interference and deprivation of regular habits which any field experiment must involve, produces 'side effects' which distort and invalidate the results.

Subsequent studies have only provided results which are inconsistent, weak or questionable. Experiments by Leyens, Parke, Camino & Berkowitz (1975), and Parke, Berkowitz, Leyens, West & Sebastian (1977), although seriously flawed

in their analyses since they treat boys living together in residential buildings as independent subjects (Freedman, 1984, p. 230), and unrepresentative of the general population in their sampling since they use delinquent boys in reform school (Dorr, 1986, p. 74), found some increases in aggression for some instances of the boys watching 'violent' programmes, but not others. Friedrich & Stein (1973) used all of the children in a summer nursery school as their subjects, who were divided into three groups shown 'aggressive', 'prosocial' or neutral television programmes over twelve days (one film per day). No effects on any of the four measures of aggressive behaviour were found. The authors of this study seek to emphasise some weak effects of violent films on initially more aggressive children whose aggression declined less after viewing, than those in the other conditions, although this 'finding' only appeared when *verbal* 'aggression' was combined with the measures of physical violence (Freedman, 1984, p. 232), and in any case does not suggest any increase in aggression following the viewing of violent films. Furthermore, a reanalysis of the data by Armor (cited in Kaplan & Singer, 1976, p. 59) found a greater post-treatment increase in aggression amongst those who had seen the *prosocial* programmes, a result which itself is small and of little consequence due to its contrived experimental origins, but which certainly emphasises the point that the original conclusions drawn from the data are partial and problematic.

Such field experiments are obviously subject to criticisms similar to those made of laboratory experiments. The situations are unnatural, even if the settings are normal for the subjects involved, who themselves may not represent the general population in the case of the studies conducted in institutional schools or children's homes. The experimental conditions are clearly different from normal experience, and may lead to frustration as well as the inevitable knowledge of being studied and the consequent possibility of experimenter demand effects. In any case, whilst getting a little closer to the real world, not one field experiment has found a clear, consistent significant effect (Freedman, 1986, p. 375), and the weak, inconsistent or null findings provided by the studies do not therefore provide convincing evidence for the causal effects hypothesis (Kaplan & Singer, 1976; Cook, Kendzierski & Thomas, 1983; Freedman, 1984).

### **Natural or 'found' experiments**

Unlike the other types of experiment, these studies have a sound methodological basis, since the method involves looking retrospectively at circumstances which have in some way created their own natural experimental and control groups – specifically, in these cases, where people in comparable areas or times have for

some reason had markedly different access to television, or violent television. This method is the only one where the 'subjects' are in wholly natural circumstances at all times, since the retrospective 'experiment', by using only historical data collected originally for other purposes, does not interfere with or touch their lives in any way (see Phillips, 1986).

The outstanding study of this type is by Hennigan, Del Rosario, Heath, Cook, Wharton & Calder (1982). The authors took advantage of the fact that there was a 'freeze' on new broadcasting licences in the United States between late 1949 and mid-1952. Some communities had television before the freeze ('prefreeze'), whilst others had to wait until it was lifted ('postfreeze'). The study was based on the hypothesis that if the introduction of television caused an increase in crime, the level of crime in the prefreeze communities should have increased in comparison to the postfreeze communities shortly after they began to receive TV, and then a few years later the postfreeze communities should have shown a relative increase in crime compared to the communities already receiving TV, when the freeze was lifted (Hennigan *et al*, p. 464). Years in which at least 50 per cent of households in a sample of communities had TV sets were selected for comparison (1951 for prefreeze cities and states, 1955 for postfreeze cities and 1956 for postfreeze states), as well as one year on from each, when approximately 65 per cent or more of households had TV sets. Although not strictly randomly assigned, the authors made efforts to ensure that the cities and states were otherwise comparable; and content analyses of television from the time show that crime and violence were frequently portrayed. We should note, of course, that television at this time was in its infancy, and that there was a dominant cinema culture in cities with and without television; nevertheless, the introduction of varied television programming available at home each evening would have constituted a significant disjuncture with the cinema experience, and this research meets the concerns expressed about the impact of a TV diet.

The study found no consistent evidence of an increase in violent crime due to the introduction of television in the years tested. There was no effect on murder, aggravated assault, burglary or auto theft. The only effect found was an increase in larceny following the introduction of television<sup>19</sup>. The authors note that whilst violent crime appeared commonly on television dramas, larceny and other instrumental crimes are shown very rarely, and so an imitation effect is highly unlikely. Rather, the increase in petty theft is attributed to relative deprivation

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<sup>19</sup> Larceny theft is property theft which is not forcible or violent. It excludes burglary (breaking and entering), and includes theft of bicycles, car accessories, shoplifting and pickpocketing.

felt by viewers who envied the wealthy characters portrayed in television programmes and advertising. To support this claim, the authors cite research by Head (1954) whose analysis of television network dramas shown in 1952 showed that 85 per cent of the characters were from the middle and upper socio-economic classes, whilst the lower classes (who were the heaviest viewers) were rarely portrayed in a positive light (Hennigan *et al*, 1982, p. 474). However, even this assertion of a less serious effect due to relative deprivation is speculative, and is not a conclusion which can be drawn directly from the data.

This important and rigorous study, then, examined the effects of a whole diet of television programmes, as voluntarily watched in natural settings by whole cities and states of viewers in all their variety, and found no effect on aggressive crimes as recorded in official FBI figures. There is absolutely no reason to suspect that these figures would not have reflected even a mild increase in violent crime, but such an increase in the type of crime most frequently depicted on television did not occur.

Milavsky (1988) conducted a very simple, but basically similar study, by examining United States violent crime rates in comparison to the rise in availability and popularity of videotape rental. He notes that the massive expansion of home video in the early 1980s, and consequent wide availability of horror and action films on videotape with content far more explicitly violent than average TV fare, should have led to a rise in violent crimes if these videos have the effects which critics have claimed. The finding, however, is that whilst crime rates were still high, they actually decreased since 1980, when the new media had not been widely available. Milavsky cites figures which show significant declines in homicide and aggravated assault from 1980 to 1985, and notes that rates for rape have fluctuated, but show a clear downward trend (p. 167). The use of official statistics, of course, has many problems, such as whether, why and how crimes are reported, how they find their way into the statistics, and the effect of changes in crime categorisation. Nevertheless, if the availability of more graphic and violent videos had the effect on behaviour which critics claim, we would certainly expect to see some increase in these figures, which is not there.

A study by Steven Messner (1986) made use of the fact that the television programme ratings produced by the American company Nielsen are aggregated on the basis of 'Designated Market Areas' (DMAs), geographical units comprised of the counties served by local television stations. To judge how much 'violent' television was watched in each area, the audience sizes for the five most 'violent' regular, prime-time series, as judged by the content analyses of the National Coalition on Television Violence, were used as a measure. These

levels of 'violent' television viewing were compared with the levels of violent crime in smaller areas within the DMAs, known as 'Standard Metropolitan Statistical Areas' (SMSAs), measured by the FBI rates of such crimes reported to the police. Statistical analysis of this data showed, to Messner's evident surprise, that the amount of viewing of the more violent television programmes was significantly related to violent crime rates in an *inverse* direction: the areas with the larger audiences for these 'violent' series were those with the lower violent crime rates. At the same time, other factors such as the level of economic inequality, and the population size in each area, were positively and significantly related to the violent crime rate. More sophisticated analyses, and an analysis which looked for an effect only amongst the supposedly 'high risk' group of males aged 18 to 34, found the same results.

It is not so difficult to account for these findings when we note that whilst the NCTV figures for violent content of prime-time series appear to be reliable, the violence viewing scale is based on ratings for programmes which are nevertheless popular entertainment shows, aimed at family and child audiences: *The Dukes of Hazzard*, *The Incredible Hulk*, *Enos*, *Fantasy Island* and *Hart to Hart*. For example, in the early 1980s, *The Dukes of Hazzard* and *The Incredible Hulk* were shown in Saturday teatime slots, and *Hart To Hart* in the early evening, on British terrestrial television. In one way, therefore, this study is disappointing since its sample of 'violent' programmes is actually a group of programmes which adults, especially the males aged 18 to 34, might be likely to find rather tame and childish. Looked at from this perspective, it is unfortunate that the study did not focus, for example, on the effects of the more genuinely violent content of feature films shown later in the evening. However, it is important to note that American prime-time action-adventure or drama programmes of this kind, with relatively higher levels of violent content, are often the target of criticism for their supposed effect on viewers. In addition, Messner reports a strong correlation between his viewing of violent programmes measure and exposure to television more generally (1986, p. 228), increasing the likelihood of such viewers having seen other potentially more violent programmes and feature films. Messner's study consequently demonstrates that whilst other sociological factors do appear to contribute to the levels of reported violent crime, the viewing of these television programmes does not.

These 'found' experiments, which utilise a sound and appropriate method, all provide results which are in some way surprising, but which uniformly refute the hypothesis that watching depictions of violence on television increases aggression. Whilst this aggression is measured in the three studies by official

crime statistics, which represent the tip of the iceberg since aggression only occasionally develops into reported criminal offences, we would nevertheless expect any potential increases in violence due to the television conditions to be reflected in the figures in at least a small way. However, the results have shown absolutely no increases due to the presence of television or televised violence. Some even indicate an opposite effect, which is unlikely to be genuine, but which certainly emphasises the lack of a demonstrable effect of screen violence on aggressive behaviour.

### **Correlation studies**

Simple correlation studies are relatively straightforward to conduct, and researchers have not had much difficulty in producing findings which show that children who enjoy 'violent' television programmes are often more aggressive than children who do not. The major problem with such findings is well-known: a correlation cannot demonstrate causality, but can only show where two variables occur together.

Freedman (1984) reviewed several correlation studies<sup>20</sup>, and found that the correlations between viewing television violence and aggressiveness are weak (mostly falling between .10 and .20, where a perfect correlation would be 1.00), and provide minimal evidence for a causal link. Most of the results are not statistically significant, and would not normally be acceptable as evidence in support of a hypothesis; in addition, almost all of the studies rely on the self-reports of subjects not only for their viewing habits and preferences, but also for their aggressivity, and such responses are of questionable reliability. Aside from the usual problems associated with getting individuals to review and measure their own behaviour, there is the additional flaw in these cases that those respondents whose social activity includes watching violent television programmes – which boys often see as a test of masculinity (Barker, 1984, pp. 18–19; Wood, 1993) – are likely to be those who may also exaggerate their aggressive prowess. Cumberbatch (1989b, p. 42) observes in addition that many of the studies focus on programme preference, rather than the mere exposure to violent programmes which experimental research has concentrated upon, thereby increasing the likelihood of positive findings<sup>21</sup>. He also notes that the findings of

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<sup>20</sup> For example, McLeod, Atkin & Chaffee (1972); Friedman & Johnson (1972); McCarthy, Langner, Gerstein, Eisenberg & Orzeck (1975); Greenberg (1975); Hartnagel, Teevan & McIntyre (1975).

<sup>21</sup> Cumberbatch actually claims that this 'contradicts' the experimental research, which is not strictly true: the idea that preference of violent programmes may lead to aggression does not

the better-known and reasonably large-scale simple correlation studies, McLeod, Atkin & Chaffee (1972) and McIntyre & Teevan (1972), become statistically insignificant when the samples are subdivided by age and sex, so that like is compared with like (1989b, pp. 42–43).

The findings of positive correlations between watching television violence and aggressive behaviour are easily accounted for by the likelihood that those with more aggressive personalities will also enjoy television programmes with violent content. This view is strongly supported by the sophisticated and large-scale study by Milavsky, Kessler, Stipp & Rubens (1982a, 1982b), discussed in full in the next section, which shows that correlations between violence viewing and aggression are stable over time, with viewing not causing increases in aggressive behaviour. Only if correlations increased with age would it be possible to argue that a cumulative effect of viewing on aggression exists, although such increases could just as possibly be a result of increasing physical strength and aggressive courage, and the greater opportunities to view more violent programmes as an individual gets older. In any case, a review of the many studies shows no such consistent effect (Freedman, 1984). Furthermore, a study of over 2,000 young people aged between 11 and 16 by Lynn, Hampson & Agahi (1989), discussed in greater detail below, found that correlations between television violence viewing and aggression had an *inverse* relationship to the age of their subjects. As Barwise & Ehrenberg (1988, p. 141) suggest, a correlation finding between respondents who are aggressive and who watch violent television could have one of several meanings, or no meaning at all: it may indicate that they are aggressive anyway, but work off some of this violent feeling by watching depictions of violence on television (no causality, and maybe the opposite), or that they like violence generally, whether on screen or in real life (no causality), or just that they have guessed what the study is about<sup>22</sup>.

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contradict the wider claim that mere exposure will lead to aggression, although the former claim should be easier to prove if either hypothesis is true.

<sup>22</sup> Correlation studies can also be problematic in ways which cannot be blamed upon the method itself, but rather the way in which it is used and subsequently reported. In a review of television effects, for example, Judith Van Evra (1990) earnestly describes a number of rather ridiculous correlation studies which 'find' certain variables which unsurprisingly co-exist, and then imply that one causes the other. For example we are told that children who enjoy violent television programmes are also the kind of children less likely to sit quietly for a few minutes when asked (p. 90), which is far more likely a consequence of a particular personality type than any causal effect; and that children whose parents were less concerned about the effects of television violence, were more likely to prefer watching it (p. 91), which is merely a self-fulfilling statement since children whose parents will not let them watch violent programmes are not in a position to express such a preference. Other correlations are

However, there are two larger-scale correlation studies which are notable for their careful design and method: Belson (1978) and Lynn, Hampson & Agahi (1989). Belson interviewed 1,565 boys aged 12–17 in London. The boys were divided into two groups, higher and lower viewers of television violence, and then the means for the groups on measures of aggression were calculated. This found that the boys who watched more violence on television tended to commit more violent acts, particularly more serious acts, than the other group. As a test to see if the violence was a consequence of the viewing, or the viewing a product of aggressive tendencies, the calculation was also performed the other way around, with the boys divided into those higher and lower in aggression, and then their violence viewing averages revealed. Although the logic of this is questionable since other factors may affect the comparability of such a reversal (such as differences in the numbers of boys in each group due to the distribution of measures (Freedman, 1984, p. 237)), the finding in any case was that for three of the four measures of aggression used, the effect of aggression on television viewing (the reverse hypothesis) was *more* significant than the opposite effect, suggesting that viewing violence has no effect on aggression, and providing support for the view that correlations are found between the two factors because more aggressive personalities may seek to watch more violent material, without the television viewing being a cause of their violent behaviour. For the fourth measure, of more serious violent acts, the effect of violent television viewing on aggression was more significant than the reverse, and Belson treated this as evidence that television violence has an effect on serious acts of real-life aggression.

However, the data cannot be so simply interpreted, and critics who have looked more closely at the findings have noted a number of anomalies. The effect of non-violent viewing in the study is actually just as significant as violent viewing, and the effect of total television viewing is more significant than violent viewing

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clearly the product of a third factor, such as family background, which the simplistic correlations render invisible. A correlation between television violence viewing and lower educational achievement might be found, for example, but this might simply be because those parents who place a greater emphasis on encouraging their children to succeed in school, may also be more likely to censor and control their children's viewing. Thus, the variables might occur together, but one is most likely not the cause of the other, and the failure of these simple correlation studies to check for potential third factors renders their results pointless. The secondary reporting of correlation studies tends to exaggerate study findings by reporting correlations without describing their strength (usually weak), and by use of terms like 'relationship' between variables, which can seem to suggest that the variables interact and possibly cause one another, where this is entirely unproven (see, for example, Van Evra, 1990, pp. 81–93).

alone (Freedman, 1984, p. 238). Viewers of very low amounts of television violence turn out to be more aggressive than viewers who saw a moderate amount, whilst very high viewers of violence were 50 per cent less aggressive than the moderate to high exposure group (Cumberbatch, 1989b, p. 44). Belson's method of analysis also produced findings such as an effect of newspaper readership on violent behaviour which is significant and, according to Belson's mode of interpretation, causal (Belson, 1978, p. 410). Such an effect seems extremely unlikely – no other study has suggested such an effect, and a public fear of newspaper readers has not been widely expressed – and this result therefore casts considerable doubt on Belson's other claimed findings of causal effects. It is also likely that the teenagers may have given inaccurate, and therefore invalid, indications of their viewing habits, since they were required to recall the frequency with which they had watched programmes which had been broadcast when they were only a few years old (Murdock & McCron, 1979). This is particularly significant, as Cumberbatch (1989b, p. 44) notes, since it has been found that subjects who make invalid claims about their viewing (by claiming to watch non-existent programme titles made up by researchers) are those whose responses dramatically increase correlations between television viewing and aggressive behaviour (Milavsky, Kessler, Stipp & Rubens, 1982a). Belson's own report also lists many other findings from the intensive interviews with the 1,565 boys which seem to contradict any conclusion that viewing violence has antisocial effects: the study found no evidence at all that exposure to television violence made boys more willing or inclined to commit acts of violence, or led to preoccupation with such acts, or made boys more callous towards real-life violence, or accept violence as a way to solve their problems (Belson, 1978, p. 16). The mixed findings of Belson's study, then, even when taken on their own terms, cannot be regarded as any kind of strong or consistent evidence for the causal hypothesis.

Lynn, Hampson & Agahi (1989) surveyed 2,039 children, aged 11–16, in three secondary schools in Northern Ireland. The study sought to compare the plausibility of the traditional effects hypothesis with a more sophisticated model, which took into consideration personality and family variables, as well as the viewing of violent television, in the attempt to account for aggressive behaviour. Questionnaires were used to measure the subjects' aggression, their viewing of 43 named popular television programmes, their enjoyment of TV violence, and their responses to Eysenck's personality measures of extraversion, neuroticism and psychoticism. The subjects themselves were asked to evaluate the amount of violence in the 43 programmes, and the mean of the older children's responses

was used as the measure of screen violence. Information was also collected about each respondent's brothers and sisters, and 386 sibling pairs were extracted from the total sample.

The findings firmly contradict the traditional effects hypothesis that the amount of viewing of television violence has an effect on aggression. Children who scored high on the psychoticism scale (described as 'a broad sociopathic personality trait' (p. 149)) tended to express greater enjoyment of television violence, and also were more aggressive. The reported levels of enjoyment of TV violence within sibling pairs were unrelated, even though their levels of both total viewing and violence viewing were very similar (pp. 155–156). It was also found that whilst there was a weak correlation between siblings for aggression, which the authors attribute to genetic similarity, the higher aggression sibling did not have a tendency to watch more television violence (p. 159). These findings suggest that aggression and enjoyment of TV violence are due to personality differences, and are not an effect of television exposure. The authors firmly reject the hypothesis of a causal relationship between the amount of TV violence viewing and aggression, and argue that their results can be explained by genotype-environment correlation and interaction: that is, that parents transmit their characteristics to their children through both their genes and the environment in which the children are brought up, and that children react differently to the same environments in accordance with their genetic predispositions (pp. 145–146). This theory could be used to suggest that the viewing of television violence may have an effect on the aggression of certain children who are genetically predisposed towards high psychoticism. In this model, the *amount* of violence viewing would be of little importance, since it would be the enjoyment of specific instances of depicted violence which may have an influence on aggression (p. 162). However, whilst the authors note that this model is tenable in relation to their data, whereas the traditional effects hypothesis is not, they appear ambivalent about whether they believe this model to be an accurate explanation. In any case, the correlational method means that causation cannot be demonstrated by this study. The findings do however provide strong support for the view that particular personality traits – whether produced by nature or nurture – are responsible for higher levels of both aggression and the enjoyment of television violence.

## Longitudinal panel studies

Of the studies considered so far in this chapter, the strongest suggestions of a causal link between television violence viewing and aggression have come from studies 'in the wrong setting (the laboratory) with the right population (normal children), and in the right setting (outside of the laboratory) with the wrong population (abnormal [children])' (Cook, Kendzierski & Thomas, 1983, p. 192). The correlation studies, meanwhile, tend to take the right setting and population, but apply the wrong tests: those which cannot tell us about causation. There are however a number of longitudinal panel studies which use both natural settings and representative children, and apply more sophisticated methods: Milavsky, Kessler, Stipp & Rubens (1982a, 1982b), Lefkowitz, Eron, Walder & Huesmann (1972, 1977), Huesmann, Lagerspetz & Eron (1984), Sheehan (1986), Bachrach (1986), Fraczek (1986), and Wiegman, Kuttschreuter & Baarda (1992). By following cohorts of the same children over a period of time, the chances of being able to more precisely identify the effect of watching television violence on the child's later behaviour are much greater.

Covering a period of three and a half years (1970–1973), the study by Milavsky, Kessler, Stipp & Rubens involved approximately 2,400 elementary school boys and girls aged between 7 and 12 at the start of the study, and a further 800 boys aged initially between 12 and 16. The elementary school group were surveyed up to six times, the older group up to five times. It should be noted, however, that because of subjects leaving school, moving away or being absent, only 178 appear in all six waves of the elementary school sample, with 200 to 500 respondents available for analyses of intervals up to two years. In the sample of older boys, 302 subjects took part in all five waves. Respondents completed questionnaires and interviews, which were supplemented by data from samples of parents and teachers. Aggressive behaviour of the younger group was measured on a peer nomination system, in which several questions were asked of each subject which would provide data on the others, such as 'who tries to hurt others by hitting and punching?' and 'who tries to hurt others by saying mean things?'. For the teenage group, self-reports were used, since prior research had found these to be more accurate with subjects of this age. The study was conducted in two US cities, Minneapolis and Fort Worth, which are both in the Central Time Zone and so receive their programmes an hour earlier than in the east or west, allowing children the greatest possible opportunity for exposure to programmes with more violent content, aimed at an older audience. Both cities received an array of programming from both network and independent stations, and schools were chosen for the survey which would draw in children of diverse

ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds. These conditions were chosen to maximise the possibility of any effects showing up, if they existed.

The panel survey design obviously does not aim to randomly assign subjects to particular conditions, as in experimental methods, but instead uses each individual in the study as their own control, by comparing their later behaviour with that recorded at an earlier point in time. Thus, prior aggression and the initial correlation between viewing and aggression can be controlled, which performs the same function as randomisation, but does not interfere with the situation as it naturally occurs. This means that the effect of television viewing on behaviour can be separated from confounding variables such as the pre-existing correlation of viewing and aggression.

As Milavsky (1988) explains, the study took so long to complete – nine years from survey completion in 1973 to publication in 1982 – because the results were weak and inconsistent, and the data showed only tiny effect sizes. More sophisticated analyses and greater control of other variables only served to reduce these effects. Milavsky *et al* (1982a, 1982b) concluded therefore that on the basis of the extensive analyses carried out, there was no evidence that television exposure had a consistent significant effect on subsequent aggressive behaviour. This was true both for the total sample and for the part of the sample identified as valid reporters of their viewing. Tests for curvilinearity (a less obvious relationship), effects of respondents leaving and joining the samples, and for measurement error, did not affect this conclusion. The use of alternative conceptualisations of ‘violent’ television exposure made no difference either, and complex analyses revealed no evidence that television had an effect on boys who could be considered *predisposed* towards aggressive behaviour. Correlations between exposure to television violence and aggression at single points in time were found (as in previous correlation studies) but were not considered to reflect a causal link, since the analysis over time did not provide evidence for any such connection (1982a, p. 482).

The study of elementary school children did identify factors which were more strongly correlated with aggression. Some of these factors – such as boys in poor socio-economic circumstances, and families and schools where aggression is commonplace – proved to be predictors of increases in aggression over time. This not only suggests where the causes of aggression are more likely to be found, but also demonstrates that the analysis model used was capable of identifying meaningful effects (1982a, p. 487).

This study made particular efforts to draw out any potential effects of viewing on aggression from the mass of data, which itself was collected in areas where effects were most likely to be detected, and there can be little doubt that its sophisticated design and multiple analyses would have produced a positive result if there was one to be found. The conclusion of no effects is therefore of considerable importance, and is certainly far more significant and relevant to the world as we find it than any number of contrived and unnatural experimental studies.

Other, smaller-scale panel studies have been interpreted to suggest that media effects have been identified. However, these studies and their interpretation contain methodological deficiencies which render them unreliable (full detail in Gauntlett, 1995a). Briefly, a study which surveyed 427 American children at both ages eight and eighteen, by Lefkowitz, Eron, Walder & Huesmann (1972, 1977) purported to find a small effect on boys but none on girls, although a more sophisticated analysis of the data by Kenny (1972) found these to be 'marginal' at best. Methodological flaws in the study were even identified in the introduction to the volume in which the study first appeared (Chaffee, 1972), these problems including a measure of exposure to television violence based only on a violence rating of specific favourite programmes; different measures of both viewing and aggression at the two stages of the survey (ten years apart), and a statistical analysis which would not work correctly with the kind of data obtained by this study (Dorr, 1986, p. 78, Milavsky *et al*, 1982a, p. 6; 1982b, p. 145, Kenny, 1972). These multiple flaws mean that Lefkowitz *et al*'s results, which were weak in the first place, cannot be taken as evidence of an effect. Furthermore, when following up the same sample at age 30, some 22 years after the initial survey, Huesmann, Eron, Lefkowitz & Walder (1984) were forced to draw back from the original hypothesis that aggression is learned from television, finding instead, for example, that 'aggressiveness is transmitted across generations within families' (p. 1131), and discussing 'propensities' for aggression which are not related to the television argument. Indeed, in their conclusion Huesmann *et al* refer to the influence of genetic, hormonal and neurological factors in equal measure to vaguely-defined environmental and learning contributors, and on the whole inadvertently provide quite strong evidence against their own previous case.

Another study by Huesmann, Lagerspetz & Eron (1984) was quite similar to the Milavsky *et al* study, although on a smaller scale, surveying 505 children aged five to ten years old from the United States, and 178 from Finland, each year for three years. The study purported to find a significant effect of violent television

viewing on later aggression for girls in the United States, but only a non-significant 'marginal' effect was found for American boys (Huesmann *et al*, 1984, p. 757). A similarly non-significant result was found for boys in Finland, and Finnish girls showed no effect at all. The single significant finding of effects, for American girls – a group who have not shown major tendencies toward violent crime compared to boys, and do not usually cause critics of television violence much alarm –contradicts the finding of the same researchers in the Lefkowitz, Eron, Walder & Huesmann (1977) study, which found no effect at all for girls. The researchers fail to account for this inconsistency, and indeed undermine their basic hypothesis by seeking to account for the apparent difference between Finnish and American girls in social terms (1984, p. 772). The single significant result is also sufficiently marginal that others would not interpret it as evidence of an effect (Cook, Kendzierski & Thomas, 1983, p. 191), and is defended by Huesmann *et al* by reference to a 'bidirectional' causal model, which they fail to adequately support (see 1984, p. 747, pp. 770–773), and is a circular argument which simply does not work (Gauntlett, 1995a).

Cross-national replications of the same study conducted in Australia (Sheehan, 1986), Israel (Bachrach, 1986), and Poland (Fraczek, 1986), found that television's effect upon subsequent aggressive behaviour was either non-existent or very slight, and in all cases the researchers were reluctant to conclude that television was an important factor in children's development of aggressive tendencies. A longitudinal study by Wiegman, Kuttschreuter & Baarda (1992) also began life as part of this cross-national project set up by Huesmann & Eron, but the connection was severed (see Huesmann, 1986a) when the Dutch researchers decided to develop different and more appropriate measures. The study investigated the effect of televised aggression on 354 children in the Netherlands over three years, and the results gave 'no support for the hypothesis that television violence will, in the long term, contribute to a higher level of aggression in children' (p. 155). The reverse hypothesis, that pre-existing aggression leads to greater violence viewing, received partial support. Although based on a smaller sample, the data used in this study was of a higher quality than that used by the Lefkowitz *et al* and Huesmann *et al* studies, and so its findings are arguably more reliable.

It should be noted that almost all of these longitudinal studies used measures of aggression which would include acts of boisterousness or incivility, in addition to the more clearly antisocial acts of physical aggression or violence which we would expect, and so levels of actual violence are likely to appear greater than they really were (Cook, Kendzierski & Thomas, 1983, p. 193). It should also be

remembered that even where 'significant' results are found, these effects of television (if we trust the studies) still only account for about five per cent of the variability in aggressive behaviour over time – leaving the other 95 per cent arising from influences other than television, and which are unaccounted for (Dorr, 1986, p. 84).

Clearly, none of these more elaborate and methodologically sound studies suggests effects of any remarkable size. Indications of potential effects tend to be positive but are rarely large enough to be significant, and flaws in the studies are likely to exaggerate them. Summarising his discussion of the most thoughtfully designed study of them all, Milavsky (1988, p. 165) admits:

'Our conclusion was that any effect of watching television violence on children's aggression either did not really exist or was very small. The data did not permit a firm choice between these two interpretations, but based on what happened when controls were introduced, our judgment was that it was somewhat more likely that the effect was zero rather than that it was small.'

### Other potential negative effects of television

Three further types of claimed effect should be considered briefly here, although the hypothesised consequences relate more to the attitudes and cognition of viewers, rather than behaviour. First is the argument that exposure to television portrayals of violence may 'desensitise' viewers to the unpleasantness of real-life violence. This contention is not supported by any methodologically sound research. Van Evra (1990, pp. 96–97), for example, reports a number of studies which suggest that viewers find television portrayals of fictional violence less shocking if they are used to seeing such scenes; however, this is entirely different from the question of how television may affect the way in which people react to real-life violence when they see it. Lack of shock when an actor hits another actor in television fiction – which viewers *know* is not real – does not mean that one would not be sickened by seeing genuine violence in real life. Buckingham's qualitative research into children's emotional responses to television (1996) has supported this point. In addition, Belson's (1978) study of over 1,500 teenage boys, described above, provides a substantial amount of data on the desensitisation question<sup>23</sup>. Hypotheses that high exposure to television violence would render boys more callous in relation to either directly experienced

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<sup>23</sup> The reasons why Belson's results were rejected above – primarily because the correlations found did not suggest a convincing and consistent causal link between violence viewing and violent behaviour – do not apply here, since the study did not even find the basic correlations which would need to appear before the question of causation was considered.

violence, or distant violence presented by the news media, received no support whatsoever in the study (pp. 471–475), whilst other hypotheses that exposure to television violence would increase the degree to which boys would like, or be willing, to commit the forms of violence shown on television, or that high exposure to television violence would reduce boys' consideration for other people or respect for authority, were all absolutely refuted by the evidence (pp. 461–464, pp. 511–516). Belson's survey evidence is the best available, since other contrived laboratory and field experiments have failed to adequately examine the possible impact of viewing upon desensitisation (Gauntlett, 1995a).

Second is the thesis, developed by tabloid newspapers and critics of television, that television turns children into mindless 'zombies', who uncritically lap up anything broadcast, and are unable to discern the difference between television and the real world. This notion is little more than a campaigners' cliché, and is not supported by the evidence. Indeed, the more recent research which regards children as distinctly 'active' rather than passive viewers – described by Hawkins & Pingree (1986, p. 233) as a new paradigm in effects research, although its emergence has been far from total – provides any number of findings to refute the 'zombie' argument. Hodge & Tripp (1986), for example, rally evidence to argue that in watching television, children 'are learning important and complex structures of meaning, and developing capacities for thinking and judgment that are a necessary part of the process of socialization' (p. 10). Neumann's (1991) review of relevant studies found absolutely no evidence to support the claims of critics that television reduces children's attention spans, impairs their ability to think clearly, causes television 'addiction', leads to illiteracy or reduces cognitive abilities in any other way. Furthermore, research has suggested that children's early initiation into narrative formats and genres, via television and video, means that they are quicker to develop literate and sophisticated understandings of books when they come to read them (Marshall, 1994). Durkin (1985) and Buckingham (1993) have shown that children, rather than being confused about the differences between television and the real world, are able to talk easily about them. Durkin, for example, found that children as young as six years old were able to distinguish between television sex role portrayals and real world conventions (p. 78), whilst Buckingham found in interviews with children aged eight, ten and twelve that they were not only aware of the nature of television adverts, but were often cynical about advertisers' methods and motives (1993, pp. 247–248). The children often saw 'other people' as being influenced by advertising, but rarely described themselves in this way; in other cases the children rejected the idea that many people would be influenced by adverts.

Eight year olds assumed that advertisers try to deceive viewers by making products look better than they really are, and by telling viewers that they need them when they don't. The substantial amount of other research on advertising has similarly demonstrated that children are not taken in by its appealing promises (Gauntlett, 1995a). Indeed, when Buckingham, Fraser & Mayman (1990) sought to initiate children into viewing television critically, they found that their initial assumptions about children as relatively passive TV consumers had led them to give the children exercises which, rather than being challenging and new, were routine and 'actually rather easy for them'. The researchers observe that, 'These 12-year-olds have already mastered the skills we were attempting to teach. Short of taking them through Barthes in the original French, it is difficult to see what one might do next' (p. 41). Such evidence suggests that the moral panic image of the undiscerning television 'zombie' has little foundation in reality, and with no evidence in its favour there is no reason to give this fictional stereotype any credence whatsoever.

Finally, there is the possible contribution of television to the fear of crime, based on George Gerbner's argument that heavy viewers of television take on a distorted view of the world, which corresponds to that portrayed on screen (see for example, Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Gerbner, Gross, Morgan & Signorielli, 1980, 1986; Signorielli, 1990). These studies all rely on *correlations* between amount of television viewing and levels of anxiety about crime, and assume that when both are high, the fear is a consequence of the television viewing. Such studies have been widely criticised. The correlations found between amount of viewing and fear of crime tend to be very small (Wober, 1978), and when multiple controls for other contributory factors are applied, the effects are substantially reduced or disappear altogether (Cook *et al*, 1983; Gunter, 1987; Cumberbatch, 1989a). Other researchers have exposed anomalies which make Gerbner *et al*'s claims much less clear-cut. Hirsch (1980), for example, re-analysed data used by Gerbner and his colleagues, and found that people who did not watch any television at all were more fearful and alienated than viewers of any amount of television, whilst 'extreme' viewers who watched over eight hours per day were generally *less* likely than Gerbner's 'heavy' viewers to have these fears. We can also note that Gerbner *et al*'s own data shows that whilst white viewers' fear of victimisation increases with their amount of viewing, non-white viewers' fear, whilst greater than that of whites overall, actually *decreases* with amount of viewing, even though (as Gerbner *et al* have noted) such minorities are more often portrayed as victims of crime (see Gerbner *et al*, 1986, pp. 31-34).

The correlations between television viewing and anxiety can be explained by a crucial third factor in all cases. The relationship between heavy viewing and a greater fear of crime is easily explained by the fact that light viewers tend to be middle class and live in areas with lower crime rates than heavy viewers. In addition, middle class viewers watch less crime drama (Wober & Gunter, 1988). Therefore, the greater fear of crime can be explained in terms which have nothing to do with the effect of watching television: in fact, the heavy viewers' greater fear of crime can be accounted for entirely by their knowledge of their neighbourhood as it exists in real life. Gerbner and colleagues have been forced to admit that it is viewers who live in such areas with high crime rates who are most fearful of crime, but they claim that television here produces a 'resonance' effect, reinforcing viewers' fears of their neighbourhood (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan & Signorielli, 1980, 1986). Whilst this is a possible reading of the data, it is only speculative, and not the most obvious interpretation. The fact that an individual watches large amounts of television is obviously not a characteristic randomly distributed in a population, as Gerbner *et al* seem to assume, but is likely to itself be at least partly a consequence of other factors, such as poverty, and the viewers' anxieties about the outside world, social attitudes and worldview; it is these variables which may influence opinions about the world just as much as, or more than, television – but would also lead an individual to stay indoors watching it.

Other researchers have found that viewers do not confuse television representations of crime with real life, and that in any case attempts to replicate Gerbner's findings outside the United States have frequently failed (Gunter, 1987). A study by Wober (1978) polled a representative sample of over 1,100 UK residents and found no evidence of this paranoid effect of television on feelings about the trustworthiness of other people or the likelihood of being a victim of robbery. A further, more sophisticated survey by Wober & Gunter (1982) found correlations between social attitudes and level of television viewing which suggested that people who feel less in control of their lives and have a generally fateful outlook tend to stay in watching television more, and express the fearful attitudes tested for by Gerbner *et al* in their studies. This result reinforces the case that it is not television which has a causal effect on the fears expressed by heavier viewers, but rather those anxieties which cause people to *be* heavy viewers in the first place.

The studies which have sought to identify negative effects of television, therefore, have not generally been successful. By this stage it should be clear that methodological flaws account for a significant part of this impressive

discrepancy between the aims and even declared *findings* of studies, and the conclusions which a careful examination of the research leads us to. A summary of the inadequacies of existing 'effects' research appears at the end of the next chapter, following a consideration of another body of studies, which are concerned with the potential positive benefits of mass media communications.

### 3. Media 'effects' II: Research on prosocial effects, campaigns, and newer approaches

Not all of the research on the effects of television has been focused upon screen violence, of course. An area of study which may seem opposed to the latter research, but in fact is quite similar, has explored the 'prosocial effects' of television – this term generally referring to such socially desirable influences on behaviour as increases in altruism, helpfulness, generosity, and other social skills – as well as media campaigns specifically designed to have an effect upon behaviour, whether for health and safety purposes, or in the form of commercial advertising. This chapter will consider these studies, and then examine some more recent developments in approaches to media influences.

The difficulty of categorising television programmes under categories such as 'prosocial', or 'violent', is illustrated by Barbara Lee (1988), who reports the findings of a content analysis which examined four weeks of network prime-time television entertainment programmes, spread across the 1985–86 season. The sophisticated definition of 'prosocial' behaviour used included altruistic actions (from heroic acts to sharing, cooperation and helping), socially approved affective behaviour (showing affection, empathy, sympathy or remorse), and control over negative inclinations of oneself or others (including controlling aggression, use of reasoning, and resisting temptation). This showed that 97 per cent of the programmes included at least one prosocial incident<sup>24</sup>. More interestingly, the analysis went beyond individual scenes and looked at each whole programme for an overall prosocial theme or moral. About a quarter (60 of the 235 analysed) were judged to have such prosocial themes, although Lee admits that the coding of themes would only have recorded quite conspicuous 'morals', and so have been likely to under-count other general acts of goodness, and would not have taken account of the underlying values of programmes. Thus, Lee notes, 'for example, several episodes of *The Cosby Show*, even though they generally promoted positive family relations, did not qualify as having a specific prosocial theme' (1988, p. 244). However, this approach is a significant improvement on the usual use of content analysis, which is generally to count incidents of violence or some other act without any reference to its context or meaning.

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<sup>24</sup> This may have been even higher if the analysis had covered only drama and fictional television programmes, but it should be noted that the sample of entertainment programmes used would include game shows, quizzes, variety shows, etc.

Lee sought to take this method further, attempting to identify the implicit values of programmes by asking coders to select the three instrumental values (means) and three terminal values (end goals) that guided main characters and were most favoured in the programme. This failed because the coders were unable to agree about these values to an acceptable level of reliability. This is unfortunate, since the analysis was an unusual and interesting attempt to get at the meanings of whole programmes, instead of individual scenes taken in abstraction; however, it is perhaps inevitable that the rather simple and unreflexive method of content analysis would be unable to cope with the full complexity of programmes. However, this study does illustrate the important point that the treatment of television programmes in many of the studies discussed in this review is far too simplistic: the very fact that the research can be sorted into studies of 'violence' (the 'bad' programmes) and 'prosocial' content (the 'good' programmes) clearly reflects this. Lee shows that the prosocial possibilities of television, when conceived in more sophisticated terms than in most of the studies, become very difficult to explore with traditional 'scientific' methodologies such as formal content analysis: television content is simply too complex to be understood in this manner.

In addition, the body of research into the potential positive impact of television is less extensive than that into aggression effects, and the area lacks the support of major longitudinal, non-experimental studies – although some interesting work involving a more sophisticated conception of possible prosocial influences has been developed. Like the violence research, the area has its share of rather poorly-designed experimental studies, often based upon ill-informed assumptions about television entertainment (Gauntlett, 1995a). These experiments (such as Stein & Bryan, 1972; Wolf & Cheyne, 1972; Sprafkin, Liebert & Poulos, 1975; Friedrich & Stein, 1975; Coates, Pusser & Goodman, 1976) have generally found that programmes which have intentionally 'prosocial' content do have some effect on increasing children's observed displays of kindness and consideration, generosity, or altruism, although they often suffer from poor or flawed designs (Gauntlett, 1995a). The nature of these experiments means that we can only know about short-term effects, which are potentially influenced by experimental demand, particularly since the 'required' behaviours are socially approved actions which can only reflect well on those who produce them for the research. In addition, we can note that these studies all cover behaviours which are both socially valued and not controversial, and so arguably not difficult to influence to a small but significant degree for a limited period of time.

## Field studies of prosocial effects

Leaving the experimental studies aside, therefore, we can consider the relatively small number of more sophisticated studies which have been conducted, with results more clearly applicable to natural situations and longer-term influences. Johnston & Ettema (1982) studied 7,000 children in seven cities to examine the effects of *Freestyle*, a 13-part television drama series aimed at changing the sex-role stereotypes of nine to twelve year old viewers. The series was developed by the National Institute for Education in the United States, and broadcast like any other programme by television stations. The study sought to evaluate the impact of the series for children who watched the programme at home with minimal encouragement (a weekly reminder from teachers), for those who were shown the programme in school, but with no subsequent discussion, and for those whose viewing in school was supplemented by teacher-led discussion and support activities. Questionnaires were used to measure effects, with questions relating to *beliefs* about boys' and girls' competence in non-traditional activities (such as girls in sport and boys in child care), *attitudes* about boys and girls engaging in such activities, and the subject's own *interest* in such activities.

For those who watched the programmes at home, the only effect was on the subject of females performing mechanical tasks. Girls who had watched at least seven of the programmes, and boys who had watched at least ten, expressed significantly more positive beliefs and attitudes on this topic, and the girls' personal interest in the area was increased. The viewing of all 13 programmes in the school setting produced larger changes on certain measures. Girls again were apparently the most affected, with significant changes on 50 per cent of the belief and attitude measures, and an increased personal interest in mechanics. Boys changed on only 25 per cent of the belief and attitude measures, and showed no increase in non-traditional personal interests. The supplementation of the programmes with discussion and support activities significantly boosted the changes in attitudes and beliefs, typically doubling them. The programme's ability to increase personal interests in non-traditional activities remained limited, however, again reflecting the fact that beyond television, there is a world full of many more complex, social influences on children. Johnston & Ettema state:

'Specifically, class discussion probably has two effects. In attitude change, confronting the problem... is more powerful than simply viewing confrontation on the screen, and adult-mediated discussion can make up for deficiencies in dramatic production... To achieve similar effect sizes at home probably requires more programming and more efforts to encourage viewing.' (1986, p. 145).

However, they also note later that even this assumption that adult involvement will enhance effects is not certain; Sprafkin & Rubinstein found one situation where the effects of 'prosocial' television were reduced by adult mediation (Johnston & Ettema, 1986, p. 158).

Also of interest is the study's finding that viewers recalled best the most dramatic scenes of the programme. When the 'message' was embedded in such scenes, it was much more likely to be remembered and understood than if it was merely verbalised in a scene with no associated action (Johnston & Ettema, 1986, p. 152). This might suggest that the good work of heroes such as 'Batman' and 'Superman', far from having negative effects as some researchers presume, is likely to have prosocial results due to the strong integration of exciting action with a moral stance. It certainly suggests that the messages of deliberately prosocial *and* exciting fictional programmes are more likely to be conveyed, such as those which form a fundamental part of the plots in the environmental action-adventure cartoon series *Captain Planet and the Planeteers* (1991–92), for example.

This purposefully designed prosocial programme, *Freestyle*, does seem to have had an effect on certain attitudes and beliefs, and a lesser effect on particular personal interests, in its relatively modest 13-week run. The study also demonstrated that discussion and activity about such a programme can increase its intended effects, and that viewers were able to generalise belief and attitude changes beyond those shown in the programme. Again, however, there is some possibility of a researcher demand effect, even in the more naturalistic home viewing setting, since the children were reminded to watch the programme by teachers, and were aware that they would be questioned about it. In addition, it is likely that those children who made the effort to watch a high number of episodes at home would be those already more interested in, and therefore favourably disposed towards, the programme's anti-sexist perspective.

Longitudinal studies of *Sesame Street* have found more positive results gained by viewing without additional support activities. Studies by Bogatz & Ball of the first two years of the programme's impact (1970–1972, reported by Lesser, 1974, and Watkins, Huston-Stein & Wright, 1981)<sup>25</sup> showed that viewers who watched the programme more frequently, whether in home or classroom settings,

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<sup>25</sup> See also Cook & Curtin's (1986) detailed consideration of the evaluational research on 'Sesame Street' and other educational programmes. Note that the Bogatz & Ball studies are sometimes referred to elsewhere as the ETS (Educational Testing Service) studies or evaluations.

showed significant increases in their scores on assessment tests which were designed to measure learning from the actual content of the programmes (such as the letters, numbers, and relational terms covered, rather than general cognitive functioning or 'IQ'). These findings appear to demonstrate that the programme was effective in its aim of teaching information and intellectual skills. In addition, it was found that viewers of the programme were influenced by its demonstrations of friendship, social harmony and other prosocial behaviour. The respect and appreciation of racial differences shown on *Sesame Street* was also found to have made an impression on regular viewers, who showed more positive attitudes towards children of other races in the large-scale evaluational studies which were conducted as an integral part of the programme's development (Lesser, 1974, p. 225). School teachers who were asked to rank children in their classes on various measures, and who did not know the children's *Sesame Street* viewing levels, rated those who had been regular viewers as having better relationships with their peers, and being better prepared generally for school life (Lesser, 1974, p. 224). It is possible that the self-selected viewers may have been those more inclined towards greater ability and these behaviours and attitudes already; however, the extensive *Sesame Street* research also compared children who could and could not receive the programme, but were otherwise matched on age, intelligence and background, and again found significant positive results for the programme's viewers (Lesser, 1974, p. 222). This research does suggest that regular viewing of the programme at home had some tangible, positive effects.

A large-scale study by Ball-Rokeach, Rokeach & Grube (1986) made use of an ingenious method to avoid researcher demand effects or other interference which occurs when people know that they are being studied. A programme intended to change attitudes and actions towards issues of equality and the environment was broadcast on normal TV channels, and the adult respondents were only contacted afterwards, so that the viewing situation was entirely voluntary and natural. In addition, the tests for subsequent changes in attitudes and behaviour were designed so that subjects were not aware of being studied, again removing the possibility of researcher demand effects.

The researchers prepared the single 30-minute programme, entitled *The Great American Values Test*, to a professional standard, using well-known presenters. The second half of the programme included 'needling' messages from the presenters, intended to make viewers examine their commitment to three target values – 'freedom', 'equality', and 'a world of beauty'. The show was advertised in newspapers, *TV Guide* and on radio and television, with the particular

intention of attracting viewers who were strongly dependent on television for their social and self-understanding. All three commercial television channels in the experimental area (the Tri-Cities area of eastern Washington) broadcast the programme simultaneously, whilst in the control city (80 miles away, with a similar population), the programme was blacked out. A random sample of residents of both cities were pre-selected, and after the broadcast the 1,699 respondents in the experimental city were contacted for the first time by telephone. Interviewers who claimed to be calling from a television station (to separate the call from the research enterprise) established whether the respondents had watched the programme, their level of attention, and whether the viewing had been uninterrupted, as well as basic demographic information.

To detect possible changes in basic values and related social attitudes, a questionnaire was used, which required respondents to rank 18 values (including the three target values) in order of importance. This part of the questionnaire was based on one used in a national survey of values, which had been discussed in the television programme. The survey also sought to measure related attitudes towards sexism, racism and environmental conservation, and the extent to which the respondent depended on television for their understandings of self and society. This questionnaire was sent to half of the samples from the two cities seven weeks before the programme was broadcast, and to the other half four weeks after the broadcast. The large size of the samples meant that the results should have been able to indicate significant changes in average overall attitudes, even though individual viewers were not questioned both before and after the programme.

To detect changes in actual behaviour, all of the participants in both cities were sent solicitations for money eight, ten and thirteen weeks after the programme. These requests were sent directly from relevant genuine charities or organisations in different Washington cities: one from an organisation providing opportunities for black children in cultural activities, one from a university women's athletics programme, and one from an anti-pollution campaign group.

The researchers estimate that only 26 per cent of the preselected respondents watched the programme, and that only half of those watched without interruption, even though the programme achieved excellent general ratings. Nevertheless, the findings are impressive. Respondents from the experimental city sent significantly more donations in response to the solicitations than those in the control city, and the appeals also received significantly fewer abusive, negative responses from the experimental city.

The 'needling' messages in the second half of the programme would appear to have had an effect, since uninterrupted viewers significantly increased their rankings of 'freedom' and 'equality', and (to a lesser degree) 'a world of beauty'. The associated social attitudes towards the environment and towards black people also increased significantly, and attitudes towards women increased but to a lesser extent. Non-viewers, and those who were interrupted (and so had comparable initial motivations to watch, although they were prevented from doing so), were unaffected. More importantly, uninterrupted viewers donated four to six times as much money as non-viewers in both cities, and (surprisingly) about nine times as much as the interrupted viewers. The authors also claim that viewers who were highly dependent on television for understanding themselves and society were more likely to watch the programme, to watch with high levels of attention and involvement, and to be more affected by it in both their attitudes (as expressed in the survey) and behaviour (as demonstrated by their donations to associated causes). However, the authors do not make clear quite how this television dependency, established from the questionnaire responses, was defined or measured, and so it is difficult to assess the authenticity of this finding<sup>26</sup>.

Despite the shortcomings of the study, the apparent changes in some values and attitudes, and particularly related behaviour (which is usually much more difficult to affect), made on adults by one 30-minute programme seem quite striking. The findings appear to illustrate and indeed magnify the argument made by Mendelsohn (1973), that the close collaboration of social scientists and broadcasters can produce public information campaigns which are able to achieve specifically targeted goals. However, the much more substantial

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<sup>26</sup> The study has some further flaws. Concern for the environment was measured by a ranking of the value 'a world of beauty', which is an ambiguous term not exactly synonymous with, say, 'a safe and unpolluted planet'. The national sample of Americans rated 'a world of beauty' 15th out of 18, a fact mentioned in the television programme as part of one of the 'needling' points (Ball-Rokeach *et al*, 1986, pp. 284–285). However, a closer look at this study shows that the national sample placed the not dissimilar value 'a world at peace' an impressive second, after 'family security'. It could be argued that those who saw the television programme and were informed that the phrase 'a world of beauty' was equated by researchers with environmental concern (rather than, say, a love of beautiful objects and home furnishings) thereafter placed it higher. More importantly, it could be argued that the kind of people who would watch such a programme as the one prepared would be the kind of people who would donate money to the causes involved in this study in any case. However, this would not explain the difference between the overall donations sent from the experimental and control cities, or the large difference between the donations of interrupted and uninterrupted viewers. The apparent changes in attitudes and beliefs are also evidence against this case, although the deliberate pitching of the programme at those more likely to be influenced by television may account for some of these changes.

experience of campaign researchers, discussed below, would suggest that these results, even if valid, are rather unique.

Aside from the self-consciously 'educational' or 'self-improvement' programmes discussed above – which are, disappointingly, the focus of most studies of prosocial effects – the potential impact of more everyday viewing should also be considered<sup>27</sup>. The *Freestyle* study has already demonstrated that prosocial messages are more likely to be remembered and understood when they are embedded in dramatic action; this suggests both that prosocial arguments can be made more clearly when dramatised in a particular context, and that they are most readily accepted when the viewer does not feel that they are simply being 'preached' to (Mielke & Chen, 1983). This hypothesis was tested, albeit somewhat crudely, by Wiegman, Kuttschreuter & Baarda (1992) in their three-year longitudinal panel study on 354 children in the Netherlands, described above in the section on longitudinal studies into aggression, which also looked for possible prosocial effects of the whole diet of ordinary programmes watched voluntarily by individuals. As with aggression, in each year every child's prosocial behaviour was measured by a peer-nomination system, and subjects' indications of their amount of viewing of each drama serial on television at the time was multiplied by ratings of the amount of prosocial behaviour shown in each programme, to produce an exposure score. No significant relationship was found between viewing prosocial behaviour on television and real-life prosocial behaviour, reflecting the similarly null findings for viewing violence and real-life aggression. The authors incidentally note that exposure to depictions of prosocial behaviour was strongly correlated with exposure to depictions of violence; viewers who saw more of one saw more of the other – they were simply heavier television viewers (p. 156). This study, then, underscores the point that there is no simple or predictable relationship between viewing and behaviour. However, it is perhaps rather simplistic to limit the enquiry to observable behavioural changes connected to the viewing of programmes containing prosocial behaviour. Whilst this type of approach was appropriate in the violence studies, since the public concerns about effect were directly related

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<sup>27</sup> Johnston & Ettema (1986) write that, 'Whether effects are intended or not, television that models socially valued behaviors, responses, attitudes, or beliefs is prosocial television' (p. 143). However, thus far very few researchers have sought to quantify the effects of the regular daily diet of programmes where positive effects are not the primary intention of the programme, and so the possible effects of the thousands of programmes which are not deliberately made as 'prosocial television', but which nonetheless feature good, moral heroes, or friends and families caring for each other, or any other ruminations about how best to go about life, have been generally ignored by effects researchers.

to behavioural consequences, it here restricts our opportunities to see if, at least, certain prime-time programmes have influenced *attitudes* or *values* in prosocial directions.

In non-Western countries, however, programme-makers have combined the understanding that everyday programmes may have a prosocial impact, with an interest in the deliberate dissemination of particular attitudes. Singhal & Rogers (1989) have noted that some television producers in Third World countries have come to question the division of entertainment versus educational content, and have sought to promote development goals through soap operas. *Hum Log* ('*We People*') is one such series, broadcast by India's government television system, Doordarshan, over 17 months in 1984–85. The 156 episodes of 22 minutes each were designed to promote a more equal status for women and smaller family size, whilst fulfilling the audience expectations – and Doordarshan's own stated prime objective – of entertainment. Rather blurring the increasingly difficult to maintain distinction between entertainment and 'educational' television, however, each episode was followed by an epilogue of 30 to 50 seconds in which a famous actor summarised the main concepts and provided viewers with 'appropriate guides to action' (p. 335). Whilst we might expect such a didactic approach might not appeal to all adult tastes, these segments were found to be very attractive to the viewers. Indeed, the programme had an average audience of 50 million viewers, the largest for a TV programme in India at that time. Singhal & Rogers conducted an audience survey of 1,170 adults in three different areas of India, 83 per cent of whom had seen at least one episode of *Hum Log*. Of these, in response to multiple choice questions, an impressive 96 per cent said that they liked it, 94 per cent found it entertaining, 83 per cent said it was educational, and 91 per cent agreed that it addressed social problems. Questions about whether the audience identified with characters as the programme makers had intended, however, show that responses cannot be so precisely planned: asked which was the best exemplar to copy in real life, the three female 'positive' role-model characters (hardworking and self-sufficient) were nominated by 37 per cent, 11 per cent and five per cent respectively, but a character intended as a negative role model for gender equality (a stereotype of the traditional Indian wife and mother) beat two of those into second place, scoring 18 per cent, whilst four per cent chose a drunken, chauvinistic father as their role model. The remaining selections were 'neutral' in terms of the programme's messages. Of course this does not necessarily show that the programme even partially failed: an analysis of 500 randomly selected viewers' letters showed that the traditional female character was admired for her

tolerance, compromise and patience, particularly in the face of criticism from her husband and mother-in-law. Such responses show that, whilst not particularly advancing the programme's explicit goals, this character may have at least provided a point of empathy for similarly oppressed women.

The survey also asked respondents to report how *Hum Log* had influenced their attitudes. Whilst subsequent self-reporting is a less desirable measure of change than having 'before' and 'after' surveys, the strength of claimed effects suggests that the reported influences should be valid to some degree: 70 per cent of respondents said that from their viewing of the series they had learned the message that women should have equal opportunities, 71 per cent that family size should be limited, 68 per cent that women should have the freedom to make their personal decisions in life, 75 per cent that family harmony should be promoted, 68 per cent that cultural diversity should be respected, and 64 per cent that women's welfare programmes should be encouraged. Of course, such stated beliefs do not always correspond to action, and we cannot tell how the programme influenced viewers' behaviour, if at all. Indeed, even these researchers note that 'Behaviour change is the bottom line in the hierarchy of media effects... and one would expect it to occur only rarely as the result of a television soap opera' (p. 342). On the other hand, having been watched across India on such a massive scale, it is very possible that the programme made an impact on the culture, however small, in the direction of the programme's aims.

Whilst *Hum Log*, with its carefully planned role models and explicit educational epilogues, might sound quite unlike the kind of television show one might expect to see aimed at a prime-time adult or 'family' audience in Western countries, there are some not incomparable cases. The example covered by the most research literature is the US network drama series *Roots* (1977), and its sequel, *Roots: The Next Generation* (1978), based on Alex Haley's best-selling combination of fiction and biography which recorded his family's experiences in America, from their struggle as black people to gain freedom from slavery (in the first part) to their efforts to gain equality after the Civil War (in the sequel). Audiences have been estimated at 32 million households for *Roots* and 22.5 million households for the sequel (Ball-Rokeach, Grube & Rokeach, 1981, p. 58). Although they have been retrospectively criticised for diluting the power of Haley's books for a white TV audience (Tucker & Shah, 1992), the series were and still are regarded as cornerstones of quality, challenging entertainment television, forcing many Americans to face their country's history of racial power abuse.

The media sensation and public debate sparked by the commitment of so many people to set aside several hours to watch the first series over an eight day period meant that the opportunity for planned research offered by its sequel could not be ignored<sup>28</sup>. Ball-Rokeach *et al* (1981) therefore set up a 'before' and 'after' separate sample survey design to assess the impact of *Roots: The Next Generation*. Telephone interviews were conducted with samples randomly selected from telephone directories for two cities in Washington county, in the guise of audience research calls from the television station, as with the *Great American Values Test* study by the same researchers, so that respondents would not associate the questions about their viewing of a particular programme with the mail survey which they would receive separately, and apparently from a different organisation, about their racial attitudes. Thus the telephone survey ascertained whether respondents had watched the programme, the number of episodes they had seen, and some basic demographic information. Meanwhile, 642 of these people had been sent a questionnaire about their personal and social values and attitudes one to five weeks before *Roots: TNG* was aired, and 1,341 different people received it five to nine weeks after the series was shown. Demographic questions on the forms meant that the researchers could check that the same respondent in a household had completed both the telephone and mail surveys, and non-white respondents could be excluded from the analysis; this left 276 subjects in the 'before' sample, and 530 in the other. The mail survey measured attitudes toward black people using questions (amongst others, and with multiple choice responses) about the right of whites to keep black people out of their neighbourhoods should they want to, the right of black people to be assertive, predicted feelings if a son or daughter wanted to date someone of a different race, the reasons for black people's unemployment, and the use of

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<sup>28</sup> The academic community could not have been expected to foresee the impact of the first series, and so it is impressive that some studies of audience reactions to the programmes were produced, even though assessed only by some rather limited single-wave surveys, mostly conducted by telephone interview around the time of broadcast (Balon, 1978; Howard, Rothbart & Sloan, 1978; Hur, 1978; Hur & Robinson, 1978). These studies generally showed that white viewers tended to be those with already more liberal values, who thought that the drama would improve racial tolerance, whilst some black viewers (who tended to have watched more episodes, and discussed it more) felt that it might increase hatred, bitterness and anger. They thought that viewers' own prejudices would affect their interpretation of the show, a suspicion which was supported by relationships found between general racial attitudes and appreciation of the programme. Nevertheless, reported reactions to the production were primarily sadness, then anger, and more than half of the population sample of 970 adults in one study (Howard *et al*) felt that their awareness of black history and culture had been enhanced, with three-quarters considering *Roots* to be relevant to modern race relations.

positive racial discrimination in job appointments. In addition the survey asked about such factors as the desirability of equality as an American value, and the anticipated level of social support from friends if the respondent were to join a pro-minority civil rights organisation.

The researchers found that the data showed significant effects of egalitarian values on selectivity and avoidance – that is, that those with more egalitarian or anti-racist attitudes and values would specifically select the series for viewing, whilst those with less egalitarian or more racially discriminatory views would deliberately avoid the programmes. This finding persisted even when demographic and personal factors (including sex, age, education, amount of TV viewing, income, and religious preference) were controlled, strongly suggesting that pre-existing prejudices significantly influenced the decision to watch, and so the opportunities to challenge the views of more bigoted individuals would have been limited. Accordingly, it was evident that egalitarianism was systematically related to the number of episodes viewed, with those most ‘already egalitarian’ watching most comprehensively. The main test of the series’ social impact – whether the egalitarianism of viewers increased compared to that of those in the pre-broadcast sample or who didn’t watch – found no evidence that this had occurred. Whilst it is possible that *Roots: The Next Generation* may have had more subtle positive influences, either more long or short term, than could be measured by such a study, it does seem unlikely that the single mini-series had a direct effect.

Nevertheless, it can be speculated that a more continued and less isolated appearance of such programmes might lead over time to have a cumulative influence on attitudes or beliefs. As Wander (1977) argues, *Roots* broke with the TV convention which usually shows people victimised by other individuals rather than by social institutions. Rather than taking the more common ‘rotten apple’ thesis with regard to social problems – that the removal of one bad cop, doctor, soldier, executive or other official will make everything alright – *Roots* deliberately ‘explore[d] the institution of slavery through the eyes of the victim’ (p. 66). In addition, Wander argues that the series demonstrated that the American audience can respond to challenging, ‘quality’ programmes shown in prime-time; broadcasters would be wrong to assume that a diet of predictable and formulaic shows are all that is desired (p. 69). Moreover, ‘edutainment’ dramas can have a life beyond their network airings through use in the classroom. Singer & Singer (1983) note that guides for teachers and parents, independently published but supported by the US television networks, have usefully focused on series such as *Roots*, and others. By accepting rather than

trying to ward off children's enjoyment of television, and in recognising the prosocial and educational potential of such programmes for children, these guides offer a means to help increase their benefits by providing support for adult attempts to concentrate the potential influence of the programmes through positive evaluation and discussion of the issues.

### **Social learning and morality**

Despite the vigorous assertions of a minority who do not want to see any depictions of 'violence' (often bundled incongruously in with 'sex') on their screens, television programming is usually characterised by a notable emphasis on morality – at least in a basic, broad sense. For every character in a soap opera or situation comedy who rebels against social norms, for example, there is usually another asking if it is a good idea; for most sexual activity outside fixed relationships, a broken heart; for the typical unkindness, a consequence. With the whole range of TV behaviours, as with 'violence', critics and academics can be seen as misguided to fuss about depicted actions without looking at the associated contexts and consequences, which almost always will either ultimately reflect outcomes and results correspondent to what society generally regards as the moral domain – whether 'realistic' or not – or else, less commonly, will be part of a more sophisticated (usually single) drama where the lack of morality is implicitly acknowledged and presented as 'thought-provoking' (as often seems to be the intent of some *Screen Two* and *Film on Four* presentations), or as stylish and interesting – and therefore conspicuous (as in, for example, the films of Quentin Tarantino). It is therefore legitimate and indeed necessary, although not entirely common, to discuss the role of television drama (and other forms) in disseminating and debating moral norms in our culture.

Grant Noble (1983) contends that rather than intruding and corrupting, television drama is able to convey moral messages and thereby establish moral values. To demonstrate that children can acquire the values 'given off' by regular entertainment programming, Noble surveyed 240 children aged seven to eleven from two schools in Australia, about a series of nature programmes, *Australia Naturally*. Questions responded to each week on the day after transmission showed that viewers (compared to non-viewers) not only learned factual information given by the programmes, but also acquired the moral, pro-environmental values implicit within them<sup>29</sup>. Moreover, it was found that these

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<sup>29</sup> These messages were not always spelt out explicitly on screen, but the intended value position was verified for Noble by the TV programme's producer.

moral lessons were learned with greater force than the straightforward factual information, and that more sophisticated messages (such as 'being careful not to upset the delicate balance of nature') actually had a greater impact than simpler ones (such as that we should not 'throw rubbish in the rivers'), which tended to be part of the children's conservation repertoire already (p. 105).

Another study, also described by Noble (1983), suggested from the self-reports of 136 teenagers in Melbourne that the popular series *Happy Days* had shown viewers how to 'be cool' (57 per cent very often, 11 per cent often), how to ask for a date (40 per cent very often, 20 per cent often) and how to get on with friends and be popular (various measures around 35 per cent very often, 26 per cent often). These self-reports are partly validated by the fact that few said that *Happy Days* had helped them do well at school work (10 per cent very often, eight per cent often). Whilst the 'how to' information which this study suggests was learned from the programme may seem oppressively prescriptive, this is of course only knowledge voluntarily picked up by the teenagers on subjects which concerned them, and Noble asserts that 'It is precisely this surrogate experience with events likely or imagined to be encountered which constitutes social learning from everyday television' (p. 111). *Happy Days* in this way fulfilled just the same function for older children as the social interaction elements of *Sesame Street* had performed – albeit rather more self-consciously – in earlier years.

One other study by Noble demonstrates the complicated relationship between children, television and individual morality, one which baldly contradicts the notion that 'good' children are those who have avoided 'bad' programmes, and vice versa. The research built upon work by Wolfe & Fiske, who in 1949 had argued that normal young children used comic books as a means of successfully coping with reality, by projecting their desires which parents found unacceptable on to comic characters. The children in that study had singled out Bugs Bunny, whose ability to get away with clever tricks was much admired, and Noble found exactly the same responses emerging in some pilot research he was conducting thirty years later. To investigate further, 158 children aged between eight and eleven from two schools were asked, on separate occasions, to complete two questionnaires, one which measured the child's real-life morality, the other assessing their television exposure and identification, imitation, and perceived morality of selected TV characters. It was found that those children who were regular viewers of Bugs Bunny cartoons were those most obedient to authority in real life, and that those who wanted to be like Bugs were those who most strongly obeyed the letter (rather than the spirit) of the law. Therefore, quite contrary to the notion that such cartoons are most enthusiastically consumed by

would-be delinquents, it was those who were most obedient and law-abiding who actually enjoyed Bug's 'tricky' antics best, whilst others, including those with what may be considered a maturer sense of morality, were not so interested. Meanwhile those who said they behaved like Bugs (who we should remember used cunning tricks to evade those who want to capture or kill him, but was not malevolent), showed real-life altruism to a highly significant degree. In addition, analysis of the full survey suggested that characters such as J.R. of *Dallas* (1978–91) were most regularly watched by viewers who were non-selfish, but who recognised J.R. as selfish; this association remained strong even when other factors such as age, sex and socio-economic status were controlled. It would therefore appear that – contrary to the assumptions of those who oppose the depiction of antisocial behaviour on television – viewers routinely engage in 'negative identification', taking such characters as models of how not to behave, and perhaps strengthening their moral self-identity through pride that they are *not* like certain disagreeable TV characters. Noble concludes that, 'Television characters thus seem to be critically observed for contiguity between them and the child's life space, rather than imitated' (1983, p. 121). Whilst it is difficult to assess the veracity of the viewers' responses and identifications indicated by this research – particularly since the use of questionnaires is at best a limited method – such studies show that questions about moral learning from television are far from settled.

Having to some extent established that television can contribute to social learning, and that children are able to apply basic moral standards to television characters and so have their own morality – if it is affected at all – augmented rather than corrupted by television, it is worthwhile to look at some of the small body of work on the morality of television content. The question of how television has grown to have such prominence in Western (particularly American) cultural life, and how such a vast audience manages to find meaning in programmes 'despite their artistic shortcomings', is the concern of Victor Lidz (1984). His answer is that television programmes 'participate deeply in American *moral* culture' (p. 267, emphasis in original), sustaining a secular moral framework which underlies all programmes, regardless of whether they are set in a family home, the newsroom, the Old West or outer space. The heroes of prime-time dramas, of course, are commonly highly committed to the ideals of justice and hard work, even to extremes such as Dr Sam Beckett in *Quantum Leap*, who was not only sentenced to a lifetime of 'putting right what once went wrong', but actually had this spelled out for him in a breathy voiceover on the titles each week. Lidz's contention is that 'it has been television's standing as an

agent of conventional moralism that has made it so meaningful within the routines of daily life as well as integrative of popular social experience as a whole' (p. 288). The assertion that morality is at the very heart of television entertainment, whilst absolutely at odds with those who argue that morality is not to be found there at all, is certainly closer to the often-expressed claims of programme-makers themselves, and is clearly better able to explain the popularity of most TV dramas, sit-coms and soaps.

Newcomb & Hirsch (1984) take a slightly different view of television's role, describing it as a 'cultural forum' in which issues of the day are discussed. They argue that 'conflicting viewpoints of social issues are, in fact, the elements that structure most television programmes' (p. 65). Television should be studied as cultural ritual, they argue, with an emphasis on process rather than product: programmes produce a multiplicity of meanings, and views from the most traditional or repressive to those which are subversive or emancipatory are discussed and examined on screen. Television programming, when taken altogether, cannot be seen to offer any coherent conclusions or solutions to social issues, and that does not matter; instead of coherence there is confusion and contradiction, which means that television is more of a diverse seminar – within certain limits – than a pedagogic lecture.

The point, for Newcomb & Hirsch, is that 'in popular culture generally, in television specifically, the raising of questions is as important as the answering of them' (p. 63). The introduction and discussion of social issues, particularly topical or contemporary ones, and even within the limits which obviously exist in television, is at least just as important as their screened conclusion, whether traditional and normative or not. Television content in its entirety is seen to constitute a varied symposium on modern life; even banal programmes with no obvious 'argument' will contain submerged assumptions about values and lifestyle. Of course all programming can be received in a multiplicity of ways by the viewers, and it is this very richness and diversity which the cultural forum model embraces, although it should be noted that the fundamental morality of much TV drama is closed and fixed in such a way that the 'preferred reading' can hardly be avoided. The model recognises that television is sufficiently complex that it can attract a diverse audience, and that its influence cannot be reduced to any simple deductions about straightforward 'effects'. Indeed, the cultural forum model is particularly useful precisely because it suggests that television has an influence in a way which absolutely cannot be quantified in the simplistic terms of 'effects' researchers, although the continual translation and

discussion of moral and social issues in television entertainment may be the content most likely to have an impact on a growing child.

### **Campaign studies and advertising**

The studies which have been discussed thus far have concerned effects which were either unintended, or which (in a smaller number of cases) were the hoped-for prosocial offshoots of particular programmes, usually for children. Running parallel to this tradition of research has been another which involves the evaluation of planned campaigns which seek to affect the consciousness of the public in a particular way – usually to influence behaviours which pertain to their health or safety. A full review of these studies appears in Gauntlett (1995a); the findings are summarised very briefly below.

In general, health and safety campaigns, and other targeted attempts at persuasion, have surprisingly high failure rates considering that they usually seek results which are widely regarded as desirable and then set out, explicitly and determinedly, to produce them. This conclusion was established early by a campaign to promote the United Nations in Cincinnati, which unleashed a mass of media information upon the city, in every conceivable form over an intensive six month period, with every effort made to reach each adult among the 1,155,700 residents of central Cincinnati, but which signally failed to achieve its aims (Star & Hughes, 1950). Almost no-one could have failed to encounter the massive number of media promotions regarding the UN, and yet those who knew little or nothing about it prior to the campaign were generally just as ignorant afterwards. The number of people who thought of the UN as a possible remedy to growing international problems actually declined, whilst it was largely only those who knew something about and were interested in the organisation *already* who went on to learn something more from the programme.

Such findings initially produced a degree of consensus that media campaigns were barely worth the effort. However, as the 1960s and 1970s progressed, a carefully qualified optimism began to be accepted, that the media could be used to influence people within carefully planned and limited parameters (Mendelsohn, 1973), perhaps rather indirectly by working through a complimentary mix of particular mediated and interpersonal channels, and cumulatively through repeated exposure to particular kinds of messages (Rice & Atkin, 1989; Alcalay & Taplin, 1989). However, the findings of most campaign evaluations do not really justify even this diminished and qualified level of confidence.

Whilst the Stanford Three Community Study (Flora, Maccoby & Farquhar, 1989) seemed to produce some notable changes upon the knowledge, attitudes and risk-related behaviours of people in relation to cardiovascular disease, the enhanced and more ambitious Five Cities Project only managed a mix of failure and some partial, small changes (Taylor, Fortmann, Flora, *et al*, 1991; Fortmann, Taylor, Flora & Winkleby, 1993; Fortmann, Taylor, Flora & Jatulis, 1993). In Finland (Puska *et al*, 1985), a successful massive campaign effort on the same issue included so many interpersonal aspects and structural changes – with important modifications being made not only to healthcare provision but also to the availability of food products in line with the campaign’s aims – that the mass media element was reduced to a supporting rather than central role. Nevertheless, a Finnish national TV series was able to have a small but significant impact on smoking cessation (Puska *et al*, 1979), and another seemed to have similarly limited but worthwhile effects on diet (Puska *et al*, 1981). A television anti-smoking campaign in Sydney, Australia (Pierce, Dwyer, *et al*, 1986; Dwyer, Pierce, *et al*, 1986) had a small effect on a cohort group but this was not reflected in independent cross-sectional samples. Other anti-smoking campaigns seemed only to have an effect when they managed to smother a population without being too unvaried or dull, and ideally when supported by as much interpersonal contact as possible (Flay, 1987; McAlister, Ramirez, Galavotti & Gallion, 1989). A media-only crime prevention campaign (O’Keefe, 1985; Mendelsohn, 1986) appeared to have a greater impact than most of the programmes about personal health, perhaps because the suggested crime deterrence activities called for very little self-sacrifice; however, a TV campaign promoting use of safety belts had no observable effect at all (Robertson, Kelley, *et al*, 1974). These findings all reflect the current ‘unmistakable consensus’ within the research community (Hornik, 1989, p. 309) that the mass media may be effective for providing information and creating awareness, but that face-to-face channels are almost essential for behaviour change to be produced.

The studies of advertising are rather flawed by their implicit model of a relationship between advertising and the individual which ignores the wider demands and constraints of capitalist society (Gauntlett, 1995a). However, even given that life in such a society is bound to involve both advertising and consumerism, and that the former only seeks to alter our performance of the latter in limited ways, commercials have been found to have an undistinguished impact. Children are able from an early age to identify advertising and its purpose (Donohue, Henke & Donohue, 1980; Levin, Petros & Petrella, 1982; Wartella, 1981), and quickly became cynical about its methods and power to

persuade (Wartella, 1981; Buckingham, 1993). Studies have been unable to demonstrate much of an 'effect' beyond that people would be a little more likely to select products which repeated advertising had made them aware of, compared to less advertised products (Atkin, 1981; Goldberg & Gorn, 1983).

On the whole, deliberate efforts to cajole and persuade the public via television have met with what might be considered a remarkable lack of success. Since those who have worked in the field for years apparently find it so hard to produce minor but socially beneficial results, it becomes difficult not to think that the idea of negative effects accidentally 'slipping out' is equally unlikely. If the mass media is so unable to lead people to do things for which they will be positively rewarded, it should be much less likely to induce 'wrong' or criminal behaviour which is neither socially approved nor (despite the assertions of some) marketed by the media.

### **Towards an understanding of influences?: Newer directions in effects research**

The deficiencies of the traditional approach to television effects have not, of course, gone unnoticed by researchers, and some attempts have been made to find new angles on the old problem, and new avenues of enquiry. However, this research has not generally succeeded in advancing knowledge about the kinds of potential effects which have previously been of concern in this field. The new work has tended to fall short of this undertaking in one of two ways, by either failing to escape from the old paradigm, or else moving so far away from the study of effects that the work falls into a different field altogether (see Gauntlett, 1995a).

The 'uses and gratifications' tradition of media research is seen by some as the successor of the effects paradigm (for examples, see Rosengren, Wenner & Palmgreen, eds, 1985; Bryant & Zillmann, eds, 1991). Concerned with the question of *why* people like to watch particular programmes and genres, and what they get out of the experience, this school has produced some interesting work; however, the question of why people are drawn to certain programmes clearly cannot provide answers about what the material *does* to them in terms of the behavioural consequences which are of concern in traditional effects research. In a sense, of course, this is an advantage, freeing researchers to investigate the 'internal effects' of pleasure, entertainment and stimulation which television produces. Understood in these terms, the uses and gratifications approach is potentially much more constructive and noticeably less basic than

most of the straight effects research. On the other hand, the school has not always fulfilled this potential, at times reproducing the same flaws which crippled the effects tradition. Researchers who aim, for example, to identify the cognitive processes which inspire 'the audience' to watch TV violence, apparently fail to appreciate that the depictions of violence on television are not generally encountered by viewers who have sat down 'to watch violence', but rather occur as components in dramas which contain many other emotional and involving elements.

However, with sensitive and qualitative research focused on particular cases, the opposite becomes true. Recent research which is less swift to make simplistic assumptions about young people's media preferences has been able to show that the connections are complex, and quite unrelated to the cause-effect models. Examination of an aggressive and troublesome adolescent's interest in horror videos, by Derdeyn & Turley (1994), for example, revealed that the horror stories intersected with his own worries, fears and fantasies which were in turn a product of his emotionally deprived and abused childhood. The frightening situations and ultimate resolution of the films were seen to be analogous to the fairy tales enjoyed by younger children; and by understanding and discussing the horror films with the boy, both therapist and patient were better able to comprehend his past troubles, and to help him for the future. By taking on board the boy's media use as a symptom, rather than a cause, the researchers were thereby able to produce the kind of valuable insights which are rarely found in effects studies.

Nevertheless, whilst carefully conceived uses and gratifications research can provide this kind of useful insight into viewers' preferences and psychological needs, it clearly cannot contribute directly to our knowledge of the kinds of *effects*, beyond pleasure or emotional responses, which are our concern here.

### **Cultivation analysis and media influences**

The failure of direct-effects research to produce results showing clear consequences of media consumption does not mean that some form of study of television's influence on the way people view the whole texture and tapestry of their lives is not possible. An approach to the possible influences of television fitting this requirement might be based on the method of cultivation analysis developed by Gerber and colleagues – although not in the oversimplistic form in which it has generally been used in the past and is still deployed today. The basic principle at the root of the approach is a promising one: that exposure to

television programmes will, over time, have a cumulative influence on viewer's perceptions of the world and their place in it. This basic assumption underpinned the useful and intelligent approaches to television and the development of moral values, and the notion of television as a 'cultural forum', which we have already discussed above. Recent formulations of the cultivation perspective certainly make it seem like an important and sophisticated advance in research; for example, Morgan & Signorielli (1990, pp. 18–19) state:

'Cultivation analysis looks at [television's] messages as an environment within which people live, define themselves and others, and develop and maintain their beliefs and assumptions about social reality... The cultivation process is not thought of as a unidirectional flow of influence from television to audiences, but rather part of a continual, dynamic, ongoing process of interaction among messages and contexts.'

Unfortunately, however, the assumptions and methods which have supposedly been built upon this promising theoretical basis leave much to be desired. It is argued, for example, that television, by showing women and members of minority groups as victims more often than others, subdues people of those groups and tells them a 'message' about their place in the world – that other dominant groups have power, whilst they are powerless – which they come to accept (for example, Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Gerbner, 1994). This is a possible outcome, but not one which is obviously more likely than that such portrayals would demonstrate the injustices of the world to viewers of those groups and others, and so raise their political consciousness and lead them to seek social changes. The conclusion that viewers would *accept* a victimised, submissive position simply because they had seen it demonstrated a number of times on television does not have an obvious logic. It seems more likely that if viewers were regularly subjected to depictions of their unjust treatment in society, they would be roused to seek change; however, of course, television entertainment – particularly in America – tends not to dwell on explicit or intense depictions of social injustice in any case, and if Gerbner's methods allowed for a more sophisticated reading of programmes beyond a content analysis which simply identifies the demographic characteristics of victims, it would be likely to find that such victimisation is rarely shown in anything other than a sympathetic light which reflects, at least to some degree, its unfairness. It might then be concluded that portrayals which remind society of the unjust treatment of minorities actually help to generate sympathy and awareness of their plight. It could even be argued that television output should therefore devote *more* time to portrayals of such victimisation – although, of course, the arguments for more positive, empowering images of minorities are just as strong.

The assumption that television projects one 'mainstream' message and viewpoint, which is adopted by heavy viewers, is itself severely flawed. Television output is characterised in this approach as 'a particularly consistent and compelling symbolic stream' (Gerbner, 1990, p. 249), and even Morgan & Signorielli, quoted above, see television as 'an essentially repetitive and stable system of messages' (1990, p. 18). The idea of television depicting a perpetually 'mean and dangerous world' has also become a cultivation analysis catchphrase (for example, Gerbner *et al*, 1986, p. 26; Gerbner, 1988, p. 26; Signorielli, 1990), despite its great oversimplification of the broad range of television output. The notion of television projecting a particular worldview may be partly applicable to America's commercial networks, seeking to appeal to as many viewers as possible in their endless battles for ratings, although even in that case no singular set of political or other values could be identified as receiving consistent support. In other countries such as Britain, the diversity of programmes available, whilst generally restricted within particular cultural and political boundaries, make it impossible to describe a singular 'TV opinion' or 'TV world'.

In addition, the discourse about television 'mainstreaming' its viewers strongly recalls the assumption of the inactive viewer, the proverbial potato who happily absorbs anything that hits their couch, and is unable to regard programmes critically or ironically. Indeed, the 'heavy viewer' is roundly (if unintentionally) demonized in the cultivation literature, and the cumulative picture which the research reports themselves cultivate is one of people who watch larger amounts of television as edgy, zombified individuals who are in a category quite removed from the researchers themselves, and who watch television in an entirely unselective way. Even if this has any partial relevance to some American viewers, the model is little able to cope with either the typically more selective behaviour of viewers in other countries such as Britain (Wober, 1990), or the many viewers of more specialised cable channels in the United States and elsewhere (Perse, Ferguson & McLeod, 1994). In particular, the widespread ownership and use of video recorders very clearly reflects the discrimination of viewers (Levy & Gunter, 1988; Dobrow, 1990; Perse *et al*, 1994), whether using the machines to timeshift particular programmes to more convenient times (Gray, 1992), or for the pleasure and empowerment of curating and controlling one's own sequence of viewing (Cubitt, 1991; Canning, 1994). After all, video recording, the VideoPlus system, and the multitude of TV schedule guides would never have become popular if it was wholly the case, as Gerbner *et al* suggest, that 'most viewers watch by the clock and either do not know what they will

watch when they turn on the set or follow established routines rather than choose each program as they would choose a book, a movie or an article' (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan & Signorielli, 1986, p. 19). Statements such as this also reveal the researchers' rather particular stance towards television viewers, and their application of a 'high culture' usage model to the medium (which in any case is unable to fit the serial nature of many programmes) suggests a degree of ignorance and contempt for popular television and its audience<sup>30</sup>. As Newcomb & Hirsch (1984) suggest, researchers might gain a better understanding of their subject by beginning with the assumption that to be capable of attracting a mass audience in a complex culture, television must be 'dense, rich and complex, rather than impoverished' (p. 71), and being accordingly unsurprised to find that the audience has sophisticated and heterogeneous responses to the medium. However, Gerbner and colleagues tend to weaken their argument by unnecessarily conflating the feeling that television may have an influence on its viewers with the view that its output is overtly repetitive, similar and simplistic.

The research methods adopted to explore the possibility of cultivation influences or effects also have severe limitations, as we have partly seen in the previous chapter. The bland and inherently unrevealing correlational methodology – where amount of TV viewing is simply compared with a measure of some belief or attitude – is uncritically inherited from Gerbner, and seems to be taken for granted even by those of his followers who take an otherwise more sophisticated approach (such as Morgan & Signorielli, 1990). Cultivation studies in Signorielli & Morgan's state-of-the-art collection (1990) such as those by Hall Preston on pornography, Perse on involvement in local television news, Signorielli on fear of crime, and Hoover on religious programming, are all severely weakened by their method of simply correlating television exposure with particular attitudes, and presuming that the former causes the latter. The need for evidence of this causation is imperative, particularly since in many cases the suggestions of a causal link otherwise appear extremely unlikely. For example, Hoover's data shows that pro-Christian and conservative attitudes are more strongly correlated with the viewing of Christian religious programmes (in the United States) than they are with viewing of non-religious television, and although the article

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<sup>30</sup> This also recalls Jenson's (1992) comments on the false distinction made between enthusiasts and academics concerned with 'high' culture, and 'fans' concerned with popular culture. Whilst they communicate in different types of discourse, Jenson argues, both groups are basically people with comparable interests, enthusiasms and attachments to figures in, or aspects of, their chosen field, although one group is better able to define and take advantage of notions of 'respectability' than the other.

acknowledges that religious television has an obvious appeal to already-religious people, the data is interpreted as demonstrating an effect of viewing on attitudes in much the same style as the most outdated of simple correlation studies. Similarly, Zimmerman Umble's evidence (in the same volume) that the most devout and conservative Mennonites watch least television, whilst more liberal and less strict Mennonites watch more, is unsurprising and provides little reason to believe that this is an *effect* of television, as the author concludes.

Murdock (1994) notes that Gerbner's approach, whilst differing from the standard effects model in some ways, nonetheless shares the same '*transportation*' model of meaning, in which the media are simply seen as vehicles for shifting messages from sender to receiver. Murdock himself proposes 'a *translation* model, which sees television as an organizational system for converting social discourses into completed programs through the mediation of specific cultural forms' (p. 173). However, even this model seems to suggest that discourses are funnelled into programmes and then (presumably) *transported* into the world by those programmes. The idea that viewers unproblematically absorb television content, whether this is conceived as a set of messages or as the undoubtedly more sophisticated notion of discourses, remains in both models. A third model can be considered, which concerns discourse as it is produced *about* television programming *by* the audience, with any intended transported meanings, or discourses translated into television output, of interest only in terms of how they have come out on the 'other side' of the broadcaster-viewer relationship.

### **Beyond simple surveys: listening to the audience**

The cultivation researchers' rigid adherence to the practice of not informing subjects that the study of their attitudes is being conducted in the light of their television exposure – a technique elevated to one of high cunning in some reports – means that any opportunity to find their reactions and meanings derived or developed from their television viewing is lost. The researchers do not seem to have considered that instead of simply stockpiling correlational data, they could actually ask the respondents about the possible mediation and formation of their attitudes through television; whilst this would make it impossible to investigate the connection between viewing and attitudes without respondents being aware of the research topic, it presents opportunities to better understand television influences beyond the uninformative correlations and their speculative results. The idea of valuable research being found in such interaction with subjects might seem alarming to the more 'scientific' psychology and

communications researchers, but their own failure to produce many genuine insights is one of the strongest arguments in favour of the alternative methods.

David Buckingham's qualitative interviews with groups of children, for example, reported in his *Children Talking Television* (1993) and *Moving Images* (1996), amply demonstrate the benefits which can be gained from in-depth exploration of children's knowledge, attitudes and perceptions by simply sitting down and *talking* with them. Patricia Palmer (1986) combined loosely structured interviews with individual children, lengthy observation of their viewing in the home environment, and a survey to test the generalisability of certain findings, in a study which was thereby able to reveal children's sophisticated, interactive approach to television. The interview component of such studies show that the volunteered, verbal responses of subjects can tell us what they really think and feel in ways which convey information in greater detail and, importantly, with much greater precision than many a set of questionnaire responses. This point is also extensively illustrated in Ann Gray's interview-based study of women's use of videocassette recorders, *Video Playtime: The Gendering of a Leisure Technology* (1992); in Schlesinger, Dobash, Dobash & Weaver's *Women Viewing Violence* (1992) in which groups of women watched and then discussed several complete programmes; and in Hagell & Newburn's (1994) interviews with young offenders, discussed at the start of chapter two.

The value of more qualitative research has also been demonstrated by Tulloch & Tulloch's (1992) study in which groups of Australian school students were shown sequences involving violence from two different programmes: scenes of domestic violence from the Australian soap, *A Country Practice*, and of conflict between police and miners from a British documentary about the 1984 miners' strike, Ken Loach's *Which Side Are You On?*. After each twenty-minute screening, the children were asked to write up to a side of A4 on 'what it was about', providing the researchers with the written interpretations of almost 400 students (aged nine, twelve and fifteen) to analyse – an amount of data sufficient to impress any quantitative researcher. The study was able to show, for example, that the children could all readily understand and make inferences about the soap narrative, but that the non-linear documentary caused problems for some of the younger viewers, with its less familiar (and foreign) 'arts programme' format, and unusual portrayal of the police not as benevolent helpers but as instigators of violence. Almost all of the children condemned the violence in the scenes (the only exceptions being a small number of younger children who did not understand the documentary, and assumed that the miners must have been 'naughty'), and many developed complex responses to what they had seen. The

study was able to provide 'massive endorsement to the notion that (reformist-type) "feminist" readings are common among adolescents – boys as well as girls – in the area of domestic violence' (p. 230), and the children's responses show that whilst they in no way approved of the fictional acts of violence, they believed that such depictions were important – in the words of one twelve-year old girl – 'to show people what is happening to people' (p. 213).

Qualitative studies are also able to show that some public feeling that a programme is violent, or even upsetting, cannot be equated with the opinion that such programmes should not be shown at all. The study by Schlesinger, Dobash, Dobash & Weaver (1992) involved showing groups of women particular television programmes from videotape, and discussing with them their experiences of watching the scenes of violence in these programmes, and on television more generally. The women who had experience of domestic violence (52 of the 91 women involved) generally indicated that they found an episode of the BBC soap opera *EastEnders*, which included scenes of domestic violence, to be 'violent' and 'disturbing' (p. 87); however, they also felt very strongly that it gave a fair picture, and generally felt that it was important that the programme should have been shown, to raise awareness about the existence and nature of such assaults (pp. 102–103).

Another method, developed by Morrison & MacGregor (1993; also MacGregor & Morrison, 1995) has taken the idea of confronting subjects with the media issues in question one step further, through encouraging focus groups to actively edit video material into preferred television programmes or reports for themselves. The task of actually producing their own 'cut' evidently brings into the open the participants' most deeply felt responses and thoughts about television content, which are not necessarily recorded by the 'gut reaction' responses given to interviewers, or even revealed in traditional focus group discussions.

Qualitative research into the media sophistication of young adults is perhaps as much-needed as study of the intersections between deprivation, violence and media use. Research with children (Buckingham, 1993, 1996) has already suggested that media literacy is generally underestimated to a substantial degree. Viewers may well, for example, keenly look forward to a *Cracker* story about a serial killer motivated by the 1989 Hillsborough football stadium disaster (more specifically, blaming police for the deaths of the 96 fans, and bitter about the treatment of the victims and their families by a British culture which held them in low regard – Jimmy McGovern's *To Be A Somebody*, 1994). The viewers' reaction to the existence of such a killer in *real life*, it can be hypothesised,

would be similar to anyone's – most likely of horror and shock. Indeed, the television fiction (deliberately) produces such emotions, particularly in having a well-developed central character, DCI Bilborough, murdered before viewers' eyes. Nevertheless, the drama's production and 'high concept' may at the same time be quite separately enjoyed for its imagination, gripping realisation, and audacious plot. The ability of viewers to recognise screen entertainment for what it is would mean not so much that they are 'media educated' enough to avoid the supposed temptations of imitating screen violence, but rather that their naturally developed media literacy means that any potential links between the screen fiction and their own behaviour would be severed at source. Indeed, the work of researchers such as Livingstone (1994) suggests that the very differences between the views of some clearly genuinely worried researchers, and the many quite unconcerned viewers, is because familiarity with TV *genres* is central to their appreciation. In other words, the researchers' greater level of concern about television's effects might be due not only to differences in sensibilities and expectations, but also a discrepancy in the levels of contemporary media literacy held by researchers as compared to the young people who have grown up with recent television output, and so whose media sophistication has been cultivated over considerable viewing time. Clearly, however, more research is needed into such degrees of viewing literacy and modes of consumption. One way forward is to put video production resources into the hands of children themselves, giving young people the power to directly refute the notion that they are naive and incompetent in their media encounters, as explored in the later chapters of this thesis.

The more sophisticated, qualitative approaches discussed in this section have clearly shown that research which engages respondents with the focus of study, such as television depictions of violence, are much more likely to reveal their actual feelings, concerns, interpretations and preferences about television output, than simple surveys which seek to keep television separate from the other questions in respondent's minds. A more dynamic and imaginative interpretation of what are supposedly the tenets of cultivation research – the influence of television over time as it is actively watched and interpreted by viewers within the full environment of their lives – would perhaps produce research which manages to break free of the apparent pull of the stimulus-response effects tradition, and would enable researchers to better understand viewers' uses and interpretations of television, and its place in their lives.

## Moving on to more subtle approaches

The attempts to find direct effects of television on viewers' behaviour have had little success, and the traditional effects research paradigm can now be left behind with some confidence. The inherently simplistic, determinist type of question being posed meant, perhaps, that the enterprise had been flawed from the start. To argue that social problems are caused by their depiction in the mass media is, as Boston (1994) has said, 'like suggesting that the wind is caused by trees shaking their branches'. Television is likely to have some *influence* upon viewers' perceptions of social life and the world in general, but the traditional research questions are not couched in these terms, and are unable to give us such information.

All too often the television effects research evidence is interpreted as 'inconclusive', or as showing nothing. In fact, if nothing else, it *has* answered its own question: television does not have predictable, direct effects. The mass of studies, which individually may be inconclusive or flawed, when taken as a whole must demonstrate that. The lack of 'positive' results showing effects in the real world do not constitute an informational void, but have to be taken as a conclusion in themselves.

The history and persistence of effects research can be much more easily traced back to the recurrent moral panic and associated political interest about television (see Gauntlett, 1995a), than to any more intelligible process of reflective research development based on a growing body of knowledge. The research evidence has at least shown that this moral panic has little justification. As Barwise & Ehrenberg have noted, it is not simply that effects of television on violence have not been proved, but that they are not usually even a consideration for those professionally involved in limiting it (1988, p. 139): criminologists do not concern themselves with television output when they seek to explain crime rates, any more than villains are genuinely likely to trace their illicit career back to Saturday evenings in front of *The A-Team*.

As we have seen, most of the effects studies, especially those claiming that television viewing produces violence or other undesirable outcomes, have generally made no attempt to suggest why the alleged effects might occur. Since the claimed results are usually very tenuous extractions from weak data, one would expect such justification to be doubly necessary. The research into the possible effect of television depictions of violence on viewers' aggression, on its own terms, has produced a variety of results, some positive. However, we have seen that the studies which claim to find 'effects' tend to be methodologically

flawed, and are often small-scale. Freedman (1986, p. 378) asks readers of these studies,

‘If all of the results were precisely reversed, if every effect that showed an increase in aggression actually showed a decrease and vice versa, would the evidence be sufficient to convince you that television violence reduced aggression? I doubt that it would.’

Since the most in-depth, sociological studies, using large samples over extended periods, showed no evidence of television having negative effects upon the behaviour of viewers, whilst effects were suggested only by superficial, weak and artificial laboratory experiments, it seems safe to conclude that such effects are unlikely to occur in the real, complex social world. Even prosocial programming and health and safety campaigns – material which seeks only to bring benefits to viewers – have found that behavioural change is extremely difficult to produce. Communications research surely has a place in recording, analysing and transforming the ways in which media audiences share and develop understandings about the world through the powerful medium of television, but it can be concluded that such complex and sophisticated processes will only be understood by correspondingly subtle and carefully-handled research.

## 4. A bigger picture: Critical questions about mass media and society

The psychological, individualistic cause–effect paradigm remains the magnetic core of public discussion about the impact of the mass media, drawing all debate within its restricted terrain. The previous two chapters have addressed questions about media effects research on their own terms, and produced clear answers. Effects research has not demonstrated that the media has a direct impact on the behaviour of the audience. This most likely means that concern about direct effects is misplaced, and that entertainment media have been used as a political scapegoat in ways which cannot be excused by reference to any evidence.

The straightforward and basic questions which recur in this field demand a particular kind of response: does media ‘X’ cause behaviour ‘Y’? Such questions must be answered from within the same paradigm, by reference to research which focuses on that kind of effect – which is why I have examined and discussed that evidence in some detail. Nevertheless, the findings of such studies are in many ways a side-issue. The fact that they make unconvincing claims about the occurrence of direct effects is only *one* of the reasons for criticising them; in fact, disputing the interpretation of particular ‘findings’ can be seen as irrelevant to the broader ideological context which such studies are produced in, and reproduce.

The studies, as I have argued, treat media consumers as fundamentally passive, indiscriminating, and malleable, and the mass media as correspondingly vapid, undemanding, and meaningless. In this, the effects studies share Theodor Adorno’s analysis of popular culture and its consumers. However, whilst the effects studies have little other theory to offer, Adorno’s often patronising view of the appeal of mass culture, whilst misplaced, is not actually a *necessary* part of his thesis, as this chapter will establish. Put simply, Adorno advances broader arguments about media and culture which remain timely and important, and these issues can be discussed without having to revile their subjects. Indeed, Adorno himself was unable to escape the conclusion that the effects studies which he witnessed during his time in America, which ‘proceeded from the subjects’ reactions as if they were a primary and final source of sociological knowledge,’ were ‘thoroughly superficial and misguided’ (Adorno, 1969, p. 343).

Although both perspectives are critical of the mass media, Adorno’s work within the Frankfurt School tradition of critical theory, and the work of the much less coherent school of media effects proponents, could not be more different in their

political impact – whether or not this is consciously intended. Whilst Adorno and his colleagues produced enduring insights into the workings of capitalist domination, the psychologists of media effects have tended only to generate excuses for the inadequacies of contemporary societies.

The analysis of the individualist effects research tradition which I have outlined in the previous chapters might appear to suggest a belief that there is no justifiable need to be concerned about the role of the mass media in society. Indeed, I would argue that the impact of the mass media is *not* an isolatable ‘problem’ *in itself*. As targets for criticism go, the ideological role played by media-effects psychologists is a much clearer shot. But the mass media obviously *do* matter, and cannot fail to contribute massively to social life and understandings. In this chapter I will consequently begin to locate my critique of the effects tradition within a broader social, critical theory.

The discussion which follows involves a number of elements; if all of these were thrown into play immediately and simultaneously, it would not be possible to introduce each one properly and would no doubt make for a perplexing read. I therefore begin with a discussion of Adorno’s ideas, and consider how they could be applied to an understanding of the media’s function in society today. This is followed by a consideration of whether the field of cultural studies has fulfilled its initial promise to drive forth a new critical understanding of the media and society. The chapter then returns towards critical theory and discusses the problematics of identifying singular explanations for complex questions. Finally, the work of Antonio Gramsci, which is hinted at throughout the text, steps out of the shadows and is used to fit the themes of the chapter together.

### **Theodor Adorno and critical theory**

Adorno took culture to be more significant in social domination (or change) than Marxism traditionally had<sup>31</sup>. Capitalism, rather than being headed towards its own inevitable collapse and revolutionary overthrow, was seen to be integrating

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<sup>31</sup> Adorno’s theories about the ‘culture industry’ – of which this section provides a somewhat potted survey – should really be understood in the full context of the works of the Frankfurt School, which, due to limitations of space, are only hinted at here. Douglas Kellner’s *Critical Theory, Marxism and Modernity* (1989a) provides a comprehensive critique of the field, whilst key critical biographies of the School are Martin Jay’s *The Dialectical Imagination* (1973), and Rolf Wiggershaus’s considerable *The Frankfurt School* (1994). Adorno’s work is perceptively explored in Gillian Rose’s *The Melancholy Science* (1978), and other valuable discussions include Buck-Morss (1977), Held (1980), Bernstein (1991), and Kellner (1995).

and reinforcing its domination. Adorno – with typical pessimism, but also informed by twentieth-century hindsight – felt that classical Marxist theory had in this sense been much too optimistic, and that Georg Lukács and others had been wrong to think that the radicalisation of the working class would be inevitable<sup>32</sup>. ‘No universal history leads from savagery to humanitarianism,’ he wrote in 1966, ‘but there is one leading from the slingshot to the megaton bomb. It ends in the total menace which organized mankind poses to organized men’ (Adorno, 1973, p. 320)<sup>33</sup>. Mass culture was seen as a primary machine in the production of this apocalyptic scenario.

Capitalism had effectively put the final bricks in the wall of its domination by filling the one space which it did not previously occupy – non-working or ‘free’ time – with the products of the mass media, the ‘culture industry’ as Adorno and Max Horkheimer dubbed it in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, completed in 1944 (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1972). The term is not intended to suggest that popular culture is the product of a singular industry like any other, but rather encapsulates the irony that culture, which had previously been seen as the place

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<sup>32</sup> Indeed, the Frankfurt School was not only more fatalistic than Marxists of the nineteenth century, but generally displayed a pessimism which *increased* as the twentieth ran its course. Of the mid-1940s, Jay (1973) observes: ‘Disillusioned with the Soviet Union, no longer even marginally sanguine about the working classes of the West, appalled by the integrative power of mass culture, the Frankfurt School travelled the last leg of its march away from orthodox Marxism’ (p. 256).

<sup>33</sup> This statement is taken from *Negative Dialectics*, completed by Adorno three years before his death. The work is deliberately obtuse, juggling phrases and thoughts in a manner which suggests arguments, rather than dictating them. The author himself describes it as a ‘largely abstract text’ in his Foreword (p. xix), and the book can be seen, like some of Adorno’s other fragmentary works, as an early experiment with alternative forms of academic textual presentation. More recent examples of such ‘new literary forms for sociology’ can be found in Michael Mulkey (1985), and are discussed in some depth by Elizabeth Chaplin (1994, pp. 243–274). Chaplin also provides some valuable notes on Adorno’s style: ‘The fragmentary nature of his writing is intended to counter the domination in written scholarship of linear, “coherent” prose, whose arguments are linked together cumulatively by “therefores” and “because” to produce a “compelling” thesis... Adorno’s writing is also intended to make the reader *work* to grasp its meaning, in contrast to the “easy” style of popular culture, which, he would contend, lulls the consumer into an unthinking, uncritical state’ (p. 37). The style also reflects Adorno’s belief that for art works to be autonomous and resistant to exchange value, they should be unintelligible to the masses (see Chaplin, p. 39); Adorno thus, in a sense, sought to be to text what Schoenberg – whom he admired – was to music (see also Jay, 1973, p. 176 & p. 183). As Gillian Rose notes, Adorno ‘was always searching for a style for philosophy and sociology which would be the equivalent of the search for a modernist style which has concerned twentieth-century musicians and novelists’ (1978, p. 8). Adorno’s conception of ‘method’ indicated ‘the relation between ideas and the composition of texts’ (*ibid*, p. 11), and other writers, musicians, philosophers and sociologists were discussed by him as if they shared this preoccupation (*ibid*, p. 12).

for 'pure' individual expression and creativity, was now being produced by the truckload for profit and consumption<sup>34</sup>. The products of the culture industry were seen to be extending the capitalist integration of society, with the mass media producing a 'circle of manipulation and retroactive need in which the unity of the system grows ever stronger' (p. 121). Mass culture draws the population under its spell, filling time with its familiar, largely apolitical content, whilst individuals are led to feel that their desires are being gratified through their personal choice of entertainments. 'Each product affects an individual air,' Adorno noted in 1964; but this illusion of individuality 'itself serves to reinforce ideology' (1991, p. 87).

It is argued that the culture industry produces a debased mass of unchallenging popular media which is antithetical to free or critical thinking about society. A hegemonic spirit of generally optimistic ignorance is thereby generated and maintained in the comfort of every home. The obvious analogy is with a simple interpretation of the Marxist approach to religion, with the media in the twentieth century simply superseding religion as the institution which performs the function of diverting attention from the pain and exploitation of life under capitalism, occupying consciousness instead with the appearance of a satisfying life, and the promise of greater happiness from further media consumption<sup>35</sup>. This fulfilment, of course, is seen to be false.

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<sup>34</sup> The term 'mass culture' is used in this chapter to denote the products of the culture industry; the term 'popular culture' is also used, almost interchangeably, but with the latter additionally signifying that which is observably successful. The use of the term 'mass culture' does not imply any sympathy for the view that mass media products are a homogenous mass, or are produced for an indiscriminating audience; nor is the use of 'popular culture' intended to give credence to the notion that the culture arises entirely from the people. In the light of these criticisms of the common terms, Kellner (1995) has proposed the alternative, 'media culture', which is said to emphasise media content, audiences, production *and* distribution, as well as the way in which the mass media have come to colonise contemporary culture. With use over time, this term may come to be useful, but is currently both unfamiliar and somewhat vague, and so has not been adopted here. Instead, 'mass culture' and 'popular culture' are used in a context which is intended to shake off, respectively, the more judgmental or overtly populist interpretations of their meaning.

<sup>35</sup> It should be acknowledged that the analogy being drawn here is related more to the popular 'opium of the people' soundbite than to Marx's actual writings on religion, which were, unsurprisingly, significantly more complex. His 1844 essay 'A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's "Philosophy of Right": Introduction', from which the 'opium' quote comes, for example, explores the way in which religion represents humanity's alienation from itself – perhaps a step beyond the role claimed for the mass media by the Frankfurt School. However, the products of the culture industry, for Adorno, could easily replace religion in Marx's statement that 'The overcoming of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is the demand for their real happiness' (Marx, 1844, in Kamenka, ed., 1983, p. 115).

‘[The culture industry] proclaims: you shall conform, without instruction as to what; conform to that which exists anyway, and to that which everyone thinks anyway as a reflex of its power and omnipresence. The power of the culture industry’s ideology is such that conformity has replaced consciousness. The order that springs from it is never confronted with what it claims to be or with the real interests of human beings.’ (p. 90).

Adorno knows, of course, that the culture industry does not literally issue propagandist commands of the ‘You shall conform’ nature, and his conception of media effect is not that people would blindly follow such instructions even if it were to do so. Rather, it is simply that the mass media erodes the free or critical thinking of its audience, thereby producing conformity with little effort. Drawing on his 1957 essay, ‘The Stars Down to Earth’, an analysis of the astrology column of the *Los Angeles Times*, Adorno illustrates his point:

‘If an astrologer urges his readers to drive carefully on a particular day, that certainly hurts no one; they will, however, be harmed indeed by the stupefication which lies in the claim that advice which is valid every day and which is therefore idiotic, needs the approval of the stars.’ (p. 91)<sup>36</sup>.

With their time occupied by work on the one hand, and with entertainments produced under capitalism on the other, individuals – and in this we have to mean intellectuals and factory workers alike – fail to develop their fullest capacity for independent critical thought and judgements. In an age of unemployment, the culture industry is presented with even more responsibility for maintaining the status quo in this way, and this may be one of the reasons that contemporary mass culture contains more apparently ‘critical’ elements than in Adorno’s day – although the mass media has never been quite as uniform as he frequently suggested. Punk or rap music which is simultaneously anti-establishment in content but is marketed enthusiastically by multi-national companies is one example; political satire on commercial television is another. Closer to the theme of this thesis, the promotion of ‘environmentally friendly’ goods, and the pro-environmental concern shown in capitalist products from children’s cartoons such as *Captain Planet* (1991–92) and Disney’s movie *Pocahontas* (1995) to the music and videos of Michael Jackson (such as the hypocritical ‘Earth Song’, 1996), reflect the ability of capitalism to attack itself

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<sup>36</sup> Astrology was also seen by Adorno to have the more direct effect of promoting assimilation into the status quo; social contradictions are naturalised, and concerns about life under capitalism are shifted onto the private plane, with the additional promise of a reassuring outcome. Emphasis is placed on the conventional, and bourgeois aspirations are presumed. Of course, astrology was not taken entirely seriously in Adorno’s time, and today is unable to escape from a gaze tinted with irony and satire; and yet horoscopes still appear in numerous publications, serving as tireless reminders of a catalogue of approved priorities.

from within and yet be wholly unaffected. With businesses competing against each other for market shares, common interests are unlikely to be perceived; but this is unnecessary in an age where radical symbols and messages can be packaged as 'cool' and achieve fashionable, and financial, success.

Rather than being fundamentally challenging, such material can be seen to have the role of giving the *impression* that mass culture is engaged in critical dialogue with forms of social organisation – enabling the more politically conscious sector of the audience to feel that 'their' media is challenging the system – whilst in fact doing nothing to bring about change. As Horkheimer & Adorno noted in 1944, 'Something is provided for all so that none may escape' (1972, p.123). Deviations from norms of style or content only serve to reinforce the system, therefore, by generating the impression that the mass media is characterised by variety, whereas in fact any challenges are so fundamentally limited *within* that system as to be inconsequential. Such deviations are soon reconciled: 'Realistic dissidence is the trademark of anyone who has a new idea in business' (*ibid*, p.132). Aspects of the mass media which appear to have challenging content are, in this view, only the footprints of the culture industry keeping pace with the ever-increasing sophistication of its audience; doing what is necessary to maintain attention.

It can be credibly claimed that Horkheimer & Adorno *predicted* the ultimately highly profitable 'counter-culture' of the late sixties (see *ibid*, p.145), as well as any number of apparently anti-establishment mass culture products from rap and punk music, to the controversial programming of Channel Four on British television, and the more subtle challenges of *The Simpsons* (with its 'All-American dysfunctional family') and even *Sesame Street* in America. This propagation of an illusion would not be a *conscious* trick on the part of the individual producers of such material, of course, any more than priests and the clergy are required to be cynically manipulative defenders of capitalism in the parallel example of the Marxist approach to religion<sup>37</sup>. Nevertheless, the

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<sup>37</sup> Nor does the media ignore questions about class; indeed, the British mass media is full of discourses about 'class', in various forms. Some television programmes contemplate the subject head-on, such as Tony Parsons' (rather hollow) social commentary series *Parsons on Class* (BBC2, 1996), or Peter Flannery's powerful epic drama serial *Our Friends in the North*, which followed four (initially) working-class friends from 1964 to the present, getting its teeth into key political questions and swallowing all of BBC2's serials budget for half of 1996. Many other series involve relationships between central characters which are structured around the tension between their class differences, the typical example being working police officers being put together with inexperienced public-school fast-trackers, as in *Between the Lines* (BBC1, 1992–95), *Backup* (BBC1, 1995) and *Dalziel and Pascoe* (BBC1, 1996). Curiously, the character differences in similar ITV shows are more likely to

capitalist system is able to absorb 'challenging' culture, and this has the function of incorporating those who would otherwise be dissidents – 'to lessen the distance between the alienated individual and his affirmative culture', as Jay puts it (1973, p. 186). In the 1930s the latest example of this was jazz, which for Adorno was 'a source of continued horror' (*ibid*). Whole-heartedly rejecting its claims of musical liberation, Adorno saw jazz as nothing other than a pretentious commodity, which – whilst providing superficial satisfaction – could, ironically, only strengthen alienation.

A similar incorporation of 'alternatives' is the well integrated but ultimately dilute 'critical' stance which can be found throughout the mass media today. Stephen Wagg (1992b), for example, notes that popular television comedy since *Monty Python's Flying Circus* (1969–74) has appealed to an implied audience of intelligent individuals living, in John Cleese's words, in 'a mad, crazy world' (p. 282). The global conditions which *Comic Relief* (1985–) annually seeks to improve are not in particular need of explanation, being an unfortunate part of this 'mad' world, to be alleviated by a day of limited 'craziness' on the part of the intelligent consumer/individuals at home. In this case, popular culture criticises the world, whilst simultaneously dissipating any need for accountability, and replacing such a need with the apparent capacity of 'the people' to provide a solution (however ephemeral that may really be). In addition, we can note J.M. Bernstein's observation that many of the social conflicts represented in the mass media are concerned with the ideologies of sexism and racism, which are no longer essential to the survival of the capitalist system, and indeed have always been somewhat contradictory to the notion of

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mirror American programmes, in that the structuring differences are not so obviously class-based but are to do with cultural taste, as between Morse and Lewis in *Inspector Morse* (1987–), or education and approach to justice, as between Fitz and Jimmy Beck in *Cracker* (1993–95). However, commercial television's continuing dramas such as *Coronation Street* (ITV, 1960–), *The Bill* (ITV, 1984–) and *Brookside* (C4, 1982–), like the BBC's *EastEnders* (1985–), regularly involve tensions between the more conspicuously 'middle class' characters and those with a different background.

The press, too, seem to find the subject of recurring interest. In a period when many papers had run articles probing the centrality of the British class system today, the *Daily Mail* published a spread on class (18 April 1996, pp. 8–9) in which columnist Simon Heffer painted a picture of present-day Britain in which social mobility is free and fluid, but within which the class system still survives. However, 'class today is not to do with money, or background,' he explained, 'but in the way different people do things: what ambitions they have for their families, how they treat others, what their tastes are, how they choose to live'. Class here is a free-floating option, with middle-classness clearly the *Mail's* favoured choice. Indeed, the qualifications in this list indicate that the working-class are characterised by slovenly, tasteless and inconsiderate behaviour.

free individuals in the market-place (1991, p. 20). Without wishing to reify capitalism, we can see that by appearing to discard bits of sexism and racism along the way, the capitalist system is able to become more streamlined and at the same time secure contemporary hegemony, whilst additionally benefiting from the superficial appearance of being progressive.

Adorno himself credited the content of the mass media with little cleverness, and indeed seemed incapable of understanding how any intelligent person could begin to enjoy popular culture. Whilst it is obviously part of his argument that 'real' pleasure is not even on offer – nor even *knowable* – in contemporary mass culture, Adorno persisted in a characterisation of both mass media products *and* audiences which has perhaps served to weaken the more substantial part of his thesis. In a 1938 essay, for example, Adorno argues that those who enjoy popular music are 'regressive listeners' who are 'confirmed in their neurotic stupidity' by it, and 'behave like children' in their continued demand for similar goods (see 1991, pp. 41–46). They are characterised as 'retarded' and 'infantile' fans, whose enjoyment of popular music is seen not as conscious selection but as passive submission<sup>38</sup>. As Rolf Wiggershaus notes about Adorno's work on popular music and radio listeners,

'Taken as a whole, these essays of Adorno's represent a position which, in spite of its trenchant criticism of society, condemned the victims of the social structure it criticized; and it passed sentence on those victims without making any attempt to address them... There was no let-up in his negative interpretation of the ways in which these victims expressed themselves' (p. 245).

This perspective stemmed, in turn, from the Frankfurt School's general view that mechanical, ideological mass culture is the absolute opposite of artistic 'high culture', which alone is able to convey real feelings and political resistance (see Kellner, 1989a, pp. 122–130, and Jay, 1973, pp. 173–188). Adorno specifically felt that contemporary society is only reflected in art which bypasses superficial

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<sup>38</sup> Adorno was not alone in making such extreme characterisations. Most obviously, fellow Frankfurt School theorist Herbert Marcuse took a similar line, as this classic passage from his *One Dimensional Man* (1968) indicates: 'The irresistible output of the entertainment and information industry carry with them prescribed attitudes and habits... The products indoctrinate and manipulate; they promote a false consciousness which is immune against its falsehood... Thus emerges a pattern of *one-dimensional thought and behaviour*' (pp. 26–27). Marcuse's important thesis, about the way in which the media describes and closes off the universe of discourse, is potentially obscured by this somewhat brash view of media effect, which itself, of course, suffers from being overly one-dimensional.

This type of view of mass culture can be partly accounted for – if indeed it needs to be – by the profound cultural shock experienced by Adorno and his colleagues upon their encounter with highly commercial mass media, following their exile from Frankfurt to North America during the Nazi era (Bottomore, 1984, p. 45).

notions of beauty and is characterised instead by dissonance, fragmentation and negation. The uncomfortable, alienated work of Franz Kafka and Samuel Beckett in literature, and Arnold Schoenberg and Alban Berg in music<sup>39</sup>, was upheld as the kind of 'truthful' art which might 'arouse the fear which existentialism merely talks about' (Adorno, 1977a, p. 191). This kind of disorientating, shocking work – art which rips away all comforting masks to expose the deepest, most alienating horrors of life in modern society – is not likely to be the enjoyable, relaxing stuff of which most mass entertainment is made<sup>40</sup>. At the same time, it can be noted that those who – unlike intellectuals – are forced to confront the rock-face of capitalism at work every day, are not likely to want to spend their little spare time enduring further artificially unpleasant experiences, of which they are likely to have had enough already. (This is not to argue that such art has no role, but is merely recognition that its place is more likely to be akin to that of academic commentary than mass entertainment).

It is true that Adorno seems *genuinely* unable to believe that anyone can enjoy popular music – although false consciousness theses of that kind are inevitably somewhat arrogant – as this example shows:

'The illusion of a social preference for light music as against serious is based on that passivity of the masses which makes the consumption of light music contradict the objective interest of those who consume it. It is claimed that they actually like light music and listen to the higher type only for reasons of social prestige, when acquaintance with the text of a single hit song suffices to reveal the sole function this object of honest approbation can perform.' (1991, p. 30).

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<sup>39</sup> We can see the influence of these artists upon works by Adorno such as *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life* (1974) and *Negative Dialectics* (1973). Their choppy and unconventional styles have much in common with Schoenberg and Berg's musical experiments with atonality and the 12-note system, and Beckett's plays of the incomprehensible and absurd. The picture of human alienation, delusion and paralysis painted in *Waiting for Godot* (1953), for example, is well aligned with Adorno's vision of modern culture, whilst Kafka's alienated, alienating fictions conjure with related reflections on life in contemporary society (see Adorno's 'Notes on Kafka', in *Prisms*, 1967).

<sup>40</sup> Adorno generally required art to reflect the most terminally bleak view of capitalist alienation and oppression. Consider, for example, Adorno's appreciation of Kafka: 'He over whom Kafka's wheels have passed, has lost for ever both any peace with the world and any chance of consoling himself with the judgement that the way of the world is bad; the element of ratification which lurks in resigned admission of the dominance of evil is burnt away' (Adorno, 1977a, p. 191). The image of being crushed under the prose reflects Walter Benjamin's idea that 'Kafka's outlook is that of a man caught under the wheels' (1977, p. 91). Both images are appropriate; but even Benjamin sought to extract positive lessons from Kafka, and resented Bertolt Brecht's suggestion that his essay on Kafka 'increases and spreads the darkness surrounding Kafka instead of dispersing it' (p. 90).

The sheer incomprehensibility of the enjoyment of light music to Adorno clearly contributed to his view that popular culture was imposed from above, rather than having any real appeal to the audience. This view was supplemented, and indeed strengthened, by the argument that art and culture in capitalist society have become fetishised commodities, attractive for reasons of their exchange value and superficial novelty rather than any inherent quality of their art or content. As Horkheimer and Adorno argued, under capitalism,

‘No object has an inherent value; it is valuable only to the extent that it can be exchanged. The use value of art, its mode of being, is treated as a fetish; and the fetish, the work’s social rating (misinterpreted as its artistic status) becomes its use value – the only quality which is enjoyed’ (1972, p. 158).

We can observe that, for example, the culture of the dance music which dominates the British pop charts in the nineties is a tight combination of sophisticated graphics and marketing, the appeal of latest releases, and perhaps a glamorous or mysterious appearance on *Top of the Pops* or the frisson of association with the most currently fashionable clubs or drugs, *as well as* – but not in any way excluding – the music itself. The allure of this package can readily be seen as a fetish, as can that of any number of ‘cult’ television programmes or films marketed as hits (whether of the mainstream or arthouse variety). Indeed, any mass culture product can be thought of as a fetish object for some kind of audience. The theory of the fetish character of popular culture is, then, a powerful one, but it would seem to become more rather than less complete, if Adorno could allow that some enjoyment must come from consumption of the cultural experience as well. Such an acceptance would also help to explain the consumption of those cultural products which sell well despite a complete lack of any ‘trendiness’.

Adorno’s style of argument has in recent times been seized by liberal postmodernists as a classic example of the traditional elitism against which can be set their own claims for cultural transformation through playful interpretation and the continual self-reinvention of mass culture (Bernstein, 1991, p. 1). To attack Adorno for this aspect of his argument alone, however, is to ignore his contribution of more substantial insights which can stand apart from that particular line of criticism. The elitist references to ‘retarded’ pop fans – particularly when so explicitly compared to the audience for the kind of modernist music which is commonly regarded as unlistenable – are undoubtedly infelicitous, but the unfortunate emphases in some of the work do not affect the basic theory.

There is, however, a need to rework this aspect of Adorno's argument. Most individuals can identify some aspects of popular culture which appeal to them. A pertinent body of argument will not be built on the premise that people are fools, with foolish tastes. More often than not popular culture is quite sophisticated culture/entertainment, containing much to occupy an intelligent audience. Adorno was wrong to think that people's awareness of the tyranny of capitalism would be buried by its supply to them of completely 'rubbish' culture<sup>41</sup>; however, once turned around so that we note that mass culture really *does* contain something meaningful for most people, it is far less surprising that people come to be attached to it.

This is not to argue that the status quo is fine since so many people consume mass culture with apparent pleasure. Horkheimer & Adorno warned that the consensus amongst the public, 'which ostensibly and actually favours the system of the culture industry, is a part of the system and not an excuse for it' (1972, p. 122). The sense in which the audience is said to 'favour' the media is not seen as a consequence of its quality, but rather is due to the fetishistic attachment to its superficial charms. As Adorno was to assert later, 'Even if it touches the lives of innumerable people, the function of something is no guarantee of its particular quality' (1991, p. 88). This is surely true, and one would not want to argue that popular culture is the *ideal* culture, or the culture which society specifically needs or deserves. However, we must recognise, as Adorno did not, that it can at least be intellectually *engaging*, and to people of all types of personality and capability. This concession would also lessen the reliance of the thesis on a somewhat patronising false consciousness argument, wherein individuals are not capable of recognising what they 'really' want.

By the later stage of his career, Adorno did seem to accept that both 'servile intellectuals' as well as general consumers could be appreciating the products of the culture industry with 'a tone of ironic toleration' (p. 89):

'People... force their eyes shut and voice approval, in a kind of self-loathing, for what is meted out to them, knowing fully the purpose for which it is manufactured. Without admitting it they sense that their lives would be completely intolerable as soon as they no longer clung to satisfactions which are none at all.'

This account credits the audience with some critical capacity, then, as well as providing a reasonable explanation of the mechanism by which capitalism makes itself indispensable. In his *Grundrisse* of 1857, Marx (1973) argued that

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<sup>41</sup> Popular culture *is* actually described as 'rubbish', for example in Horkheimer & Adorno (1972, p. 134).

capitalism, once established, thereafter reproduces the conditions of its own possibility; and Adorno's twentieth-century, *cultural* account of that process is invaluable to its understanding, and adds considerable support to the case. However, it must be insisted that the satisfactions provided by the media, whether false or not in Adorno's conception of 'reality', are experienced by media consumers as quite *genuine*, and in that sense their lives *would* become much less congenial without such long-accustomed pleasures. It is precisely because of this genuine attachment to elements of mass media that the potential loss of the capitalist system, within which media products are highly integrated, becomes equally intolerable.

Adorno and his colleagues therefore produced the keys with which we might come to understand both the functions of the entertainment-dominated mass media, and the ways in which capitalism's hegemonic survival is maintained. This is not to suggest that the mass media is 'evil', nor that its content is unchallenging, or a direct conduit for dominant ideology. The bones of the argument can even be reduced to three benign words: the mass media *fills time satisfyingly*. It takes up the spaces which would otherwise be occupied with other social activity. In Adorno's rather more melancholy words, 'The colour film demolishes the genial old tavern to a greater extent than bombs ever could' (1991, p. 89).

Importantly, the argument as made here is *not* that the media fills time with unchallenging pulp. The latter view is considerably weakened when we note the frequently complex and surprising elements of mass entertainment. This argument thrives on that very observation, however, since the intelligent viewer would not be satisfied by shallow amusements – and we cannot assume that most viewers are not intelligent. The status quo is secure not so much because the media does not question it, but rather because 'challenging' viewing *feels* like political action, and comes to replace it, whilst little is changed.

### **Framing the issues**

On the question of mass media effects, Adorno rightly pulls the focus right back to the big, social picture. The psychologists of the direct effects research tradition are quite wrong to pick on particular types of media content, although it is obvious why their microcosmic approach would lead them to do so. What domination there is will be effected just as surely by gardening programmes as by violent dramas. As early as 1895, Emile Durkheim was warning that the individualistic approach of psychology was of little use in the study of social

phenomena. In *The Rules of Sociological Method*, he noted that whilst society is made up of individuals, the whole cannot be understood through exclusive study of its parts (1938, p. 102).

‘The group thinks, feels, and acts quite differently from the way in which its members would were they isolated. If, then, we begin with the individual, we shall be able to understand nothing of what takes place in the group. In a word, there is between psychology and sociology the same break in continuity as between biology and the physicochemical sciences. Consequently, every time that a social phenomenon is directly explained by a psychological phenomenon, we may be sure that the explanation is false’ (p. 104).

This critique of the psychologically-centred approach to social problems was particularly prescient in the light of studies produced over the following century, as will be discussed in the following chapter. The assertive tone of Durkheim’s argument would also set the scene for an enduring struggle between the disciplines over the ‘proper’ scale on which social questions should be considered – a battle over whether the academic camera should be fitted with a wide-angle or a close-up lens. One of the potential bridges across this ideological chasm has been cultural studies, which might also be the tradition to inherit and advance the concerns within critical theory about the construction of hegemony and meaning through culture. The following section discusses these possibilities.

### **Critical disintegration in cultural studies**

The early form of cultural studies, as pioneered at the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies under the directorship of Stuart Hall, and influenced by members of the previous generation such as Raymond Williams, Richard Hoggart and Edward Thompson, would have seemed in the 1970s – and indeed for most of the 1980s – to be the new school which would take critical and very broadly Marxist perspectives on culture forwards into the twenty-first century. Even today, when the field has cause to define itself, such concerns are reflected, as in these selections from John Hartley’s description of cultural studies, in *Key Concepts in Communication and Cultural Studies* (1994, p. 71):

‘Cultural studies has focused... on the way social divisions are made meaningful. ... Culture is... the terrain on which hegemony is struggled for and established, and hence it is the site of “cultural struggles”. ... Cultural studies seeks to account for cultural differences and practices not by reference to intrinsic or eternal values (how good?), but by reference to the overall map of social relations (in whose interests?).’

It would certainly appear that an intellectual project so defined would be concerned with the issues at the heart of the discussion above – the conflict

between the pleasures offered by capitalist media on the one hand, and the potential of individuals to catch glimpses of the societal flaws and potential freedoms, from which those products distract attention, on the other<sup>42</sup>.

However, as it has grown and spread, acquiring its own departments in bookshops and universities, the critical edge of cultural studies has become surprisingly blunt. Of course, as it has proliferated, cultural studies has become an increasingly difficult field to define; Jon Stratton and Ien Ang note that 'As a label appropriated in a variety of ways by a diverse and heterogeneous constituency, the identity of cultural studies is becoming increasingly elusive' (1996, p. 361). It still has some distinguished practitioners, vital and insightful commentators on culture, many of whom – such as Stuart Hall, Angela McRobbie, Tony Bennett and Ien Ang – show up in the seminal collection *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies* (Morley & Chen, eds, 1996). However, too often today cultural studies academics are occupied not with the important questions established by Hall and colleagues in the past two decades, and indicated towards by Hartley above, but with overelaborate (and thus, arguably, conservatively ideological) considerations of cultural products, or with an unlikely and strangely romantic vision of audience resistance.

It has become something of a cliché to pick on the work of John Fiske, but his writings have visibly influenced cultural studies in the 1990s, and more broadly represent what one might call the field's 'indulgent' turn, which manages to be populist and esoteric at the same time. Evidence certainly supports the view that audiences can and do make their own meanings, resist messages, and intelligently select and process their media diet (see, for example, Hill, 1996; Petrie, 1995; Moores, 1993; Ang, 1996; Buckingham, 1993, 1996; Gray, 1992; Morley, 1992). However, the world described in Fiske's prodigious output, in which audiences are infinitely capable of interpreting any bit of mass culture, of whatever 'intended' meaning, into a challenging and fulfilling text, is not convincingly matched to the one we live in (see Fiske, 1989)<sup>43</sup>. The idea that every viewer is

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<sup>42</sup> This assumption would not be based on an isolated recent definition; similar expectations are raised, for example, by the descriptions of the field in Chris Jenks's chapter 'Cultural Studies: What Is It?' (Jenks, 1993, pp. 151–158), and in John Storey's 'What is British Cultural Studies?' (Storey, 1994, pp. vii–xi).

<sup>43</sup> For example, Fiske argues that 'The art of the people is the art of "making do". The culture of everyday life lies in the creative, discriminating use of the resources that capitalism provides' (1989, p. 28). Indeed, the media is used in a specifically political way: 'The polysemic openness of popular texts is required by social differences and is used to maintain, question, and think through those differences' (p. 30). Whilst I keenly support the view that mass media audiences are *capable* of using the media in this way – and are certainly more likely to react in this alert manner than in the hopelessly subservient mode

wittily reinventing every bit of culture that they meet is an appealing one, but not really likely to be an accurate summary of experience. It is also an argument which, whilst apparently being critical of the 'intended' message of much mass culture, gives the status quo a celebratory handshake which is only slightly ironic. As Dominic Strinati has observed,

'Whereas elitism has patronised the audience by calling it stupid, populism has patronised the audience by calling it subversive. Populism has still presumed to speak on behalf of, not to, the audience. If the elitist conception of the audience is wrong, then so is the populist one, and for similar reasons.' (1995, p. 258).

The model of the audience gaining pleasure from the renegotiation of each received text promotes the idea that the mass media is giving everybody what they want – or at least that everybody achieves satisfaction with what they get – which leads cultural studies into a passive arena of media appreciation: the affirmation, often, of little more than how pleasant it is to be an academic enjoying the delights of late twentieth-century popular culture. And there undeniably *are* pleasures to be had, which perhaps helps to explain how quickly it is forgotten that simply celebrating that fact is of little use or interest. It is not that Fiske fails to recognise the existence of oppressive structures, but his (rather naive) optimism seems to lead to the conclusion that all is well since 'the people' will always subvert texts, creating resistance to 'white, patriarchal, capitalist' structures (see Moores, 1993, pp. 131–133).

What this resistance might actually mean is, however, unclear. Firstly, as Nick Stevenson has noted, despite Fiske's purported attachment to the world of meanings produced by viewers and readers, he consistently substitutes his own readings for those of the audience (1995, pp. 100–101). Secondly, as Douglas Kellner has observed (1995, pp. 37–39), the few empirical examples of resistance which Fiske does offer are unsophisticated and double-edged: audiences who cheer on the 'baddies' rather than the 'goodies' in action films, or who read porn magazines hidden inside *Time*, are possibly inverting some middle-class norms, but are hardly challenging conventional attitudes to violence or sexism. Pleasure is subjective, and is linked into culture and socialisation, and to celebrate such 'resistant' pleasures for their own sake, without regard for their meaning or implications, is as lacking in usefulness as it is in reason.

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assumed by those who argue in favour of behavioural effects – one cannot escape the fact that there is little evidence to support Fiske's optimistic model of the unsparingly refractory viewer. Whilst Fiske himself may now be beginning to move slightly away from this thesis (Bondebjerg, 1996), his legacy still seems to lie close to the heart of cultural studies.

Another problem with Fiske's approach is that it pays no attention to the commercial institutions of the culture industry. As Jim McGuigan has noted (1992, p. 75), Fiske even bends his subject matter to avoid this whole issue, positioning popular culture as a subversive alternative to 'dominant' culture (seen as the sphere of high art), whereas in fact it is obviously popular culture which dominates in social life, and in the capitalist market. Stevenson (1995, pp. 95–97) illustrates the problem with reference to computer games, which are often quite 'open' texts, ready prey for semiotic resistance. However, they are also massively profitable for multinational corporations, and hardly constitute a threat to the structures of advanced capitalism. Indeed, a degree of semiotic openness may be built into such products, and whilst it might add to their success, it does not add to any form of organised or collective resistance. As Stevenson argues,

'Structures of domination are just as likely to be maintained through social atomism as by ideological consensus... Indeed, one could argue that the culturally fractured nature of the audience works in the interests of the culture industry, as it provides new markets and promotes an individualistic culture' (p. 96).

Fiske therefore offers a somewhat patronising, largely unsubstantiated, limited, and romantic view of an audience who may recognise their oppressed conditions, but find relief through ever more consumption of supposedly 'resisted' culture. In this scenario, of course, it is the culture industry which has the last laugh.

In any case, it does not matter if people enjoy the media, as most apparently do, or if a few people hate it, or a lot of people dislike some of its parts, since resistance itself is part of the deal. As Horkheimer and Adorno recognised, the system is endlessly able to co-opt and absorb 'resistant' readings, which simply expand the possibilities for satisfaction offered by existing media. One might think of Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) – with the same sinking feeling that Winston had – when we find that what appeared to be resistance was in fact being happily run by the government. Whether making an oppositional reading of a traditional media text, or sharing a sly joke hidden within oppositional material, one can feel considerable satisfaction at one's critical consciousness. But if the spirit of opposition is contained in that moment, then it is the cultural equivalent of the controlled explosion, and it ends there.

One could argue that cultural studies has been the victim of a similar co-option, the popularity of Fiske's work reflecting a general movement in the field – with some exceptions, of course – away from the tiring work of radical political analysis towards the rather more comfortable and 'fun' task of producing an Eng. Lit. of the contemporary media. It is not easy to explain why many

practitioners of cultural studies so quickly shed its neo-Gramscian roots; why issues surrounding the production of ideology and hegemony through the meanings in culture (as highlighted, for example, in Hall *et al*, 1978; Hall, 1982; Bennett, 1986; Hall, 1988) were deserted in favour of a cheery, subjective revisionism which split off audience consumption of the mass media from consideration of the social circumstances of its production<sup>44</sup>. The result has been that much of cultural studies today, in spite of its 'cool' styling and superficially radical self-image, is basically functionalist. The obvious analogy is again in perspectives on religion. Marx's argument that one of the oppressive functions of religion is to serve capitalism by giving people false satisfactions and leading them to accept their place in the world, can be contrasted with Durkheim's functionalist perspective, which takes a similar view of the ways in which religion shores up social order – 'society as a mechanism of collective constraint', as Adorno put it<sup>45</sup> – but describes these as contributing to social cohesion, rather than being deleterious to societal well-being. In this parallel scenario, cultural studies would often be firmly in the functionalist camp, being able to describe 'how it works' in undeniably complex and protracted ways, but failing to link the analysis critically to broader social issues.

In having developed an industry based on highly detailed but subjective academic interpretations of the mass media, cultural studies seems caught in a lucrative loop which continually commentates on culture without going anywhere. Proponents of the discipline also flounder continually in their attempt to be relativistic on the one hand, asserting that one interpretation is as valid as any other, whilst on the other being unable to escape the claim implicit in their publishing of analyses of media texts, that their perspectives are privileged and superior.

The claim to superior insight is also emphasised by the often impenetrable language of cultural studies, which we might suspect also shrouds a massive – albeit repressed – insecurity about the whole enterprise. Translating its

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<sup>44</sup> This point about the newly vigorous emphasis on the celebration of popular texts in cultural studies has been made by McGuigan (1992, see p. 74 in particular), and in slightly different ways by Morris (1990) and Harris (1992). More recently writers such as Turner (1996) have suggested that this kind of cultural populism has become less common in the mid-1990s (pp. 205–207), although this is debatable. Whilst this particular emphasis may have declined, cultural studies has hardly returned to powerful critical theoretical roots, with the contents of the journal *Cultural Studies*, for example, not notably containing any less plethoric mystification of commonplace subjectivity than previously.

<sup>45</sup> Adorno quoted in Gillian Rose (1978, p. 83), from her own translation of Adorno's 1966 essay, 'Gesellschaft', from Volume 8 of his *Gesammelte Schriften* (Collected Works, 1976).

prohibitive jargon into more everyday terms tends to reveal that its insights are, simply, everyday. Of course such translation is not easy, for as Ellis Cashmore has said, 'Reading it is so punishing that one feels rather like Bruce Willis, in the movie *The Last Boy Scout*, who remarks after being assaulted by a prolix villain: "Feels like we're being beaten up by the inventor of Scrabble."' (1994, p. 44).

More seriously, Cashmore has argued that cultural studies too often lends itself to a passive acceptance of culture, and chooses to ignore important questions about the interdependence of capitalism and the mass media. Cashmore argues that cultural studies sees society as a 'human aquarium', the ideological limits of which are set by the media texts through which meanings are made:

'Cultural studies' undoubted strength is in mapping intricately the inner life of [cultural] discourse. But, if it does not combine this with the outer institutional structure that makes [the mass media] possible in the first place, its value is like that of the aquarist to the marine biologist: interesting, but hardly theistic in import.' (p. 57).

Contemporary cultural studies, then, attends to the question of *how* meaning is made at the expense of the more pertinent question of *why* it is made. Cashmore's particular concern is with the link between television and consumerism, based in his suggestion that 'the portrayals of television might be understood not as propaganda for any particular ideology, conservative or liberal, but as propaganda for commodities – things that can be bought and replaced' (p. 57). My own concern is not so much with consumerism, but more generally with the way in which political consciousness (in the very broadest sense) can be simultaneously heightened *and* dissipated by sophisticated contemporary media, which may be produced with genuinely 'good intentions', but is constrained by its function of reflection rather than action, and the normative boundaries which surround what can and cannot be done in the mass media.

Cultural studies is also too often blind to straightforward social realities. Those followers of Jean Baudrillard who have argued that the postmodern world is a fundamental break from the former condition of human experience because it is characterised by an information overload – endless television channels, interactive electronic media and fetishistic cyberspace interfaces – seem to have forgotten the condition of the actual lives of many of the population, who simply do not have the luxury of the time or money to meaningfully connect with these playthings of a self-consciously stylish minority (see Baudrillard, 1988; Kellner, 1989b, 1995; Stearns & Chaloupka, eds, 1992; Gane, 1991). As Kellner (1995) puts it, in Baudrillard's postmodern world, individuals 'abandoned the "desert of

the real” for the ecstasies of hyperreality and a new realm of computer, media, and technological experience’ (p. 297). Although he at times seems to take a ‘celebratory’ position (Hall, 1986b, pp. 45–46), Baudrillard was originally far from being an optimist of the information age, however; as McGuigan (1992) puts it, postmodern existence for Baudrillard was ‘total ideological entrapment’, in which ‘the reification of human labour and the ideology of consumerism had... become overwhelming’ (p. 114). This view is all too often lost in references to his work in cultural studies, where he is seen, at his most critical, as a playful ironist, the circusmaster of postmodernism. Elsewhere, the pessimistic stance is deleted altogether and replaced with an unabashed excitement about the revolutionary transition to the electronic postmodern age (for example, Taylor & Saarinen, 1994; Nunes, 1995). In a world where many do not have access to the high-tech media which are so closely associated with this break with modernity, the idea that humankind has passed into a new era of existence only makes sense if those who have the relevant electronic interfaces are supposed to have become in some way superhuman – a bizarre and broadly fascistic notion. Even at its least alarming, the technologically-based definition of postmodernism within post-Baudrillard cultural studies overlooks social differences and the inherent capitalist basis of such technology – factors which can hardly be ignored. As Maivân Clech Lãm (1996) has written,

‘To the desperate cry for redress of marginalised peoples, postmodernism repeatedly offers the at-first playful, but eventually tiresome, if not obscene, would-be paradoxical rejoinder that we are all marginalised, that we all live in the borderlands. Tell that to the homeless in New York!’ (p. 258).

The latter cry is echoed in another scathing critique of cultural studies, as Keith Tester (1994) slams its ‘morally vacuous’ and ‘wilfully trivial analysis’ of contemporary social problems. Taking the field’s focus on consumerism as a case in point, Tester argues that ‘What is interesting about shops today is not what is in them but who sleeps in their doorways’ (p. 11). By the nature of its development, insularity and self-definitions, he argues, cultural studies is *necessarily* and inevitably silent on such matters.

Therefore, to return to Hartley’s optimistic definition of cultural studies, it is the very fact that the discipline today so *rarely* faces actual ‘social divisions’ in the real world, and so *rarely* refers ‘to the overall map of social relations (in whose interests?)’, that is its shortcoming. Cultural studies therefore has fallen from its promising origins, to be within sociology that which Adorno argued the mass media is within society: a distraction. Cultural studies ends up looking at media texts in much the same way as the media consumer, albeit at greater length:

neither is uncritical, but neither is really challenging anything either. The way forward, therefore, remains with critical theory.

## **Critical theory and the future of communications research**

In the previous sections of this chapter I have advanced a particular brand of critical theory, which is primarily – although selectively – influenced by the work of Adorno. In order to consider the possible future of the project somewhat more broadly, it is worth returning to the roots of the enterprise. In founding critical theory, the Frankfurt School were seeking to unite theory and practice, both in terms of tying theory to empirical research, and also linking it to consideration of contemporary social, political, and cultural issues, with the benefit of some historical perspective. The kind of critical approach taken by Adorno and his colleagues to the role of the mass media in society is not easily married to empirical investigation, of course. Much critical theory can indeed seem empirically ‘research-proof’ in that it relies on a model in which individual social beings are not expected to be aware of the purposes and meanings of the institutions which they encounter on a daily basis. Significantly, Adorno himself did not really have any patience with the kind of empirical research he encountered upon his arrival in America (see Adorno, 1969), whilst the typical American mode of research allowed little space for the kind of theoretical social critique of which Adorno was fond<sup>46</sup>. Indeed, as Gillian Rose notes, he generally deplored the use of empirical research which was not grounded in critical theory, and ‘remained convinced that “the structures of the total society resist direct empirical treatment”’ (1978, p. 98). For their part, American commentators

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<sup>46</sup> For a full account, see Morrison (1978). Paul Lazarsfeld, who employed Adorno to supervise a study of music within American culture – at least in part as a favour to Horkheimer, who wished to have his old colleague with him in exile – found Adorno unwilling to accept any form of empirical data. Instead, Adorno perpetually angered and insulted the American music and radio industry bosses whom the work brought him into contact with. This reflects Adorno’s integrity in the face of what might otherwise be perceived as a sell-out – the Marxist critic conducting research within the terms of the capitalist industry which he had so resolutely condemned in the past. For Lazarsfeld, of course, it was a ‘social nightmare’ (Morrison, 1978, p. 342), although he admired Adorno’s intelligence and critical approach, which he felt made the appointment worthwhile. The Rockefeller Foundation, however, was not to agree with this view, and refused to continue funding the project. Morrison notes that ‘Lazarsfeld’s attempted fusion of critical theory with empirical social research, especially within an administrative setting, does, looking back, appear a bold but nevertheless doomed experiment’ (p.352). Adorno’s firmly held views of the culture industry, and research which required some sympathy for that culture, and indeed that industry, were not surprisingly an impossible combination. (See also Wiggershaus, 1994, pp. 236–246).

often failed to grasp the foundations of critical theory, and consequently misread Adorno's empirical work of the 1940s as purely psychological (Jay, 1973, p. 218).

The difficulty of reconciling empirical research with the critical-theoretical approach remains the most obvious problem for critical theory. Partly in response to this challenge, Douglas Kellner (1989a) has argued that in order to progress, critical theory must make a break from the crude Marxist approach to culture which simply denounces ideology, and must grapple more directly with the products of the culture industry:

'In contrast to the mode of condemnatory criticism associated with critical theory, radical cultural criticism today should develop more complex strategies, and should attempt to develop a more multidimensional approach to mass culture. Rather than seeing its artifacts simply as expressions of hegemonic ideology and ruling-class interests, it is preferable to view popular entertainment as a complex product that contains contradictory moments of desire and its displacement, articulations of hopes and their repression. In this view, popular culture provides access to a society's dreams and nightmares, and contains both ideological celebrations of the status quo and utopian moments of transcendence, moments of opposition and rebellion and its attempted containment' (p. 141).

I have already noted that Adorno's theory does allow mass culture to be viewed as more than an ideology pipeline, and can account for apparent 'critical' content. Nevertheless, it is certainly the case that the theory could be made stronger by an analysis from *within* popular culture – although such analyses would have to be extremely careful not to become stuck upon the introspective discussions which so frequently have led cultural studies to lose sight of the critical questions which concerned its founders. Most importantly, such analyses would have to connect with the audience by empirical research, the lack of which characterises much of the least promising cultural studies output.

But critical theory is not to be simply 'cultural studies plus research'. It is worth recalling another fundamental aspect of critical theory, mentioned in Craig Calhoun's extensive discussion of its origins:

'Drawing both on the early Marx and the first chapter of *Capital*, and influenced by Lukacs' analysis of reification, critical theory aimed to show how human history had produced an alienation of human capacities such that social institutions and processes that were creatures of human action confronted people as beyond their scope of action' (1995, p. 20).

The point is infinite in scope, reaching well beyond the mere creation of a media system which is too vast and complex to be policed, restrained or directed<sup>47</sup>. Critical theory, we can see, would need to be able to unite research with theoretical analysis. There can be no easy answers, for the complexity of contemporary culture has to be mirrored in our attempts at understanding. The attractiveness of singular, linear approaches and explanations – the understandable need for neatness in theory to explain an increasingly complex world – is reflected in Adorno’s homogenised view of popular culture, Fiske’s unvaried celebration of audience resistance, cultural studies’ shooting down a narrow path of cultural commentary, and my own attempts to tackle effects research *on its own terms* (see chapters two and three, and Gauntlett, 1995a). The problem with such perspectives is not that they are necessarily *wrong*, but that their power is limited by their confinement to a single paradigm or conception of the world. This is not to say that the social world has become too complicated to *ever* be explained, but simply that connections must be made with a range of other understandings, perspectives, and areas of the world to prevent the scholar from disappearing down a narrow theoretical hall of mirrors where explanations ‘make sense’ only insofar as they reflect and reinforce aspects of themselves.

The contemporary social world, like contemporary culture, is a mish-mash of conflicting forces on a variety of levels, and we cannot focus exclusively on either just the macro *or* the micro. Modern industrial societies have to be understood with some reference to how individuals today experience them, just as the multiple and contradictory social impacts of the culture industry must be considered alongside the tastes and desires of its audiences. One of Marx’s key legacies has to be the recognition that ‘big’ structures such as capitalism occupy

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<sup>47</sup> Marx could barely have begun to imagine the number and range of ‘runaway’ projects which humankind would create and then be unable to control. Mary Shelley’s novel *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus* (1818) paved the way for innumerable science fiction books, movies and TV shows in which the horrified scientist would have cause to gasp, ‘My God, what have I done?’, the scenario becoming a cliché not simply as a consequence of its redoubtable dramatic value, but because it reflected a fear of technological industrialism producing the machinery of horror which has remained current for two centuries, and with increasing justification. Albert Einstein’s oft-quoted regret regarding his making nuclear weaponry possible, ‘If only I had known, I should have become a watchmaker’ (1965), encapsulates this concern that science’s practitioners, even where they would wish to apply some morality and responsibility, are simply not able to retain control over the uses of their discoveries. This kind of alienation is well illustrated in a broader sense by the common – almost inevitable – attitude of individuals to the environment, which appears to be of some concern to all but ultimately in the hands of none, a classic case of humankind being alienated from its own actions.

and affect everyday experience, perhaps subtly, but pervasively, so that all social life and action are constituted in and through it. Experiences of the mass media meet in the social crucible with other factors, such as identity, race, sexuality and gender relations, to create a (not necessarily consistent) web of influences upon action and understanding.

Social, cultural, communications and psychological theories, however, have all too often obfuscated our knowledge of this world, ironically, through their efforts to provide pictures which appear reasonable by the supposed virtue of being consistent and relatively straightforward. Calhoun indicates part of the problem when he argues that 'a great deal of modern social science has tacitly assumed that human beings normally live in one social world at a time' (1995, p. xv). It is wrongly assumed that people receive the media – or other parts of the world – in a singular way, such as with unmitigated enjoyment, rather than through a more complex mix of feelings about amusing, offensive, problematic, provocative and other contradictory aspects of the material in question. Conversely, a viewer's distaste or disagreement with some aspects of a text may be so much taken for granted that those reservations can be set aside, resulting in a more singular experience of enjoyment, but with unspoken qualifications which a full understanding of the material's reception could not afford to ignore. As Calhoun goes on to say,

'Modern social science... has presumed that the individual consciousness is itself integral and that it requires a stable and consistent social environment. Monolinguality and religious orthodoxy have been taken as normal, and multilinguality and religious syncretism or variation as deviant cases to be explained. Yet in these and a range of other ways, it does not seem obvious that people usually live in one social world at a time, but rather that it is now, and throughout human history often has been, common to inhabit multiple worlds and even to grow as a person by the ability to maintain oneself in connection to all of them' (*ibid*).

Accordingly, the study of culture must accept that consumption is not always without reservation, and enjoyment of aspects of a text will not necessarily even make sense to the viewer or reader *themselves*. We certainly cannot assume that enjoyment of material which seems to involve a particular ideology equals *belief* in that ideology (Barker, 1996); a love of football does not mean support for an ideology of competition, just as an attachment to the heroes of the innumerable TV police series should not be equated with an uncritical acceptance of 'law and order' or sympathy for real-life police<sup>48</sup>.

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<sup>48</sup> Given the problems with linear social-science accounts described here, we can appreciate why Adorno tended to find that fragmented art forms caught the experience of modern life more effectively. A relatively recent example is Bruce Nauman's 1985 work *Good Boy Bad*

Texts speak to viewers in a broad and complex variety of ways. Whilst I am increasingly reluctant to speculate on the appeal of individual media products at any length, the popular and continued success of the ‘antisocial’ animated characters *Beavis and Butt-Head* (MTV/C4, 1993–) is worth considering here<sup>49</sup>. Despite the apparent simplicity of the show’s content, and the ease with which one can predict the critical and defensive responses to it, it is unusually difficult to determine where a unified and meaningful interpretation of the show’s popularity would lie. The obvious reactionary reading is that the series depicts foul, moronic characters who are highly dangerous and damaging role models for youthful viewers<sup>50</sup>. The opposing liberal view is that the programme is purely a satire, which does indeed centre around two foul and moronic characters, but makes fun of their sexist and stupid ways, inviting the audience to laugh at their regressive behaviour (for example, Katz, 1994).

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*Boy* (Tate Gallery Liverpool, 1996), which features two video screens, one showing the ‘talking head’ of a young black man, the other an older white woman, who repeat scripted lines in a range of styles. As Fiona Bradley’s commentary observes, ‘Together but not synchronised, in a parody of communication, they speak the same words at different times, rehearsing seemingly endless variations on the same initial idea. The actors seem to want to initiate a relationship with the viewer, moving from proclamation (“I have sex”), through insight (“You have sex”), to complicity (“We have sex. This is sex”). Repetition, however, strips meaning from the words’. The cycles end with ‘I don’t want to die. You don’t want to die. We don’t want to die. This is fear of death’. Simultaneously engaging and impenetrable, meaningful and shallow, chilling and banal, the installation seems to illustrate – on the poetic rather than academic plane – Calhoun’s argument that social life cannot be accounted for in terms of a single social world since it is not experienced in that way; the video speakers seem to describe whole truths whilst at the same time showing them to be fragmented, differentiated and incompatible.

<sup>49</sup> For a good short essay on this subject, see ‘*Beavis and Butt-Head*: No future for postmodern youth’, in Douglas Kellner (1995, pp. 143–152). This is a fine example of cultural studies, combining a deep understanding of social theories with a well-informed study of the media text in question, in pursuit of the more substantial objectives discussed in the section on cultural studies earlier in this chapter.

<sup>50</sup> As one typical psychologist told *The Washington Times* (17 October 1993), ‘I totally condemn this program... It is one of the most sadistic, pathological programs I’ve ever seen. I would not recommend it to anyone of any age’ (quoted by Kellner, 1995, p. 155).

In one episode (*Lightning Strikes*, 1995), Beavis and Butt-Head have the opportunity to comment directly on this conception of media effects. Having attempted to replicate a science experiment shown on an educational TV programme, the boys have ended up in hospital. A campaigner from ‘Decency in Media’, having established that their behaviour was inspired by the television, and that they enjoy rock videos, appears on the TV news which the boys are watching from their beds. The campaigner says, ‘These two boys were left unsupervised watching music videos that depicted rock stars they thought were cool. I understand that in one of the videos there was fire, explosions, and even lightning. We’re not saying there was a connection, but certainly the coincidence is difficult to ignore. It’s obvious that kids are imitating what they see’. Beavis’s reaction: ‘This chick is stupid’. Butt-Head notes, ‘Yeah. I hope nobody imitates her’.

Whilst the former perspective is obviously trite and stunted, the latter view is almost equally unsatisfactory, for in taking *Beavis and Butt-Head* as nothing more than a rather repetitive joke, the argument fails to account for more significant meanings within the text which prevent what would otherwise be a remarkably thin and simplistic satirical subject from becoming stale. Particularly striking about the liberal defence is that it makes sense only if it is believed that the behaviour of Beavis and Butt-Head is basically *wrong* – a fundamental assumption shared wholeheartedly with the reactionary response. Neither approach is able to cope with the idea that *Beavis and Butt-Head* might reflect the desires and frustrations of the youthful audience more directly – feelings for which that audience could not be criticised, in that the social world which produces such responses is not of their making. For that not insignificant section of a generation who are disaffected, for whom school and college seem pointless preparation for a future of unemployment or ultra-exploitative ‘McJobs’, *Beavis and Butt-Head* may be an enjoyable, albeit somewhat exaggerated, mirror of existence. For critics to deplore the content of the show – or excuse it purely as a joke – without comment on the actual social conditions in which it arises, is (once again) to find problems in the media which have much more serious origins in the real world.

In depicting an alienated world, a world interpreted entirely through media references, a world of boredom and being made to do things by teachers and bosses, where temporary light relief is found in acts of practical rebellion and minor violence, *Beavis and Butt-Head*'s producers have created a critical picture of the world which a latter-day Adorno might approve of. In their acts of spontaneous sabotage whilst working at a fast food joint or for other corporations, in their open-minded interpretations of school work and refusal to conform<sup>51</sup>, their antagonism of bland liberal teachers and conservative war-veteran neighbours, and even (more domestically) in their distanced and critical response to MTV's music videos, Beavis and Butt-Head demonstrate a creative and adroit response to the world which is not well served by being interpreted simply as either amusingly or worryingly stupid<sup>52</sup>. For the young viewer today to

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<sup>51</sup> Beavis and Butt-Head are in this way living the thesis of Ivan Illich's *Deschooling Society* (1973) and are refusing to submit their will to the oppressive, disciplinarian and custodial schooling system which would seek to integrate them into social norms.

<sup>52</sup> An obvious offshoot of this argument is a questioning of the basic category of 'antisocial behaviour' which is taken for granted in psychologistic approaches. Rebellious activities are almost always 'antisocial' to individualist psychologists, but insofar as such actions challenge and question an unsatisfactory world, they are antisocial only on the pettiest of

be watching fictional lives characterised by endless spare time and boredom may not seem terribly aspirational, but we cannot forever hide from the fact that such a scenario is as reflective of a common experience today as workplace dramas were to previous generations. Beavis and Butt-Head's sexism cannot be applauded, but this an aspect of the programme which most obviously *is* straightforward satire upon stupidity and ignorance, a point emphasised regularly by the characters inadvertently exposing their lack of sexual experience, Beavis in particular lacking even basic knowledge about anatomy.

The point, in any case, is not so much that *Beavis and Butt-Head* is a telling drama of everyday life, any more than it is purely a 'just good fun' satire, a disgusting blemish on the face of broadcasting, an object lesson in the application of critical thinking, or a damning vision of media's effects on youth. It can be partly any of these and other things, but most obviously it is *not* a single or unified product containing a cohesive argument. The show is more of a postmodern scattergun, with bits which are variously funny, inspirational, dumb and upsetting. At the same time it must be recognised that *Beavis and Butt-Head*, an initially 'alternative' animation which struck a popular chord, has become incorporated into the system, its popularity ensuring high advertising, merchandising and overseas sales revenue for MTV.

Although it may seem somewhat forbidding, the future of critical theory must therefore involve approaches which reject the reductionism of traditional views of media consumption and accept instead the model of a self which lacks unity of interpretation, viewing material which lacks singularity of meaning. In addition, a forward-looking critical theory must consider the centrality of gender and race in how we apprehend and understand the social world. Even aside from the debates about the extent to which males and whites dominate that world, the categories of gender and race underpin and give meaning to an enormous range of thoughts and interactions. Feminist and anti-racist work within most disciplines of the arts, humanities and social sciences has become well-established, but such projects are nevertheless still most often consigned to the 'women's studies' and 'anti-racist' corners of each school, and so far have generally failed – not through their own lack of effort – to have forced gender and race issues into the centre-stage of basic teachings. These are, however, further considerations which need to be included in the mix.

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scales, and in broader terms can be seen rather more sensibly as oriented towards the *prosocial*.

In the preceding sections of this chapter, the analysis has sought to indicate how the psychological perspective almost inevitably shifts critical attention away from society and on to individuals, and so serves the interests of conservative ideology more than it contributes to a rounded understanding of the interplay between individuals, society, and culture. An analysis of the role of media in society would appear to make far more sense when we start from the larger context, society, and then work our way in, towards an understanding of the place of the mass media.

The search for a meaningful approach to the media in society has brought this argument from a relatively cohesive Adorno-inspired brand of critical theory, through a critique of aspects of cultural studies, to some cautionary words about the hope of finding unitary explanations. It is hoped that the fusion of relatively 'modernist' macro sociological critique, with a more postmodern sense of the complexity and fragmentation of the social and cultural spheres, will provide a frame and context for the chapters which follow. In the final section, the discussion returns to the bigger picture, as a Gramscian perspective is installed into the theoretical approach.

### **Gramsci, Chomsky, the mass media and 'hegemonic bending'**

Although the concept of hegemony has necessarily appeared earlier in this chapter, the fuller consideration of its application to my argument has been reserved for this final section. I have argued above that the mass media has the potential to dissipate political thought and action by the very means of appearing to involve it. To put it another way, mass media products may contribute to the maintenance of a relative hegemony not because oppositional forces are excluded from their content, but rather because some contentious elements *do* appear, generating the impression that mass entertainments such as television are more politically critical – and that the activity of their consumption is more socially challenging – than is actually the case.

Here I will seek to combine this analysis, which began from an attempt to renegotiate Adorno's critical view of the mass media's role in preserving the status quo, with Antonio Gramsci's writings on hegemony. The affinities between Gramsci's work and the original Frankfurt School's critical theory – although they almost certainly did not encounter each other's work – have been documented by Alfred Schmidt (1981) and Renate Holub (1992). Of particular interest here is that Holub has shown that whilst in Gramsci's earlier writings (1916–17) he saw cinema audiences as passive and manipulated by theatrical

industrialists (see Gramsci, 1985, pp. 56–70), in parts of his *Prison Notebooks* from around 1930 which remain untranslated into English, he was considering the cinema in terms of its potential for producing an emancipatory counter-hegemony (Holub, 1992, pp. 86–92). Of course, Gramsci wrote those particular passages at a time when the first film with sound had only just been produced<sup>53</sup>, and the (omni-)presence of a television set in every household could hardly be predicted. I will therefore draw more generally upon Gramsci's ideas, which emphasise fluidity and negotiation rather more than did Adorno, and allow for a more subtle and practical understanding of popular culture and its audience.

This application of Gramsci's work settles alongside many other attempts to incorporate it into contemporary critical cultural theory. Indeed, Morrow (1991) describes Gramsci as 'the shadow around which the transformation of critical theory has danced' (p. 30), and the 'turn to Gramsci' which profoundly affected the development of British cultural studies in the late 1970s has been much documented (see, for example, Bennett, 1986; Hall, 1986a; Morrow, 1991, Harris, 1992).

Here, however, Gramsci is taken relatively directly, rather than through the filters of the multiple recent renegotiations of his writings. It is necessary therefore to consider Gramsci's conception of 'hegemony' in a little more depth. It is described in the *Prison Notebooks* (1929–1935) as 'The "spontaneous" consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group' (1971, p. 12). Gramsci recognised that such direction (and consent to it) could not be stamped upon a society by its leaders, but would always be the subject of on-going struggles between ideological discourses, which would be effective only where they made connections with the 'common sense' of the public – or, indeed, *became* common sense.

Hegemony describes, in Raymond Williams' phrase, 'a saturation of the whole process of living' (1977, p. 110) by the relations of domination and subordination, with ideology seeping invisibly into all corners of experience, identities and relationships. The role of the mass media in giving shape to this 'whole body of practices and expectations' (*ibid*) will inevitably be significant, and Gramsci importantly saw culture as a site for struggle which was just as important as the economic base, requiring that we study the workings of both

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<sup>53</sup> The first major sound film, *The Jazz Singer*, which included some songs and a very small amount of dialogue, was released in 1927.

power and culture, and their battles in and over popular discourses<sup>54</sup>. This obviously jars with Adorno's more straightforwardly deterministic approach. As Dick Hebdige argues,

'To engage with the popular as constructed and as lived – to negotiate this bumpy and intractable terrain – we are forced at once to desert the perfection of a purely theoretical analysis, of a "negative dialectic" (Adorno) in favour of a more "sensuous (and strategic) logic" (Gramsci) – a logic attuned to the living textures of popular culture, to the ebb and flow of popular debate' (1996, p. 195).

Where Adorno had dismissed popular culture as merely a form of psychological 'white noise' designed to keep the consciousness of subordinate groups retarded and ignorant of their situation, Gramsci established the notion of "the popular" as the cultural terrain which all ideologies must encounter and negotiate with, and to whose logic they must conform if they are to become historically organic' (Hall, 1991, p. 9). In common with the conclusions of my discussion of Adorno's work above, Gramsci argued that the content of popular culture and discourses could not be left out of the debate, or put back to a previous epoch, but were centrally involved in the production of the political climate, understandings, and domination.

Gramsci was also concerned that theory should recognise that individuals are active participants in the construction of their reality – and indeed that 'everyone is a philosopher, though in his own way and unconsciously' (1971, p. 323) – again in contrast to Adorno's model of the manipulated, passive public. Hegemony, in Gramsci's work, becomes a battle over 'common sense', since common sense describes the uncritical and partly unconscious way in which individuals perceive the world, and so is the site on which dominant ideology is constructed, but can also be resisted and challenged (see Gramsci, 1971, pp. 323–333, 419–425; Simon, 1991, pp. 26–27). Therefore a more active role is given both to culture and its audience. In addition, a role is also granted to intellectual challenges which may pass into popular cultural forms and thus change the basis of 'common sense'.

My argument in this chapter, however, is concerned not with the manner in which a general political hegemony is achieved over a whole population, but rather with how the generation of a sphere enclosing the acceptable middle-

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<sup>54</sup> For an insightful introduction to Gramsci's work, see Simon (1991). Discussions of Gramsci's concept of hegemony can be found in Joll (1977), Williams (1977), Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke & Roberts (1978), Nemeth (1980), Buci-Glucksmann (1980, 1982), Femia (1981), Showstack Sassoon (1982b, 1987), Bocoock (1986), Ransome (1992), and Bellamy & Schecter (1993). The newer career of a selection of Gramscian ideas since the 1970s is critically considered in Harris (1992).

ground for the understanding of issues also (of course) defines the boundaries of the normal, the challenging, and thereafter the unthinkable. For example, to have drama characters interested in material gain, or for programmes to advise viewers on prudent investments, is quite normal. However, a programme advising the working people in the audience of the best methods for running a legitimate industrial action is unthinkable<sup>55</sup>. Programmes somewhere between these two poles, which are challenging – in a way which can be accommodated within the broadcast schedules but which is also satisfying to those in the audience who would not like to think that their viewing is wholly supportive of the status quo – tend to be so with relatively non-economic issues such as sexism, homophobia and racism. Hegemony is thus stabilised in a manner similar to the way in which Gramsci noted that the state could keep oppositional forces weak and disorganised, through granting particular reforms which appear to satisfy some of those groups' demands (see for example Gramsci, 1971, pp. 57–59).

With regard to environmental issues, the media can appear challenging by suggesting individual action to counter environmental pollution – but macro social changes which would have a much greater impact are rarely mentioned. For example, people driving cars on television is normal, whilst suggesting that people should walk or cycle more in the interests of the environment is challenging. To have a programme's *presenter* tell us that the environment is being ruined by the economic greed of the auto industry and the petro-chemical complex, however, is almost unthinkable. In this way, the opposition to a traditional view is steered into a relatively 'safe' sphere – one of individual lifestyle change – as opposed to one of more radical, social and political antagonism.

A somewhat similar argument has been strikingly made by Edward Herman & Noam Chomsky in their 1988 book *Manufacturing Consent* (Herman & Chomsky, 1994) and its redoubtable spin-off package (the film *Manufacturing Consent: Noam Chomsky and the Media*, directed by Peter Wintonick and Mark Achbar, released theatrically and on video, and its companion coffee-table picture book (Achbar, ed., 1994), as well as Chomsky's sell-out public lectures,

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<sup>55</sup> Gitlin (1979) similarly notes that, whilst there may be exceptions in movies or one-off dramas, television bosses 'do not risk investing in *regular* heroes who will challenge the core values of corporate capitalist society: who are, say, explicit socialists, or union organisers, or for that matter born-again evangelists' (p. 260).

the academic equivalent of stadium rock concerts)<sup>56</sup>. The central thesis suggests that American news and current affairs broadcasting presents a very selective and partial view of the world, one biased in favour of the US government and right-wing interests generally. This is said to be the consequence of free market forces, rather than a conspiracy, although the distinction is a subtle one. The authors summarise the argument thus:

‘The mass media of the United States are effective and powerful ideological institutions that carry out a system-supportive propaganda function by reliance on market forces, internalised assumptions, and self-censorship, and without significant overt coercion. This propaganda system has become even more efficient in recent decades with the rise of the national television networks, greater mass-media concentration, right-wing pressures on public radio and television, and the growth in scope and sophistication of public relations and news management’ (p. 306).

Fundamentally challenging views will usually be excluded from the mainstream media, for reasons which include the institutional pressures applied to news organisations generally and to the careers of journalists individually, and by government ‘information’ agencies simply producing so much official matter that it effectively floods the news marketplace. Herman & Chomsky suggest that government publicity machines can pick up (or produce) particular news stories and run with them, producing further ‘news’ off the back of these functional stories. For example, the shooting-down of the Korean airliner KAL 007 by the Soviet Union in 1983 ‘permitted an extended campaign of denigration of an official enemy and greatly advanced Reagan administration arms plans’ (p. 32). Similarly, the authors argue that the shooting of Pope John Paul II by Mehmet Ali Agca in 1981 was dressed up by the US government and its friends to look like a KGB plot, and was uncritically reported as such by the mass media, despite the lack of convincing evidence<sup>57</sup>. Linking the shooting of the Pope to the Soviet Union enabled Reagan to promote discourses about ‘terrorism’ and ‘the Soviet evil’ in the mass media, these themes being ‘the centrepieces of the Reagan administration’s propaganda campaign that began in 1981, designed to

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<sup>56</sup> It should be noted that Chomsky has not apparently encouraged this focus upon himself as a ‘personality’, and this and the associated ‘personalization of the issues’ is something he says he opposes (see interview in Achbar, ed., 1994, p. 11). Chomsky also protests that the book *Manufacturing Consent* was a joint production with Edward Herman as the primary author, and so the focus upon Chomsky alone is doubly inappropriate. On the other hand, Chomsky would have a difficult job keeping public attention at bay. A survey of the Arts and Humanities Citation Index 1980–1992 found that Chomsky was the most cited living person in that period, and was the eighth most cited source overall. The top ten sources were: Marx, Lenin, Shakespeare, Aristotle, the Bible, Plato, Freud, Chomsky, Hegel and Cicero. (Cited in Achbar, ed., p. 17).

<sup>57</sup> For full details of the complex case, see Herman & Chomsky, 1994, pp. 143–167.

support its planned arms increase, placement of new missiles in Europe, and interventionist policies in the Third World' (p. 145). A further example discussed at length is the presentation of elections in Third World countries (pp. 87–142), in which the American media are seen to follow the angles favoured by the US government, supporting its aims of legitimating or destabilising particular regimes. In short, Herman & Chomsky argue that the American mass media's reporting (or non-reporting) of news is heavily biased in favour of domestic power interests, and indeed helps to *promote* those interests<sup>58</sup>.

The evidence presented in favour of these arguments – chapters focusing on particular major, long-running news stories – is detailed and impressive, although the focus on specific stories allows room for doubters to suggest that these are isolated and unrepresentative cases. In addition, the thesis as argued by the authors is limited to coverage of factual stories in the news and current affairs media, rather than being a theory covering the output of the mass media more generally – although one can readily imagine that similar pressures may influence the style, presentation and development of themes in television drama series, and other media<sup>59</sup>. The other obvious point here is that Herman & Chomsky refer only to the *content* of the media, and that the actual impact of such material is not explored, although the idea that people's understanding of the issues will be affected by the media's presentation of them is implicit. This is not unreasonable, since without the mass media, most audience members would obviously not even be *aware* of the news stories in question – therefore the media's presentation of the issues almost certainly *will* be integrated with the audience's understanding of them. This relative predictability of such an influence on perceptions, however, can only apply to news stories which are centred in places away from the individual audience members. We could not assume that attitudes to general social issues, or specific 'news' topics in which the audience member has personal experience, would be affected in this way. The implication of this point

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<sup>58</sup> The extent to which this thesis may or may not be applicable to the media of other countries is a matter for further research. When Herman & Chomsky assert that 'the observable pattern of indignant campaigns and suppressions, of shading and emphasis, and of selection of context, premises, and general agenda, is highly functional for established power and responsive to the needs of the government and major power groups' (1994, p. xv), it is obvious that this applies in Britain to, say, the *Daily Mail*, but the extent to which it can be said of the BBC would make a more interesting study.

<sup>59</sup> Critics could also observe that commentary in the media cannot be quite as homogeneously uncritical as Herman & Chomsky suggest, or their own work would not be in the public realm. However, this point is relatively weak – whilst the existence of their paperback in bookshops seems to disprove its own thesis, it is obvious that this voice is small compared to the tidal wave of news media which enters homes on a daily basis.

is that the mass media can only ‘manufacture consent’ in relation to issues about which the public have little interest or personal investment. On the other hand, since the thesis would also hold that the presentation of news, being biased in favour of the status quo, would contribute to that kind of apathy, then it does give some force to the argument that the news media can contribute to political consent or contentment.

However, my argument here is not that the mass media in any way produces an overall *consensus* (although it prioritises a particular way of seeing)<sup>60</sup>. As David Held (1989) has argued, drawing upon Adorno, social stability depends less on shared norms and beliefs, and rather more upon the atomisation, fragmentation and decentring of knowledge (pp. 91–92). If the largest amount of informal political or social power belongs, at its greatest, to fragmentary groups, these are unlikely to pose a major threat to the established social order. The role of hegemony here is to bend and influence the solutions to perceived problems which isolated individuals and groups will countenance. Discourses are subject to what I would call a ‘hegemonic bending’, which issues a magnetic pull in favour of particular responses to an issue, whilst others become ignored. Whilst hegemony, however strong, cannot prevent any number of alternatives being thought or believed, it can serve the function of shifting boundaries, and pulling in reins.

If Margaret Thatcher secured hegemony over the British people in the 1980’s with her strategy of ‘authoritarian populism’, as Hall has argued (1988), restructuring ideological discourses so that the Right could apparently represent the ‘common sense’ voice of the public<sup>61</sup>, it was perhaps inevitable that a range of new social movements and alternative discourses, such as environmentalism – as well as a reinvented non-Marxist branch of cultural studies – would emerge out of the mid to late 1980’s, and become established as continuing, media-conscious alternatives to an increasingly homogenised and Right-leaning Parliamentary party politics. These ideological escapees from the hegemonic reign, however, have not split off in all directions; rather, through the media’s processing and repackaging of their discourses, they have been collectively delivered to the public in the liberal ‘challenging’ mode rather than the radical, media-unthinkable mode. Thus, although the media obviously does not tie the

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<sup>60</sup> The way in which my own theoretical approach differs from that of Chomsky, and also from the applications of the notion of hegemony used by those associated with the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies since the 1970s, is clarified further in chapter ten.

<sup>61</sup> See Stevenson (1995, pp. 38–45) for a critical consideration of this argument.

boundaries around established or hegemonic views so tightly that no counter-arguments appear, it does have a 'total exclusion zone' a distance away from these ideas – and as the centre moves further to the Right, the corresponding ideological universe either side of it is dragged in that direction also. As Todd Gitlin (1979) has argued, opposition is domesticated, absorbed and incorporated by popular culture, with hegemonic ideology shifting slightly to maintain consent, and thereby remaining hegemonic. Gitlin notes:

'Major social conflicts are transported *into* the cultural system, where the hegemonic process frames them, form and content both, into compatibility with dominant systems of meaning' (p. 263).

Gramsci, in the early 1930s, characterised the successfully hegemonic state as a 'night-watchman' (1971, pp. 262–263), able to retire from active coercion and simply act as 'guardian of "fair play"'. One could argue that today the role of 'night-watchman' for the liberal state is occupied by television and the mass media, but in a more active sense, since it helps to define the rules of play – or more precisely, the nature of the playing field. In this it additionally performs the night-watchman role of diluting potential conflicts. In environmental terms, for example, the fundamental questions at the heart of the issue, of industrialism versus its alternatives, have instead been recast as questions such as whether or not one should recycle household waste. This becomes the accepted terrain of debate, the 'common sense' approach to the subject, and the more radical perspectives are left outside of the debate altogether. If hegemony is 'subordinate consent to the authority of the discourses of the dominant group in society', as Strinati puts it (1995, p. 167), then we have a hypothesis that the ways of thinking about and understanding environmental issues have been hegemonically affected. This will be explored further as we discuss the approach of television producers to these issues, and as we see what children themselves came up with, when asked to produce video texts about the environment.

## 5. Paradigm collisions: Children, sociology, psychologists

The ‘children’ who appear in academic or popular texts and discussion about the media – or any other subject – are a construction of their context. That is not to deny that actual children exist, of course, or to assert that research on children is not actually based on real young participants. But the filter of discourse about children wholly shapes how they emerge in the debates, such that they can become a cipher within cross-paradigm dialogues which make impossible any common definition of what children are, or even what our related research concerns about them might be.

The notion of childhood as a social construction is by now a familiar tenet of sociology, supported by the predictably assumption-inverting historical evidence which suggests that adolescence is a wholly new category, whilst the category of general childhood barely existed in the middle ages, emerging somewhat in the sixteenth century, but being seen as a much shorter period than we regard it today right to the end of the nineteenth (Ariés, 1962). Contemporary social needs, concerns, and the availability of leisure have always defined childhood in this way. The discipline of psychology, however, whilst recognising its own ‘science’ as new, has a greater tendency to take its own views of the individual child as universal. Piaget’s highly influential developmental theory, for example (e.g. Piaget 1926, 1929) – commonly criticised for specifics, but respected as a general model – has the child making a rational and linear journey from immature, inadequate childhood to logical, competent adulthood. This hierarchically-arranged model, as Chris Jenks (1996) has observed, ‘sets a narrative in the discourse of cognitive growth that is by now global and overwhelming’ (p. 24). The progression through the stages is characterised by an ‘achievement ethic’ (*ibid*). Play, for example, is seen as a trivial fantasy activity which must be shed on the route to sensible maturity (Jenks, 1982). Piaget did not necessarily *create* a trend of undervaluing children’s own expressions and experience, but he certainly gave this approach its foundations.

Children are the ‘other’ group, who do not have the specific type of rationality which is equated with adulthood, but who – as in most learning theories – must progress through stages to achieve it. Children are understood rather more as non-adults than they are as young human beings. Thus negatively defined, they become empty or wrongly-filled vessels, who will only complete the long voyage to maturity by adopting a particular set of ‘adult’ values, perspectives, and models of behaviour.

The different conceptions of the nature of children, and the purposes for which they appear in research, both within and between disciplines, means that a thesis such as this one is almost untenable without some discussion of the topic. A great deal of research on children and the media, particularly that developed in the psychological field, has side-stepped any real consideration of children and what their interests might be, just as it has often ignored actual media content and what it might mean. Jenks (1982, p. 10) suggests the analogy of the early anthropologist, who implicitly 'knew' the savage to be different and inferior to him or herself, and therefore an appropriate object of study. Children appear in psychological media research literature as similarly unknowable, with habits unfamiliar to the scholar, and often in need of improvement – 'civilisation', as it were. Young people's media use is judged against the yardstick of 'rational', often middle-class, adult norms, and is found wanting. In this chapter I will discuss some of the history of how children have been deployed in media and other research, and consider the implications of the conflicting paradigm approaches.

### **The crooked history of effects research**

Textbooks and overviews of research on the impact of the mass media often suggest that the 'hypodermic' model of unmediated, direct effects was popular in the early part of the twentieth century but was gradually eased out and superseded by more sophisticated models – a straightforward and neatly linear story which fits into our expectations (and the ideology) of progress. However, in their exploration of the history of research on the relationship between children and the media from 1900 to 1960, Ellen Wartella & Byron Reeves (1985) have shown that in fact early studies, such as the 1933 Payne Fund research, were surprisingly subtle attempts to explore a wide range of consequences of media use, including changes in different kinds of attitudes, emotions and knowledge as well as behaviour; and their conclusions tended to recognise that any potential 'effects' would have as much to do with the milieu and character of the viewer as they would with the media itself. By the 1940's, work on children's relationships with the media had been all but given up, in favour of the new communications research interest in questions of politics and persuasion. Indeed, Wartella & Reeves come to the conclusion that, contrary to received wisdom, 'it is difficult to find evidence of the "hypodermic needle" model of media effects in pre-1940 studies of children and media' (p. 122). Rather, it was the 1950's which saw the growth of research concern for measuring the supposed impact of the media on children, and we can add that

the American laboratory experiments of the 1960's were the clearest methodological manifestation of the simple 'hypodermic' effects hypothesis. The first studies of each new medium – cinema, radio and television – were not about effects, but about uses and preferences, and then impact on knowledge and attitudes; effects studies, in all cases, followed later.

The model of research progress which would have us believe that research was initially unsophisticated, but has become more advanced, seems to be a rather optimistic interpretation. In fact, media research got off to an impressively complex and mature start, only to rather surprisingly crash into a quagmire of oversimplicity just at the point when some prescient scholars, such as Klapper (1960), had begun to warn against just that. Studies produced just before this downturn, in the late 1950's, notably the classic texts by Himmelweit, Oppenheim & Vince (1958), and Schramm, Lyle & Parker (1961), were highly complex attempts to examine the place of television in the lives of children, characterised by large samples and sophisticated questions. The relationship between television and children which these studies consider is not based on the one-way, poisoned arrow model; tastes, influences, perceptions, reactions, emotions and effects are all discussed in ways which do not seek to reduce all information to fit the simplest questions. Children are given their due as sentient individuals able to process and reflect upon their viewing.

However, political pressure for research on TV violence was growing in the 1950's, although researchers seem to have been slow to take up the baton. We can see from the calls for hearings, and promises made at the time (cf. Liebert & Sprafkin, 1988, pp. 61–62) that American authorities, in particular, were virtually demanding that *simple* research be conducted to establish the link. The complex findings of sophisticated research were of little use to politicians seeking binary, unambiguous answers to their questions. After some recalcitrance, television research did then, to an extent, give in to the 'effects panic' which dominated from the 1960's and made it difficult for more intricate research programmes to resurface for quite some time.

Wartella & Reeves do not speculate on the reasons for the changes of direction in the history which they report, but a look at the possibilities indicates one strong and perhaps rather unexpected contender. Whilst new methodologies have become apparent over the decades, the body of studies as a whole have not particularly veered in favour of 'discoveries' in superior methodology – least of all in the turn towards fatuous laboratory experiments. There is no evidence that children themselves have changed fundamentally; and the direction of research has not shifted because of massive changes in types of media content, which has

maintained a similar mix of material, even though details of genre fashions and style may have varied over time. Levels of explicitness in portrayals of sex, violence and language have obviously increased since the 1950's, but on the other hand viewers have to some extent become familiar with these depictions; we might imagine that the violence in 1950's TV crime dramas would be *more* of a shock to viewers then, and raise more immediate concern about the then-new medium's effects in the home, than somewhat more explicit screen violence would today. The rise of simpler 'effects' studies *does* follow the growth of the home visual medium, television (although the medium enjoyed more than a decade of widespread use before the most naive studies began to appear). What is left, then, is the changeable perception of *children* in different periods, coupled with the rise of television, and mixed with the regular fears of what might happen to children and society at the hands of mass media and culture. The protectiveness which a society purportedly feels towards children at any particular time – and by this I mean the expressed concern of public figures and opinion-formers over the *concept* of 'children', rather than the everyday concern of parents and most other people for children in particular and in general, which no doubt remains steady – feeds into the academic paradigms of fields which may involve the study of children, and has an impact on the direction of research.

### Psychologists and 'children'

When used in public debates like this, 'children' becomes a term which is far from being a transparent description of the section of a population under a certain age. Politicians and psychologists like to use it to denote a particularly susceptible and vulnerable group of sub-humans who cannot speak for themselves, in any sense; sociologists (and, for their own purposes, some broadcasters) more commonly take the view of 'youth' as a group whose own views, whilst coherent and strong, are ignored by the society which would not only prefer to speak for them, but also give accounts of their very motivations and action on their behalf. This latter perspective prioritises the 'macro' and structural approach to social problems, so that in the case of media effects the main question is not 'Might one child be at all damaged by media exposure?', but rather, 'Does it make sense to focus on the media when seeking the causes of the "social problems" with which children are associated?'<sup>62</sup>.

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<sup>62</sup> The clash of these irreconcilable concerns is illustrated whenever new research which suggests that there is no evidence of direct media effects, manages to find its way into the

One of the several problems with the cause–effect model, still adhered to by many psychologists, is that it strips away all else in its narrow focus on – as David Buckingham has put it – ‘the isolated encounter between the individual child and the all-powerful screen that characterises a great deal of academic research’ (1993b, p. 19). The notion of the passive child audience disables the possibilities for understanding children’s uses of and interactions with the media. ‘How children use television, for example, and how they talk about what they watch, need to be considered as social acts with social functions and purposes’ (*ibid*). This ‘angle’ of study would be quite invisible from within the ‘effects’ paradigm, which takes little interest in children’s motivations, and indeed barely credits them with the capacity to make choices at all. As Collins (1983) has noted, ‘Questions of how viewers perceive salient images and how their cognitive and motivational characteristics might contribute to the influence of particular content upon subsequent behaviour have rarely been addressed’ (p. 126). Once again we find ourselves facing a paucity of research or explanation (more fully exposed in chapters two and three) in the space where we would have expected to find theories providing foundation for the claims made about media impact.

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spotlight of public debate (in Britain in the 1990s, at least). Psychologists, stirred by phone calls from newspapers, generally emphasise their concern for the ‘protection of children’, implying (less than accurately) that they know how possible media-influenced harm to particular disturbed children could be avoided. The argument that no child should be put at such ‘risk’, on its own individualistic, anti-sociological terms, appears to make some sense, although it remains unclear which specific things should be removed from the screen to protect the very particular collection of predisposed individuals, and even less clear what action could be taken in cases where the individual may be disturbed by the televised sight of red tablecloths or noisy dogs (since there is little evidence that the depictions of *violence* we find on TV are more likely than anything else to ‘tip the balance’ for particular viewers). This line of argument, coming from such a completely different angle – a different paradigm, indeed – is not able to recognise the sociological case that effects research has shown so little that, if we have any interest in identifying the real, structural causes of crime and violence, we should follow the example of the criminologists and most clinical psychologists, and turn to the home environment and other social factors.

The clash of paradigms means that each party finds the others’ views almost literally incomprehensible. The concern that we should correctly identify the real causes of social problems, rather than irresponsibly applying the blame to false targets (in this case, television), is not apparent to the individualist psychologists. It can be argued that their approach is like trying to cut the number of road traffic accidents in Britain by locking away one famously poor driver from Cornwall; that is, a blinkered approach which tackles a real problem from the wrong end, involves cosmetic rather than relevant changes, and fails to look in any way at the ‘bigger picture’. Such psychologists nevertheless generally seem simply shocked that anyone might be willing to allow anyone else to be put at media ‘risk’, even if that risk is random and unpredictable, and more a problem of life in the late twentieth century than of anything more specific or controllable.

The different approaches to children within academic literature are dissected in detail by Christine Griffin in her imaginatively-conceived critique, *Representations of Youth* (1993). Griffin seeks to analyse the academic hegemony or 'common sense' about young people, as it is constructed and reproduced in youth research, through the study of texts from a range of disciplines. Consternation is prompted not by a straightforward failure of the studies to pick up the correct 'facts' about children, but rather the more complex ideological role played by this research in constructing the very categories associated with youth, and in presenting statements which purport to define their inhabitants. The problem has deep roots, but is not one which we can reassure ourselves is being swept aside by superior recent research. Rather, Griffin argues that the 1980s saw a particular resurgence of biological determinism which had a substantial impact on the treatment of youth and adolescence. This determinism helps to reinforce the idea of children as a singular group with common characteristics, who are, as it were, pre-human, pre-mature; social beings in waiting.

Obviously, the mass of disparate texts from different fields on the subject of youth (psychology, sociology, education, social work, cultural studies, and others) cannot be said to be projecting any kind of unified picture. None is without its flaws – the more radical sociological studies of 'youth', for example (such as Hall & Jefferson, eds, 1976; Willis, 1977; Cloward & Ohlin, 1960), can often be more precisely described as studies of 'gangs of lads', as Griffin notes, with much less being known about young women's leisure and subcultures, particularly historically. Across the literature, though, Griffin did find a mainstream perspective, characterised by 'the search for the putative causes of specific constructed social problems, the tendency to use the victim-blaming thesis, and to represent certain groups or individual young people as "deviant", "deficient" or otherwise inadequate'. She notes also that mainstream approaches 'tend to psychologize inequalities, obscuring structural relations of domination behind a focus on individual "deficient" working-class young people and/or young people of colour, their families or cultural backgrounds' (p. 199). It is these approaches to young people, derived from the psychological literature, which are of particular interest here.

A notable example of the phenomenon described above was found to occur in psychological studies of youth unemployment:

'Whilst research studies might emphasize the damaging psychological, social and economic consequences of unemployment, and even reject the victim-blaming thesis, the onus usually remained on training or helping unemployed young people as *individuals* to "cope" with their situation and to change it through their *own* efforts

(i.e. by getting a job)... Getting a job where few existed became a matter of *individual perseverance and mental attitude*' (pp. 79–80).

Whilst psychologists might argue that it is not their 'job' to take social and political contexts into account, such reasoning seems, at best, naive and not particularly helpful. Similarly, some social psychologists have examined 'rebelliousness' amongst unemployed working-class youth, by taking their 'condition' to be indicative of an inability to organize this 'unstructured free time' (for example, the work of Mark McDermott in the 1980's – see Griffin, pp. 136–138). 'Rebellion' is indicated by truancy, poor academic performance, and an early end to the school career. By taking such outcomes to be merely indicators of a particular kind of psychology, Griffin notes, the approach obscures 'any consideration of the social, economic or structural forces which might lead certain groups of young people (namely white working-class young people and/or young people of colour) to be more likely to "drop out" of school or obtain fewer academic qualifications than their more affluent white middle-class peers' (p. 138). Again, the psychological account papers over social differentiations with the self-fulfilling and unconvincing personality traits 'explanation'.

Teenage pregnancy has also been discussed by psychologists in the 1980's as a form of 'deviance' – represented as part of a pattern which might include 'alcohol and drug abuse, misbehavior in school, criminal behavior, aggression, lying and stealing' (Abrahamse, Morrison & Waite, 1988, p. 16) – and accounted for by factors such as 'rebelliousness' (again), depression (based on the response, in this case, to a single survey question), and low self-esteem. Again, one cannot help but feel that something must have been missed by the approach which appears to want to place all social activity on scales of psychological inadequacy alone.

A more trenchant denunciation of developmental psychology is made by Stainton Rogers & Stainton Rogers (1992), who began their academic careers in psychology but felt unable to sustain its paradigm, whose claims to 'scientific' explanation they felt to be no more than unreliable narratives. They assert that psychology's accounts of child development constitute 'stories' which provide the willing student with *one* way of looking at young people, but not one which has a greater claim to truth than any number of other stories. Whilst any discipline might have its committed relativists, or those who have simply become weary of their field, the Stainton Rogers' argument provides a detailed critique of psychology's developmental accounts, and is able to draw on quite firm evidence that the discipline rests on incomplete foundations – whole basic areas

about the nature of the self, what goes on in the brain, how and why, which are not understood.

Developmental psychology, they argue, draws on metaphorical devices linking it to the natural sciences, and also relies on a resonance with commonsense knowledge, as passed through everyday discourse, as well as the stories and myths underlying Western culture. The science metaphor gives psychology strength, but is far from firm when scrutinised. Socialisation is seen as the crucible in which nature and nurture (in whatever proportions) are melded together to make a new compound, as when two elements are combined in chemistry. But as the Stainton Rogers' note,

'Unlike the chemist (but like the alchemist) psychologists have never had any clear idea of how their metaphorical process actually operates – how the melding together of nature and nurture actually happens. Since what they are dealing with is a metaphor for a process (and not a model of a process itself), psychologists can only speculate in extremely vague terms about the way it may operate, let alone how it may fail, be reversed, break down or whatever. Unfortunately, this has not prevented them from doing so at great length, and in some arenas with far-reaching impact upon the way people lead their lives.' (p. 38).

These authors argue – as does Morss in *The Biologising of Childhood* (1990) – that due to this weakness the whole enterprise of developmentalism is crippled by concerns which when expressed go well beyond mere cautious questionings from within, and which instead constitute the kind of 'cataclysmic conceptual fracturing' which should lead to a paradigm shift (p. 42). It is not necessary to take the more extreme view that *all* sciences are 'stories', to appreciate – as the Stainton Rogers argue – that the accounts provided by developmental psychology are limited and inadequate, taking constructed characteristics to be universal products of either nature, nurture or its compound. The Stainton Rogers note that the various reinventions of biological or social causalism which psychology has produced in controversial areas such as race, gender and sexual orientation have only served to reveal the acceptance-seeking flexibility of its far from scientifically-solid narratives; 'Once the possibility is allowed that developmentalism is intrinsically political then instead of a timeless, universal "telling it how it is", the practice of the discipline becomes seen as inevitably symbiotic with its social location' (p. 48). Even if the reader does not share these psychologists' wholesale despair with their own field, such concerns certainly raise questions, and reflect interestingly on the supposedly value-free individualist, social-vacuum contributions made by some psychologists to political and social debates.

## The child as active viewer

The work above is relevant to the discussion of contemporary approaches to the media, since the same psychological approach has become a notable force in media effects debates, and has roots in other disciplines, as well as popular thought. As Anderson & Lorch (1983) have noted, there is an implicit theory in much writing on the nature of television viewing, which presumes that 'visual attention to television is fundamentally reactive and passively controlled by superficial nonmeaningful characteristics of the medium' (p. 3). In other words, children are inadequate viewers who do not watch television for any meanings or experiences which might exercise their minds, but simply because they cannot resist the attractive flow of its images. Programme content, as long as it is reasonably lively, is irrelevant. Many psychologists, including Albert Bandura (1977), Jerome Singer (1980) and Harvey Lesser (1977), have propagated the view that children's interest in television is not held by the meaningful content of programmes, such as the script and characters, but is captured by formal features such as visual complexity, movement, zooms, cuts and sound effects. The novelty and 'attractiveness' of television, it is claimed, produces involuntary attention which has little to do with thought, appreciation or cognition; television supposedly overrides normal discrimination and the viewer becomes simply 'reactive'. Again, this is a theory which is not only unsupported by the weight of evidence, but which refuses to give young people any credit, and which seems to be comfortable with the assertion that children are a completely separate group – almost a different species – from adults, as if brains are installed complete at age 16. If it were correct, television companies would achieve success by broadcasting an ever-changing but random succession of colours, sounds and images. The familiar and intelligently defined recurrent characters of *Sesame Street* or any other children's programme would work against the need for continuous novelty, and would presumably spoil things simply by talking. Whilst the very 'look' of television clearly has an initial immediate appeal to very young children, it is also obvious that it is precisely the meaning content of programmes which holds that attention. Whilst children, like most adults, may be willing to extend a degree of generosity towards television as regards what they would normally regard as interesting, they nevertheless are bound to prefer and seek out those programmes containing characters or representations which provide meaningful, absorbing and amusing material for their minds.

Anderson & Lorch (1983) describe how, from the late 1970's, they and their colleagues began to question the then widely accepted 'reactive viewer' model.

Experiments devised in the light of this implicitly-held model were producing unexpected results. In one, 5-year old children had been given toys to play with in a laboratory, and consequently paid precisely half as much direct visual attention to a television showing *Sesame Street* as a control group of children who had no toys, and so watched the screen more avidly. Subsequent tests showed that the two groups did not appear to differ at all in recall or comprehension of the programme's content. This suggested that the toy-playing children were able to modify their attention to television with a strategy so effective that actually paying twice as much attention to the screen made no difference. This finding, with others, so startled the researchers that they began what could later be seen as a break with the old paradigm, and the inception of an alternative which would be able to account for such dynamic and discriminating viewing. Perhaps revealingly, Anderson & Lorch admit that they were also compelled to develop 'a new respect for children' (p. 15).

The alternative 'active' model regards viewing as 'an active cognitive transaction between the young viewer, the television and the viewing environment' (p. 6). The viewer has a comprehension schema which poses 'questions' based on gaps in the current state of understanding of the programme; it is the need to answer these questions, and fill the gaps, which holds visual attention. If the viewer is too uninterested to pose questions, or is unable (due to the complexity of the subject-matter), or has had all of their questions answered (if the programme is particularly predictable or has been seen before), attention may cease. It is not the television set which controls the viewer, then;

'Rather, based on his or her experience with the medium, familiarity with the specific program, level of cognitive development, and general world knowledge, the viewer applies viewing strategies more or less appropriate to the program and viewing environment.' (p. 9).

One of the many studies conducted to test the active viewing thesis, by Anderson, Lorch, Field & Sanders (1981, reported in Anderson & Lorch, 1983, pp. 16-17), made it possible to establish whether it is attractive formal features of programme content that hold attention, or if, instead, a programme must be meaningful for a child to keep watching. In the experiment, children aged 2, 2½, and 5, were shown one of two specially prepared one-hour *Sesame Street* videotapes. Some segments on the tapes were normal, but others were altered in one of three ways: some retained the original visuals but had a professionally dubbed Greek soundtrack (which retained lively and characterful voices, but would of course have been incomprehensible to the American children); others had a soundtrack in which each utterance was played backwards, so that it fitted the video frames but again had no meaning; and others featured a changed order

of scenes within the (otherwise unaltered) segment, making for a confusing sequence of events. These alterations meant that the formal visual features and style of the original were retained, although the meaning was effectively removed. The tapes mirrored each other, so that normal sections of one were in altered form on the other, and vice versa.

The implication of the 'reactive viewer' hypothesis would be that the engaging visual and audio features of *Sesame Street* would hold the children's attention regardless of whether the content had meaning for them. However, the study found that normal segments received more attention than randomly edited segments, and much greater attention than foreign language or backwards dialogue segments. This evidence strongly suggests that attention is guided by a search for comprehensible and meaningful programme matter, rather than being carried by the supposed appeal of colourful, noisy television alone.

Furthermore, it should be noted that the task of establishing meanings from television programmes, whilst generally enjoyable, is not psychologically easy. The idea of the lazy, reactive viewer makes little sense when one notes, as for example does Collins (1983), that the process of inference and connection through which viewers make sense of the string of scenes which make up a TV drama is highly sophisticated. Television presents cognitive tasks which 'require considerable attentional, organizational, and inferential activity by the viewer' (p. 127). However, of course, viewers are so adept at this mental work, so visually literate, that it is not experienced as difficult. For those younger viewers who have grown up with television, we would expect such literacy to be particularly natural (Buckingham, 1993).

The active viewer theory suggests that viewing is a process which draws on the viewer's stock of knowledge about both television and the world more generally (Collins, 1983). The experience can even be seen as constructed by the viewer from that which they bring to it; the message is not delivered complete by the medium, but rather is a function of the receiver (Salomon, 1983).

One of the most adventurous and varied attempts to move beyond the simple effects paradigm has been Robert Hodge & David Tripp's '*Children and Television: A Semiotic Approach*' (1986). Recognising that the study of the possible impact of television lacks foundations, and is therefore nonsensical, without an understanding of how the viewers are perceiving what they watch and what it might mean to them, the authors used a variety of methods in an attempt to explore how such information might be slotted back into the project. They note that previous attempts to bring television content into the effects debate had

largely used the method of content analysis, which I have criticised above. Hodge & Tripp themselves acidly relate the process to the computer users' acronym 'GIGO' – 'Garbage in, garbage out' – and argue that the counting and correlations can only begin if and when we have an understanding of the psychological, often less than conscious, processes which go into an individual's processing of each television programme (p. 5).

Their approach, which involved much talking with young people about television (over 600 Australian schoolchildren), produced some contentious results. It is well established, for example, that cartoons almost always emerge from content analyses particularly 'badly', due to their higher levels of 'violent' incidents, and in more general terms are criticised from the traditional viewpoint for being trivial and dangerously unrealistic. Hodge & Tripp however argue that:

'young children, below the age of 6, interpret television so differently that they not only prefer different shows – that much has been obvious – but prefer them because they "read" those shows and others differently. The *bête noir* of lobby groups, the cartoon, which has been stubbornly supported by generations of children, turns out, when analysed by different methods, to be a healthy form, ideally adapted to children's growing powers... Far from the fantastic nature of cartoons causing confusion between fantasy and reality, the largeness of the gap is helpful to young children in building up precisely this capacity to discriminate.' (p. 9).

Older children prefer prime-time series and films, which involve multiple plot-lines, often woven across more than one episode. The more 'adult' content may be criticised as unsuitable, but the more complex structures provide more of a challenge to the developing mind, and which they can (and do) discuss in more sophisticated terms (p. 91). Children of all ages thus seem to target programmes which not only capture their interest, but also which are most advantageous to their particular level of cognitive development.

More generally, it is found from talking with children about their viewing that TV content is fed into and understood in terms of the viewer's experiences and personal points of reference, as well as any subsequent discourse about it which may bend or amend the meanings further still. This 'sometimes tortuous course of redefinition and appropriation' (p. 217) means that no two viewings of identical material are ever quite the same, and in particular often differ greatly between adults and children – not because children are incompetent, but rather precisely because their proficiency is in making the media meaningful *for themselves*.

It is interesting that what we might in lay terms understand as the more 'psychological' dimension of television viewing – the way in which content is processed and interpreted by the viewer – is almost precisely the area which

conspicuous psychologists in this field have generally failed to address in a manner of any quality. This can perhaps be related to the interest which psychology as a discipline – through its representatives – has in reinforcing its self-image as a ‘science’, relying on quantitative methods which focus on measurable *outcomes*, rather than *processes*.

Further evidence of children’s competence with televisual media – as well as the value of qualitative methods – is provided by Gunter, McAleer & Clifford’s (1991) account of discussions with more than 300 children aged 7–16. As in other studies where researchers have engaged children in conversation about television (such as Palmer, 1986; Buckingham, 1993, 1996), the young viewers were found to be active rather than passive viewers, eager to discuss drama or soap characters in terms of how the programme-makers have constructed them, and the style, format and fabrication of programmes more generally. Children were also vigilant and aware of the possibility of bias, exaggeration and selective reporting in the news, which they readily critiqued for style and presentation. The study again supported the case that children select programmes to watch because they are interested in them; no interest meant no viewing.

The material presented in this chapter leads to the inescapable conclusion that children’s capacities have often been underestimated by media (and other) research. Almost always ‘researched on’ rather than ‘worked with’, children are constructed – by psychologists in particular – as inadequate and uncritical in their encounters with the mass media, which itself is misrepresented as forbiddingly powerful. These non-adults are treated sympathetically, as victims – they know not what they do – but are simultaneously disempowered from having any participation in the discourses about themselves, their behaviour, and the reasoning linking the two. For obvious reasons, the research method described in the later chapters of this thesis aims to avoid those mistakes.

## 6. Mass media and the environment

This chapter reviews previous research on the impact of environmental material in the mass media, and then discusses examples of recent environmental television itself, with particular reference to interviews conducted with the producers of three key programmes. The different emphases of these shows, and the intentions of their makers, are considered and contrasted, and then compared with the approach of more specifically 'alternative' media.

### **Research on environmental issues in the mass media: a narrow focus**

The scholarship produced to date on environmental issues and the mass media has been rather limited in scope. In terms of the question of the impact of environmental material on the audience, the shortcomings are particularly strong, and are twofold: first of all, most of the work has been on how environmental organisations get coverage *into* the media, rather than what the audience gets *out* of that coverage, and secondly, the work has strongly favoured discussion of environmental matters in the *news*, whilst little has been done on the environmental content of dramas, entertainment or children's programmes. The representative selection of articles in one of the very few book anthologies, '*The Mass Media and Environmental Issues*' (Hansen, ed., 1993), for example, is almost entirely dedicated to environmental news coverage, with only the occasional aside about non-factual or more general pro-environmental material. This may be satisfactory within its own terms, but the mass media represents, of course, an enormously heterogeneous universe of interests, formats and content, within which the *news* media – a more accurate phrase for Hansen's title – is just one part, and is far from being the most popular or predominant. The point here is not to question the importance of research on the role of news and current affairs programmes, nor to blame any individual scholars for the fact that their news-oriented work cannot be fitted into a broader range of research across the media spectrum. Nevertheless, the amount of material produced in the one arena means that similar work in others, such as entertainment media, becomes increasingly necessary. Furthermore, since the news-related work is generally in relation to specific real events or issues, it is unable to anticipate any change in much more general environmental awareness or eco-friendliness. Of course in practical terms this may make research *easier*, since a straightforward focus on specific environmental cases or problems, coupled with a concentration on a

particular source of information, can allow for a reasonably simple – albeit not necessarily unproblematic – methodology. The big picture, however, will remain elusive.

James Shanahan (1993) is one of the few who allow non-factual television programming to enter the media-world engaged by his study. By way of introduction, he notes that ‘environmental damage is principally a consequence of the fact that we [are] concerned with other issues’ (p. 182). Adding environmental concern to our other preoccupations is unlikely to be enough for substantive changes to be effected, then;

‘we will have to restructure our current goals and especially our everyday awareness which leads us (“us” meaning anything from individuals to nations) to commit environmentally insensitive acts. Even individuals who are nominally environmentally concerned... find it difficult to escape the prevailing paradigm of economic growth and material comfort because the economy is structured in such a way that material survival often depends on environmentally insensitive acts. The problem is one of ideology and consciousness.’ (p. 182).

The role of the mass media, Shanahan argues, has to go beyond simply making people aware of environmental problems. ‘Merely increasing the flow of environmental news, while a necessary step, does not attack the ideological base of the problem, which is a fundamental mental tendency to ignore the environment when making everyday life decisions’ (p. 183). Shanahan therefore suggests the obvious but frequently overlooked point that we therefore must look not just at environmental news, but at the much broader canvas of all media output, particularly entertainment.

Shanahan, perhaps surprisingly, seeks to use cultivation theory – and, more disappointingly, its correlational method – to test his hypothesis that ‘the thrust of television is anti-environmental, and so we would expect heavy viewers to manifest this anti-environmentalism more than light viewers. The effect might be subtle, as cultivation would predict, but should be measurable.’ (p. 187). This method is inherently very flawed, since it is apparently premised on the belief that people are randomly assigned to ‘heavy’ or ‘light’ viewing, and will be identical apart from this amount of viewing<sup>63</sup>. However, this is clearly not the case: those who watch a lot of television and those who watch little – whilst of course being wildly heterogeneous groups even within themselves – will be substantially different from the start. Their different uses of leisure time, rather than being a consequence of chance, are likely to reflect the fact that they are

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<sup>63</sup> This problem is characteristic of most studies based on cultivation theory, as noted in chapter three.

individuals with notably different interests, priorities and characters, as well as meaning that they will have different experiences of the environment (a fundamental problem which Shanahan is partly forced to admit – p. 195). This means that whichever way a correlation between amount of television viewing and environmental concern goes, it can tell us nothing valid about the impact of the former on the latter. In practice, the study is equally disappointing, being based on samples from ‘four undergraduate communication classes’ (p. 188) at two American universities, with questionnaires collected four times from 1988 to 1992, from *different* students each time (so this was not a panel study). College students are a notoriously unrepresentative sample, having quite different lifestyles to the adult population as a whole, and media students are the absolute worst subjects, being wise to the already rather transparent interests of media researchers. Even the internal validity in this study was weak since the first two samples were taken at a public American university, whilst the second two were at a quite different private one.

In any case, the findings for the first three samples suggested that heavier television viewers were less concerned about the environment, due to negative, significant correlations between viewing and expressed concern, although as noted above this cannot actually lead us to Shanahan’s conclusion that TV viewing ‘did in fact seem to be retarding’ environmental concern (p. 192). However, by the time of the final data collection in 1992, this relationship had disappeared, which Shanahan dutifully takes to suggest that the increased coverage of environmental matters on television has taken effect. Shanahan argues: ‘In any case, we are not suggesting that television viewing *causes* lack of environmental concern. We are suggesting, however, that television is a key player in the way the culture receives and interprets messages, and messages about the environment are no exception to this rule. Thus, television’s role, if not directly causal, is as a systemic factor which can work against environmental improvement in a cyclical fashion’ (p. 195).

Lighter viewers of television, it is suggested, will necessarily have more opportunities to hear of environmental matters from other sources – which may well, of course, be true, at least if television does not supply many environmental messages per evening. However, for children’s programming it is likely that this notion will be reversed: chances are that children will gain more knowledge of environmental issues from such programmes than they would learn during play with their friends. Furthermore, Shanahan’s argument is strangely inconsistent, since it asserts that television viewing and environmental concern will be negatively related, but then attributes the lack of this relationship, in the final

wave of his survey, to environmental messages on TV having an effect after all. His other speculations might be valid, but are not based on data of any substance, and could not be verified by his inadequate and flawed research procedures.

A more rigorous and qualitative study was conducted in the late 1980s by John Corner, Kay Richardson and Natalie Fenton, published as *Nuclear Reactions* (1990). Their study explored the reactions of a number of focus groups, each representing different social, political and professional backgrounds, to four different television programmes on the subject of nuclear power<sup>64</sup>. Analysing the responses, the authors note that:

‘Respondents appropriate the programmes, or aspects of them, from within particular frameworks of understanding, which supply them with criteria of evaluation both for programme forms and contents’ (p. 50).

As different groups privilege different ‘frames’, the significance of a group’s social identity upon its interpretation of the programmes is revealed: their deployment of these frames ‘can be seen as an expression of the *agendas* which the groups bring to the interpretive task’ (p. 92). For example, when a group of unemployed people are compared with a group of men from a Rotary Club, it is noted that the former favour a ‘political’ frame – seeing the interests of the government and the nuclear industry as linked, and their declarations unreliable – whilst the latter refer predominantly to an ‘evidential’ frame, which is willing to believe that government statistics are disinterested and trustworthy (pp. 94–96). Most commonly dominant across all of the groups, however, was the ‘civic’ frame, where viewers struggled to identify an overall ‘fairness’ – which it was felt a programme on a controversial topic should strive for – even in the face of an obviously partisan argument or when in conflict with other ideas of ‘balance’ and ‘truth’ (p. 107).

Whilst obviously not intended to explore the *impact* of the environmental material in question directly, this study is more valuable than Shanahan’s effort, since it provides some insight into the *meanings* which such programmes can generate. Furthermore, it begins to unfold the way in which these meanings are inferred by the individual, in the light of their own social identity and concerns,

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<sup>64</sup> More specifically, the report discusses in some detail the responses of six different groups to three television programmes, two of them broadly critical of the nuclear industry and its effects on the environment and health, and one a promotional video produced by that industry. The responses of eight other groups to this material are mentioned only very briefly. In addition, the report describes the reactions of three further groups, who watched one (different) programme which discussed the possible links between nuclear power stations and child leukaemia.

and then negotiated in the social sphere. It would seem to be a priority that models of meaning-making are produced, *before* – or alongside – any attempt to quantify changes in ecological behaviour related to television, and we shall return to this goal in the following chapter.

Other studies have only touched on the impact of environmental TV in marginal or speculative ways. For example, analysis of a survey of 1,089 young people aged 13 to 16, by Lyons & Breakwell (1994), found that the watching of television science programmes was a significant discriminator between those who were concerned about the environment, and those who were indifferent towards it, with a higher level of scientific knowledge being associated with greater awareness of environmental problems. As with all correlations, however, no causality can be assumed, leaving us to speculate that the most plausible account for this is that those who are sufficiently interested in factual matters and serious issues to watch science programmes on TV, are more likely to be those individuals who also take ecological concerns seriously.

Easterling, Miller & Weinberger (1995) take the opposite tack, providing explanations but no empirical data to support their model of ways in which children may act as catalysts for family environmental consumerism. Drawing upon previous psychological research, the authors argue that children in families where the open discussion of ideas is encouraged, and where there are high levels of communication, are likely to be able to influence their parents' shopping choices in a pro-environmental direction. It is suggested that whilst the family will be 'the primary and most significant agent of socialisation' (p. 537), the media, school and peers will also make a contribution to this environmental awareness. Unfortunately the authors are unable to offer details of any research designed to test this specific hypothesis, and so it remains at the level of informed speculation.

Finally, Burgess & Harrison (1993) conducted a detailed study of a lengthy public controversy over whether a multinational corporation should be given permission to develop a huge theme park on a site in Essex which was legally designated for nature conservation. Much of this study is an examination of the media coverage of the matter, and the media-management strategies of the various parties involved, but in addition, focus groups provided data on public perceptions of the issue as it circulated in the local and national media, as well as

(very heavily) in local public discourse<sup>65</sup>. The findings suggest that it was this local experience which was of fundamental importance to individuals as they assessed the case in favour of the theme park, versus that made by conservationists. Claims made by the media were treated with scepticism by the 'lay' local people who largely supported the proposed scheme, particularly where the media were seen to exaggerate the site's claim to being an area of natural beauty – 'You see what they want you to see', as one typical group member complained (p. 217). Burgess & Harrison conclude from their audience research that 'it is practical life lived locally which determines the sense that people make of media texts' (p. 218), with media claims 'seldom' being instrumental in opinion formation. This finding is echoed by Geoffrey Gooch's research (1996) on the regional press in Sweden and public concern about their local environment, which found that most people's primary environmental concerns were not those featured most frequently in the newspapers. The study suggested that personal experience of local environmental problems, and interpersonal communication, were likely to have a greater influence upon the public's perception of local environmental risks.

The impact of television coverage of environmental issues on the audience, then, is an area which has been surprisingly little researched. Furthermore, those studies which have been conducted are generally disappointing, with only the study by Corner, Richardson & Fenton making any substantial contribution to our understanding of what the audience 'do' with television's environmental messages. We therefore now turn our attention to the actual TV material itself.

### **Children's television in Britain**

Before its modern environmental aspects are discussed, British children's television is here briefly introduced in more general terms. An understanding of its particular nature needs to be rooted in an account of the BBC's approach to children. Stephen Wagg (1992a) describes how, from the 1920s to the 1940s, BBC radio sought to generate a homely atmosphere which had a responsibility to protect the child's purity and dignity. Children, thus idealised, could not be treated as equals, but were fed a diet of cultural 'improvement' delivered in cheerfully hearty fashion (pp. 154–155). Children's television in the 1950s began in a similar vein, but the idea of treating children as adults had started to gain

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<sup>65</sup> Rather than conducting several focus groups with different participants in each, Burgess & Harrison opted for a more 'ethnographic' approach, using the same two groups of ten people on six different occasions, over a period of a few months (p. 202).

ground. Competition from ITV meant that children could now avoid the BBC's model of 'educational' programmes designed for a child audience if they so wished, and as Himmelweit *et al* (1958, p. 14) found, when the option was there, children took it. Children were therefore now viewers and *consumers*, and not only for commercial television – even the BBC's *Muffin the Mule* (1946–54) was represented in the nation's toy stores by Muffin products, officially licensed by Muffin Syndicate Ltd (Wagg, 1992a, p. 163).

The appearance of ITV also signalled the dawn of an era in which the BBC would increasingly have to compete for viewers to justify its survival. Whilst initially this did not drastically affect the content of BBC children's programming, which was an area where the BBC was confident of its superiority (*ibid*, p. 165), the late 1970's saw the advent of a new kind of Saturday morning entertainment/magazine programme, which has mutated from *The Multi-Coloured Swap Shop* to *Saturday Superstore*, *Going Live* and *Live and Kicking*. Wagg identifies a range of ways in which these programmes represented a decisive break from the style and content of their predecessors. Rather than being about 'making and doing', the activity highlighted by these programmes is consumption – most often of other media products. Television, film and pop stars are given a platform to plug their latest products, with children's active role relegated to the opportunity to pose interview questions (in the 1990's, even *Blue Peter* has pop stars uncomfortably miming new releases to an empty studio). That popular culture not only appears in, but defines and dominates these programmes, is also a break with the previous norms. So too is the satirical humour, which like the entire shows is self-referential and reflexively ironic; if postmodern television exists, it is not in the late-night arts programmes where 'postmodernism' would be discussed, but on Saturday mornings, where *Going Live* (1988–) then *Live and Kicking* (1993–) developed a successful frame-breaking style in which the studio crew are involved in the (apparently genuine) spontaneous humour, antics and blunders<sup>66</sup>. The effort which previously went into making the techniques and technicalities of production invisible is now applied to making it entertainingly explicit, and the increasingly young presenters simultaneously make fun of bits of popular culture whilst maintaining its status as the most interesting focus of attention.

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<sup>66</sup> This style is not actually new; even *The Muppet Show* in the 1970's took place 'on stage', 'backstage', and 'in the audience'. However, this was contrived, with the 'off stage' action being just as dramatised as that 'on stage'. In *Going Live*, as the programme continually exposed its own workings and production, those were the *actual* workings and production.

There is another important aspect to Saturday morning programming, however, which is the way in which it came to symbolise the different approaches of the BBC and ITV to children's television, a dichotomy which can be seen as being centred along 'clear class and cultural divisions' (Cornell, Day & Topping, 1993, pp. 196–199). ITV responded to *The Multi-Coloured Swap Shop* with *Tiswas*, which firmly rejected the former's relatively disciplined and 'sensible' style in favour of custard pies, slapstick and silliness, in much the same way that *Blue Peter* had spawned the 'comparative anarchy' of ITV's factual *Magpie* (1968–). In short, the BBC's programming, more than ITV's, tended to represent the kinds of programmes which middle-class parents would be expected to approve of their children viewing. There have been exceptions, of course, most notably the BBC's *Grange Hill* (1978–) – the programme which referred to the GCSE examination system as the 'General Collapse of Secondary Education' – which has enjoyed considerable popularity and longevity, commonly attributed to its refusal to shy away from 'real life' issues such as bullying, shoplifting, vandalism, drugs, racism, unemployment, sex, pregnancy and abortion.

### **Environmentally-oriented children's television in the 1990s**

Within the broad context of these developments in children's programming, as well as the rise of 'green' issues in the public consciousness since the late 1980s as discussed in chapter one, are located the three programmes which are the focus of most of the remainder of this chapter, *Blue Peter*, *Newsround* and *The Animals of Farthing Wood*. All of these are broadcast by the BBC, and (along with ITV's *Captain Planet and the Planeteers*) were the programmes most commonly mentioned by the children participating in the video project, when asked to name programmes which include environmental material (see chapter eight). Aside from *Captain Planet*, which was produced by Turner Program Services in the USA and has enjoyed several repeats at various points in the schedule, ITV has offered comparatively little environmental material on a consistent basis. The channel's development of a specifically 'green' children's magazine programme, *Go Wild!*, should not be overlooked, but the show only survived two short series in 1992 and 1993, and so could not be expected to have had a huge impact. ITV has also offered *The Adventures of Grady Greenspace*, a bizarre French-Canadian mix of live action and puppet animals, in which the eponymous rodent hero fights a battle against 'crime and pollution' in his valley. Elsewhere, *Sesame Street* (which has become well established on Channel Four) features environmental elements quite frequently, and of course

many drama series have featured one or two episodes with an environmental theme (Gauntlett, 1995a, pp. 55–56).

Below, *Blue Peter*, *Newsround* and *The Animals of Farthing Wood* are each introduced in turn, drawing on interviews conducted with their producers in 1996. There then follows a comparative discussion of some aspects of the programmes, their approach, and their potential impact.

### ***Blue Peter***

Despite changing times and fashions, the BBC's factual magazine programme *Blue Peter*, first broadcast in 1958, is still the highest-rated children's show. Presented by teams of increasingly young and bubbly presenters, and upgraded from two to three programmes a week in 1995, the programme is famous for its demonstrations of how to make and cook things, filmed reports on people and places, and studio demonstrations of sport, science and song. Its primary target audience is children aged seven to eleven<sup>67</sup>.

Several years ago, one typical edition of the programme, from June 1984, was somewhat famously slated by Bob Ferguson in his essay 'Black *Blue Peter*' (1984). Ferguson tore into the programme's botched attempts at presenting a harmonious multicultural world, and attacked its cheerful but patronising middle-class discourses, which he argued involve assumptions about lifestyle, consumption patterns, and a superficial attachment to charity. The historical story featured in Ferguson's chosen edition was an embarrassingly antique collection of white imperialist clichés and obscured details: the inhabitants of a Pacific island were 'fearsome savages' with 'masses of fuzzy hair', whilst the primary characters were white capitalists whose wealth was mentioned, but the

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<sup>67</sup> Lewis Bronze, Editor of *Blue Peter* from 1988 to summer 1996, was interviewed for this study in April 1996, and provided much of the information cited in this section.

On *Blue Peter*'s audience, he commented: 'We do have a problem with reaching [teenagers], once they go to secondary school. Once puberty approaches, then there is a great desire to leave childish things behind, and it is much more difficult for *Blue Peter*, although we have many loyal viewers who are 14, 15, 16, we don't have *anything* like the numbers and the support amongst that age group that we do amongst the sevens, eights, nines and tens. That is the key *Blue Peter* audience, you know if you've got them when they're seven and eight then you've got them, and if you haven't got them you're in trouble. And the statistics and audience figures show, boy we've got them. [...] The research we have indicates that the vast majority of children who watch the programme don't watch it because there's nothing else to do, they watch it because they *choose* to watch it. The programme is very high on recorded AIs – the audience appreciation index'.

way in which it had been acquired – involving the impoverishment and death of millions of Indian people – was not. Ferguson concluded:

‘Such a programme is an obstacle to the extension of knowledge, and a means of closing off alternative possibilities of thought. It is a vector of true bourgeois ideology and... [is] riddled with contradictions, racist, sexist and reactionary’ (p. 40).

Whilst the programme has undoubtedly changed in the past twelve years, and the approach to a historical story, in particular, would today be much more likely to take account of the anti-racist critique of imperialist history<sup>68</sup>, some of the programme’s features – in particular the ‘middle-class’ discourses – remain fundamentally similar. Nevertheless, changes have been made.

When Lewis Bronze was appointed as Editor in 1988, he noted the lack of coverage of serious contemporary issues in the programme, and sought to change that trend. This coincided, as noted previously, with the wave of popular interest in environmental issues in the media and society more generally, and led to *Blue Peter* taking on environmental concerns in quite a visible and dedicated way. An obvious high point here was the publication of the best-selling *Blue Peter Green Book* (Bronze, Heathcote & Brown, 1990)<sup>69</sup>, which begins:

‘The theme of this book is hope. It is the hope that, as the children of today grow up, they will want to live in a cleaner and kinder world, a world that is not choking itself on filthy smoke, nor using up precious supplies of fuels, nor polluting its rivers, seas and countryside with poisonous rubbish... Children are the future... You are not burdened by the habits of a lifetime, as adults are. Children are the voters, workers, bosses and government of tomorrow. Start making your voice heard now’ (pp. 4–5).

This extract reflects the direct, upbeat, critical tone which characterised *Blue Peter*’s coverage at the time. The ‘action boxes’ in the book, which accompany each two-page spread and emphasise ways in which children can act ‘to make a better world’, are also typical of the approach<sup>70</sup>. Lewis Bronze – one of the book’s co-authors – recalls:

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<sup>68</sup> There is a substantial body of work on the ways in which history has been taught from Eurocentric and ethnocentric standpoints (and how this can, once recognised, be avoided), including an on-going debate regarding the content of History in the National Curriculum in Britain. See, for example, Banks (1994), Brandt (1986), Burgess-Macey (1992), Collicott (1986), Figueroa (1993), Fines (1993).

<sup>69</sup> The *Blue Peter Green Book*, written by Lewis Bronze, Nick Heathcote and Peter Brown, was published in 1990, with a revised edition published in 1991. The book sold over 80,000 copies (source: BBC Books, June 1996).

<sup>70</sup> It is curious to note that, despite the huge amount of advice contained in *The Blue Peter Green Book*, vegetarianism is not advocated, even though concern for all manner of wildlife is expressed throughout, and cruelty-free make-up is recommended. (This inconsistency is, of course, typical of the coverage of animal stories in media aimed at children, and elsewhere).

‘We went through a year, maybe two years, of doing a *lot* of environmental items. If it was an environmental story, we sort of went and did it. [...] We did a *lot* of stories which I then saw a lot later on, on adult programmes, or on specialist programmes.’

The centrality of the environment for the programme at that time was also symbolically emphasised by the introduction of a special *Blue Peter* ‘green badge’, which took its place alongside the traditional blue badge as a redoubtable trophy for the ecologically-sound viewer. Several thousand of these have since been awarded to notable campaign participants and the writers of environmentally-themed letters.

*Blue Peter* is famous for its appeals, in which viewers are typically encouraged to collect a particular item, or hold a ‘Bring and Buy Sale’, in order to raise money for a specific charity or project. The first – which collected toys for deprived children – was in 1962, and different appeals have been an important feature of the programme’s calendar in every year since. This history of successful audience involvement meant that *Blue Peter* was in a good position to encourage viewers to engage in various eco-friendly activities. In 1989, for example, the programme ran a major campaign for aluminium can recycling. Lewis Bronze comments:

‘We launched our first aluminium can collection with Tesco, and I think more or less overnight aluminium can collection rates went up from something like two per cent to sixteen or eighteen per cent. And that has been sustained. It’s got a lot broader, and when we revisited that collection campaign two years later, it was more difficult for us to collect cans because everyone else was already collecting them. [...] Today you can go and deposit your aluminium cans in Safeways or Tesco or Sainsbury’s, and I believe that while *Blue Peter* didn’t invent it, we were the catalyst – we gave it the big push that then established it’.

The show has similarly run campaigns for lead-free petrol, and for compact fluorescent lightbulbs, which Bronze believes played important roles in raising awareness about those products at important points in their development, and increased demand for them through children pressurising their parents. Like recycling, which children can obviously participate in themselves, Bronze attributes the apparent success of these campaigns to their practicality and simplicity.

'I believe that *Blue Peter* is very largely about empowerment, about making children realise their own worth as individuals, and *enabling* them to do things. And the environment has a big part to play there. You *can* actually make a difference in your own life, to the way you live your life, and you can benefit the environment around you. And children – who can't vote, who can't drive, who can't get on a plane and go abroad on a holiday, who don't have large amounts or even *small* amounts of disposable income, but they can, you know, [...] use a bike instead of going in the car, they can say let's use the car less, they can turn lights off. I mean these are all small things, but to a child these are all effective things. [...] Tiny things, but I really do believe they make a difference. Like all good environmentalists'.

Bronze feels that an observable consequence of the viewer's action is important for the programme's campaigns, so that the action has an obvious *meaning* for children.

'We've done things that haven't been meaningful from time to time. With all due respect to Jonathon Porritt, we did his "Tree of Life" thing in 1992, the World Summit in Rio, Brazil, where people wrote letters to world leaders and they all got hung on a "Tree of Life", and we did it, but even when he was explaining it to me I was saying, "Why, so what?", "So that world leaders will see-", "Well yeah, but then what?". [...] And while I was happy to go along with that and do it, and I know that people were very well intentioned, my personal desire is to do things to have a demonstrable end product, where children can say "I did this, and the result is that". And I think our most successful campaigns have always had that at the heart of it: an eight year old, having watched the programme, should be able to say to another eight year old, in about one sentence, what it is. You know: collect junk mail, they're going to get wheelchairs out of it. Simple. And if you can do that then you're onto a winner'.

After the peak of environmental coverage at the start of the decade, the desire to have a more 'balanced' programme – as well as a certain amount of difficulty in finding new ways to approach similar material – meant that the environment dropped somewhat in *Blue Peter*'s priorities. Bronze, whilst citing the belief that this shift 'reflects the tenor of the times', is quick to insist that the programme has not forgotten the environment completely, however, and is able to refer to recent features such as the campaign to collect and recycle junk mail, mentioned above, which appears to have made quite an impact<sup>71</sup>. Nevertheless, *Blue Peter* is now quite some way from being the 'green' flagship it was in 1990.

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<sup>71</sup> The campaign involved the collection of junk mail through supermarket recycling bins. As a consequence of its success, as Bronze explains, 'The Paper Federation have relaunched the whole of their paper collecting campaign, and are now trying to get the whole paper industry, all the people that subscribe to the Federation, to sing to more or less the same tune, which is that paper should be recycled into one of three categories, and this was launched yesterday in Manchester and we were filming that. So we were reporting on a new initiative which has come about very largely as a result of a previous *Blue Peter* campaign, which demonstrated that the public *have* this awareness, *can* be educated, and have this willingness to *do* something. So it's quite nice when you run a campaign and then you end up covering a news

## **Newsround**

Many viewers watching the *Blue Peter* title sequence will have spent the previous five or ten minutes with BBC1's children's news programme *Newsround*. It was launched in 1972 – the world's first news bulletin specifically for children – and presented by John Craven for seventeen years. Initially broadcast twice a week, and with a staff of two, the programme soon came to occupy a slot every weekday at around 5.00pm<sup>72</sup>. It has its own team of reporters, and is made by Children's BBC in close connection with BBC News and Current Affairs. The programme is watched, on average, by 1.6 million children per day – between 15 and 20 per cent of all children in Britain – as well as many adults<sup>73</sup>.

Unlike *Blue Peter*, *Newsround* has not allowed the environment to slip from the central position which it had firmly captured in the late eighties. Its coverage of environmental matters on a daily basis has won *Newsround* the British Environment and Media Award in five out of six years since 1990. The programme's Editor, Nick Heathcote<sup>74</sup>, says that 'The environment is probably the biggest single subject that we cover on the programme. It's very much at the top of the *Newsround* news agenda, probably far higher than any other programmes, I think, that cater for adults'. Unlike in 'adult' news, where isolated environmental correspondents struggle – often unsuccessfully – to get

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story which has come out of it. [...] This really was a *new thing*, and we think "oh my God is anyone going to know what we're talking about", and yes they do, and yes they did it. And we collected 8,600 tonnes of junk mail'.

<sup>72</sup> A series of extended (15-minute) reports on a single topical subject, entitled *Newsround Extra*, replaces the Friday edition of *Newsround* for around ten weeks each year.

<sup>73</sup> In fact, 75 per cent of the *Newsround* audience are adults. As *Newsround* Editor Nick Heathcote explains, 'We get more adults watch *Newsround* than *Breakfast News* and *Newsnight* combined. And four days in a week we'll be the market leader at that time of day. So people do actually enjoy the *Newsround* agenda, whether they're kids or adults. It's great that we're hitting our target audience but also hitting an audience beside it – it's a bit like if all the adults suddenly went out and started buying Take That records; it wouldn't mean that kids weren't buying them, just that adults were deciding to buy them too. [...] A great many of them are parents, in the main it's mums, it's older brothers and sisters, it's people who are unemployed, and we have a *huge* audience amongst the over-55s. [...] I'm not suggesting that older people tune into *Newsround* for our environmental coverage, although they are the beneficiaries, in a sense, of that coverage'.

<sup>74</sup> Nick Heathcote, who joined *Newsround* in 1979 and was Editor of the programme from 1989 to summer 1996, was interviewed for this study in February 1996, and provided much of the information cited in this section.

their stories into the news at all<sup>75</sup>, most of the *Newsround* staff 'have a real interest and care and passion about environmental stories. *Newsround* doesn't have environmental correspondents because we're *all* environmental correspondents. Everybody in that office is keen and eager to report on the environment'.

Also in contrast to 'adult' news, *Newsround* prides itself on its more consistent and long-term approach to stories. For example, when the supertanker, the *Sea Empress*, ran aground near Milford Haven, South Wales, in February 1996, spilling an estimated 70,000 tonnes of oil into the sea, most mainstream news programmes ceased to cover the story as soon as the tanker had been pulled from the rocks and into port. *Newsround*, however, took what is ironically, but almost inarguably, a more *mature* approach, as Heathcote explains:

'We haven't *finished* covering that story – and that's one of the things that makes *Newsround* different to adult news programmes. Whereas they will probably wash their hands of that and move on to a new story in about two or three days, we won't forget that story – we'll go *back* in a month's time and find out what's happened a month on, and we'll find out what's happened *six* months on. I mean this is the biggest oil disaster since Victoria Canyon in 1967, and as such, for us it is probably our biggest story of the *year*. There have been short-term effects as a result of this oil spill, but there's going to be much, much longer and perhaps more damaging effects than we've witnessed so far. I mean the death toll amongst birds, we're coming up to the breeding season, the death toll amongst birds is increasing at a rapid rate, we're now talking about tens of thousands – fifty thousand birds at risk. But already it's slipped off the agenda of national news programmes. *We* haven't stopped covering it. We've had a story every *day* so far and we've got another one tomorrow, so by the end of this week we'll have had two weeks of coverage of that disaster'.

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<sup>75</sup> Heathcote elaborates: 'I think one of the problems that adult news has, is that the environment has to fight its way onto what is a much more complicated news agenda, and if you actually analyse adult news programmes, there's a much greater emphasis on things that actually *Newsround* often doesn't cover, and you have a limited time for your news programme, and you have to make editorial decisions about what you do and don't do. Now, if I were sitting in the adult newsroom, there'd be the politics stories, there'd be the social affairs stories, there'd be the economics stories, which would *all*, I think, be seen as higher priority.

'On mainstream news you're getting more environmental coverage than you got 10 or 15 years ago, but I talk to the environmental correspondents who work for mainstream news programmes and they are incredibly frustrated, that they know that there are important stories that need to be reported – you know, big scientific conferences where they're discussing the environment – and they have to *battle* to try and get that story into the news. They're competing with all of the other correspondents, who are arguing fiercely for their stories, and at the end of the day [the environmental story] is always the one that gets dropped off the running order. This is the frustration *they* have. I've had environmental correspondents, without mentioning any names, saying "Thank God I can get stuff on *Newsround*", because they can't get stuff *placed* on the mainstream news programmes'.

Similarly, in the past, the programme has followed up news stories which have been forgotten by mainstream news, such as a number of return visits to the scene of the Braer oil disaster, and reports from the Gulf about the environmental damage caused by the burning of oil wells following the Gulf War.

*Newsround* has not only maintained a consistent level of interest in environmental matters in the years *since* the notable wave of late eighties/early nineties concern<sup>76</sup>, but also demonstrated an interest in the subject for several years before this, reporting environmental stories through the 1980s which were disregarded elsewhere. In particular, it was one of the first programmes to identify and to report on the problems of leaded petrol – one of the consequences of an unusually close association with environmental pressure groups. As Heathcote explains,

‘By the early 80s, we were *regularly* reporting stories that were being sent to us by Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth, when everybody else saw them as being complete cranks<sup>77</sup>. [...] We developed a very very close working relationship with those organisations. [...] They I think had identified for their part that young people were the future and that it was important to try to get the message through to young people, so we co-operated very closely with them, at an early stage – and have continued to co-operate with them since then. [...] I know the attitude that existed towards those sorts of organisations amongst journalists [at that time], and how it was a different attitude when I came to *Newsround*. So if anybody [at the BBC] had analysed it they may well have thought that *Newsround* perhaps was giving these people too much credibility and credence, but I don’t think that we were, and I think time has proved that we weren’t’.

This approach means that *Newsround* has effectively made the political decision to prioritise environmental matters over others – in particular over party political stories, which are dismissed by Heathcote as being more or less irrelevant when compared to the global threats posed to the ecosphere. This significant point will

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<sup>76</sup> Heathcote concurs that there was an unusual level of interest in environmental matters at that time. Discussing the level of coverage of the issue on ‘adult’ news, he remarks, ‘One has to bear in mind that it’s only in the relatively recent past that the BBC actually bothered to have an environmental correspondent at *all* – probably only five or six years, or the late eighties, at the height of the environment becoming fashionable. And for a *while*, you know, they were sort of key players in the newsroom, but over a period of time they [the news editors] have reverted to the more traditional agenda, and the environmental correspondents have been in a sense marginalised. Because it [environmental concern] came as a fashion thing – once it became rather less fashionable, the environmental correspondents were sort of forgotten about. And in newspapers likewise’.

<sup>77</sup> Further to this, Heathcote adds: ‘I remember in the early 80s, mainstream news people would have seen Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth as complete cranks, a bit like probably they would perceive people who at the moment are campaigning against the Newbury bypass, they were “travellers”, who were [seen as] off their head and concerned about things without really any rational reason’.

be discussed further below (see the section 'Different programmes, different approaches').

Another illustration of *Newsround's* critical approach is illustrated by its Editor's views on nature programmes:

'I worry whether or not the emphasis of a lot of what comes out of the Natural History Unit is a sort of "let's look at the animal kingdom" rather than actually "let's *explore* some of the *problems* that are faced by the world". I don't think they're very scientifically based, they're not based upon discussion and debate – it's basically very nice, very attractive, glossy films about the environment, whether it be animals or habitat'.

In contrast to that 'rose-tinted', uncritical approach, *Newsround's* objective is better characterised as one which seeks to convey factual information about environmental threats. Furthermore, Heathcote believes that this continued emphasis is likely to have had a notable influence upon a generation:

'I think without blowing the trumpet too much, *Newsround* is a bit of a drip-feed, it goes out five days a week, it's now 24 years old, it's been going out a long time, and it's covered environmental stories *consistently*, not because it was fashionable, but on a consistent basis. I think that inevitably will have had quite a major impact in terms of people's understanding of the problems. That's what it's about, it's about making people aware of it, putting it at the top of the agenda. I think that's happened, I think it is now on the top of the agenda of most young people, as an issue.'

This view is in part based on the mail which the programme receives from children. For example, *Newsround* runs a club for 'young journalists', the *Press Pack*, which has 110,000 members, who are invited to send in short articles. A selection of these are displayed on *Newsround's* pages on the BBC's teletext service, *Ceefax*. An analysis of the items sent in by viewers, conducted by the *Newsround* office in 1995, showed that some 70 per cent of the stories were about the environment or environmental concerns: most frequently about animals, deforestation, and pollution.

In addition, the office has noted that whilst feedback from adults has tended to consist of complaints about upsetting material – such as footage of whaling or fox-hunting – being shown to children, letters from children themselves are concerned about the actual issues: *why* such activities occur in the first place. Heathcote feels that *Newsround's* 'drip-feed' effect has partly contributed to such reactions being built in to the consciousness of young people – or at least more educated young people:

'We'll still keep covering [the environment], because at the end of the day, it's *young* people who will actually determine what happens in the future. And I think that what *has* happened is that amongst people aged 15 and upwards, people who are now at university, I think environmental concern is *so* much a part of their culture – and I think *Newsround* has had a part to play in that – *so* much a part of their cultural experience that they cannot any longer look at any decision without first of all, on a very fundamental level, considering the impact that that decision would have on the environment, and I think it's now become intuitive for a lot of people of 25 and under'.

Whether the programme has actually had this impact is a matter for research, of course. It is worth mentioning here, at least, that *Newsround's* emphasis on environmental matters was well-known to the children involved in the video project described in the later chapters of this thesis, who mentioned it most frequently as a factual programme covering those issues.

### ***The Animals of Farthing Wood***

A European co-production, financed by 19 different countries, *The Animals of Farthing Wood* is an animated series based on the novels by Colin Dann. Over three series, each of an epic 13 episodes of 25 minutes each (a total of over 16 hours of animation), a group of woodland animals – bound together by an 'Oath of Mutual Protection' which precludes them preying on each other, in an otherwise realistic series – have struggled to survive in the face of threats from mankind and other animals. The television series was conceived in 1988, when European broadcasters settled upon it as a production which would potentially capture the spirit of unity and harmony which was being looked forward to in Europe itself from 1992.

The series producer, John M. Mills, when interviewed<sup>78</sup>, was at first not sure that the programme could even be seen as environmentalist. However, he quickly conceded that the series frequently did show animals at peril in the face of human threats:

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<sup>78</sup> John M. Mills is Executive Producer at Telemagination Ltd of London, the independent production company responsible for the British part of the co-production. He was the Series Producer for *The Animals of Farthing Wood* from its conception in 1988 to completion of the third and final series in 1995, and was interviewed for this study in May 1996, providing much of the information cited in this section.

‘That was especially true of the first series, because there was the house-building that deprived them of their original habitat, then there was the farm sequence where the animals went through land that had been sprayed with insecticide, and a hunting sequence in which one of the birds was killed, and a farmer actually shooting pheasants, so all these things had a direct impact on characters that the children got to know. And I suppose worst of all – the biggest postbag of the lot – came when the hedgehogs tried unsuccessfully to cross the road. Everybody else got across the road and the hedgehogs got squashed, and that caused a real, real postbag, and a very heavy weight of phone calls into the BBC’.

Having fictional characters whom the audience can come to know and have feelings about, and who may cause the viewers to consider what the ‘good’ and ‘bad’ characters stand for, is seen to contribute greatly to the programme’s impact. As Mills reflects,

‘I used to make factual documentaries, I had nothing to do with the fictional world, and I have now come to see, principally I have to say because of *Farthing Wood*, that the power of the fictional story, the power of fictional characters created on the screen in a very real way, is, oh, *miles* ahead of anything you can do in factual terms’.

Whilst Mills emphatically asserted that environmental concerns were not a priority in the production of the series, he also admitted that the subjects of the stories, and situation of the characters in a world which they share with humans, might be expected to make an impression on viewers.

‘I mean I wouldn’t like to think for a moment that we were doing anything that could be even *remotely* regarded as propagandist – the very last thing that you would hear in this building, or our friends in France or anything like that, is that we were trying to put ‘a message’ across. We don’t. But the incidental effect of creating characters who are believable *and likeable* – but believable first, because the bad character can also be believable without being liked – the impact of that can be *very* strong indeed. And very worthwhile’.

This emphasis on the series *not* having an environmental or educational emphasis seems to stem in part from an understanding of the priorities of the broadcasters who would actually be transmitting the programme:

‘Broadcasters who are not in education – and [*The Animals of Farthing Wood* is] mainstream children’s programming – would not actively go for a property *because* it was environmental; they will look first and foremost at its entertainment value, whether in fact it has good characters, whether it has stories which sustain, and whether they will actually be able to build up a loyalty in their audience, and you *won’t* get loyalty from the audience from something that is purely educational. Or at least that’s their belief. [...] It is nice that it has that extra [environmental] dimension, but it *is* principally story-led rather than mission-led.’

Nevertheless, it should not be assumed that the programme took a meek approach to reflecting the realities of life in the contemporary environment for the animal characters. Rather, a firm emphasis on realism – albeit almost as a

goal in itself rather than for any political ends – seems to be held proudly at the heart of the series. For example, Mills says:

‘I don’t think the foxhunting lobby liked it very much, there are always telephone calls when episode eight is shown, when the two foxes are chased by the hunt, and they say it gives a very unfair point of view – well it gives the foxes’ point of view, doesn’t it? [...] There’s also the farming lobby, who are always really quite upset when episode eleven is shown, where the animals go through land which has just been subjected to insecticide. The writers took care to try and research to make [the material accurate]. [...] It doesn’t say that farming’s *bad*, but it’s also saying what is a reality, that sometimes wildlife is affected by the activities of man’.

The programme has enjoyed a level of success across Europe which suggests that the series has a relatively ‘universal’ appeal. In Britain, where on the first run of each series the episodes were broadcast on a weekday afternoon, and repeated on the following Sunday, the show averaged audiences of over three million<sup>79</sup>.

‘Throughout Europe they were getting very, very, very good audiences. In Italy they recorded record audiences, in France, despite their misgivings, they recorded record audiences, in Germany the same. Most of the Benelux and Scandinavian countries have all liked it very very much indeed. [...] Here in Britain *Farthing Wood* has been in the top ten several times, for children’s programmes. It is said that anywhere in Britain, at least nine out of ten British children have seen and actively talked about *Farthing Wood*’.

Whilst this popularity cannot be attributed directly to the environmental content – although the extent to which we could separate that from the perennially popular ‘animal stories’ context would be difficult to say, in any case – *The Animals of Farthing Wood* would appear to have touched some collective nerve.

### **Different programmes, different approaches**

Although we have established that certain programmes contain environmental material, it cannot be assumed that these shows are necessarily ‘radical’, or suggest political perspectives to either the problems or their solution. It should already be obvious, for example, that *Newsround* in the mid-1990s is more

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<sup>79</sup> As Mills says, ‘The highest viewing we had, midweek afternoon, just over about 3.2, 3.3 million people, with a repeat of about another million people on a Sunday morning. I think if you were going to average it out, over the whole run it averages out at about three million people a week. However, one of the things you should look at is not the actual figures but the audience *share*, and in the target age range, which is one to 16, *Farthing Wood* regularly got more than fifty per cent of audience share – in some cases as high as 56, 57 per cent. Now that meant the share of the available audience at that age range across the four terrestrial networks, which didn’t leave much for ITV, Channel Four and BBC2. By and large it’s been very successful’.

focused and strident in its coverage of environmental issues than is *Blue Peter*, and that these programmes both differ from the fictional *Animals of Farthing Wood*, which was not apparently intended by its producers to have an environmentalist 'message' at all. As Laclau & Mouffe (1985) argue,

'Feminism or ecology, for example, exist in multiple forms, which depend upon the manner in which the antagonism is discursively constituted. Thus we have a radical feminism which attacks men as such; a feminism of difference which seeks to revalorize 'femininity'; and a Marxist feminism for which the fundamental enemy is capitalism, considered as linked indissolubly to patriarchy. There are therefore a plurality of discursive forms of constructing an antagonism on the basis of the different modes of women's subordination. Ecology, in the same way, may be anti-capitalist, anti-industrialist, authoritarian, libertarian, socialist, reactionary, and so on. The forms of articulation of an antagonism, therefore, far from being predetermined, are the result of a hegemonic struggle' (p. 178).

The meanings of environmental-themed television, therefore, cannot be taken for granted, and differ considerably in both style and polemical content between programmes. For example, as recorded above, *Newsround* reporters have a particular 'passion' for environmental stories. The programme's Editor, Nick Heathcote, believes that becoming entangled in 'political reporting of the environment' is 'inevitable', and asserts:

'I don't think that's any *bad* thing: it *is* a political debate – I mean, [for example] whether we should have more cars or fewer cars, *is* an incredibly important political debate, so in a sense we're involved in politics, but not what you'd call traditional democratic politics'.

Whilst occasionally framing his arguments with the typical BBC-staff protestations of not having an axe to grind, Heathcote is clearly dedicated to environmental coverage, and intended to keep *Newsround* aligned with these concerns.

'I couldn't possibly admit to having any kind of messianic zeal about, in a sense, brainwashing children to be concerned about the environment. I happen to believe, by virtue of having worked here for as long as I have done, that the environment *is* one of the most important issues that exists in the world today, [...] and ultimately, by threatening the environment we're threatening the people that live on the planet, as well as the animals. I happen to think that that is of much more fundamental importance than the Scott enquiry, or, you know, some industrial story about Westland helicopters or whatever else it might be. Because if we destroy the planet then we've got nothing left. That's a sort of personal belief, and a professional belief as far as my position as editor of *Newsround* is concerned, and I see it as my job in a sense to *highlight* news stories that underpin those concerns. For example, if the ozone is being destroyed then we must tell people, we must report that; if global warming is taking place then we must report that; if animals are being wiped out because their habitat is being destroyed, then we need to report that. These are *fundamental* issues

that children hopefully, if they're fully informed, when *they* grow up will be able to take some action on'.

At *Blue Peter* the picture is quite different. Whilst asserting that *Blue Peter* 'does not dodge the political end of things'<sup>80</sup>, its Editor Lewis Bronze clearly disagrees with Heathcote's view that coverage of environmental issues should be constant – in almost every edition of a programme – and that it would be wrong to let this level of coverage slip. As Bronze says,

'I don't feel quite the same way, to be honest. I never felt quite that way at the time. I don't feel I'm a missionary. I mean I'm not a member of Friends of the Earth, I've never been a member of a campaigning organisation. I'm trying to make an interesting television programme for children. And as I said earlier, we still do many environmental items – I gave you an example – but I don't feel this sense of it's my responsibility, to bang on about this all the time. I feel it's my responsibility to produce an entertaining, informative, factual programme for children – which very often will include environmental items, but not always'.

To justify this view, Bronze adds that campaigning and appeal items are likely to have a greater impact if they are not presented in every programme, but are used more selectively<sup>81</sup>. Nevertheless, *Blue Peter*'s editorial stance today is clearly much less committed to environmental matters than that of *Newsround*. Bronze asserts:

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<sup>80</sup> Bronze adds: 'A good example is the piece we did about a year or so ago on the digging of cable and the effect it's having on tree roots. Our *Blue Peter* gardener Clare Bradley did the report for us, a very good piece, and we interviewed Michael Heseltine, and you can't go much higher than that; he's the man, at that time, as President of the Board of Trade, who was issuing the licenses which gave these companies carte blanche – they were answerable to virtually nobody; and he also is a man who is also an acknowledged tree expert, or certainly tree lover, with his own arboretum in his house in Oxfordshire. So we asked him, as a tree lover aren't you a bit fed up about all the damage being done to all these trees? So we're certainly not frightened to go to the top where we think children deserve a straight answer to a straight question – of course you never get a straight answer, but that's another point'.

<sup>81</sup> Bronze: 'I think you can have more impact – I mean for instance we only run one appeal a year, it's the most successful thing we do in the course of the year, but if we did it every week, you know, it would get boring. So we can do a *lot* on *Blue Peter*. [... 100,000 children have just written in to participate in *Blue Peter*'s Swimathon, for example ...]. We have impact, but we don't ask them to do things *all* the time – I mean if *Blue Peter* is constantly saying, 'you must do this, you must do that', it gets boring. There are *so* many things we ask them to do *anyway* – you know, get a pen and paper, write down this recipe, write down this address for this competition, so you have to try and balance it. I've got three shows a week – I can't make *every* programme an extension of homework, and I think if you were to be constantly doing items about litter, graffiti, recycling, wildlife gardens, whatever it happened to be... You've *got* to pick the good stories – you've got to pick the good ones, not just do them for the sake of doing them, otherwise the programme gets boring, you lose your impact'.

'I wouldn't want you to go away thinking that the environmental coverage on *Blue Peter* takes the tone black and white, or 'green is good and everything else is wrong'. We've never taken that tone. If you look at the beginning of the *Blue Peter Green Book*, there is a spread right at the beginning called 'Going Green', and it says that going green is complicated, we can't go back to the days where there were no chemicals and no factories because we don't want to live in that kind of world any more, and that's true for the vast majority of people. I'm not someone who thinks we should, say, abandon cars, and that would be an absurd view for a BBC producer of a mainstream programme to try and propagate'.

The *Blue Peter* producers take pride in producing even-handed reports, characterised by 'accuracy and fairness'<sup>82</sup>, and Bronze regrets 'a couple of things' in the *Blue Peter Green Book* which, he says, '*weren't* inaccurate, but were a bit one-sided... we should have been a bit fairer'<sup>83</sup>. Nick Heathcote seems not to have these qualms, and did not mention similar regrets. Indeed, his stance can be characterised as broadly anarchist, rejecting the politics of parliament in

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<sup>82</sup> For example, Bronze says: 'We've *always* shown, and tried to show, that these environmental issues are complicated, we're doing it at the moment, we're preparing a film about Terminal Five [at Heathrow Airport]. We did it very successfully in a film which comes to mind, which we did while Twyford Down was raging – the M3 extension. We did a film which interviewed truckers at a service station at the M3, residents in Winchester, we looked at what the local school was doing, and we tried to explain that there are a lot of people who want this road, that it wasn't just a question of the destruction of meadows and medieval sites and beautiful hillside, there was a question of balancing that destruction with the positive benefits that the road would produce. And, you know, in what could have been a highly contentious piece, and a piece where we interviewed several of the key people, we didn't get a single complaint. And that piece I can assure you was well monitored, for accuracy and fairness, so that's the level of the journalism we have on the programme – when we do those issues, we do them as any good BBC programme would'.

<sup>83</sup> Full extract from interview:

*'Have you ever had any complaining feedback from industry or government-?'*

Bronze: 'Yes we have. The *Blue Peter Green Book* was slightly different to – we did take a slightly different style for the *Green Book*, and we said things in the *Green Book* that we wouldn't have said on the programme, and a couple of things that I – I don't regret saying them, but I think were unwise given that they were under the *Blue Peter* imprimatur. We certainly had a go at pesticides, and we had a go at aerosols, in the *Blue Peter Green Book*, and those are two areas where very very powerful trade organisations exist to defend their particular product, and I think although I don't regret anything we did about the aerosols, I think we probably should have been... I think we were a bit one-sided with the farming, and that's a very powerful lobby to upset, and I think I regret that in retrospect, because we needn't have done it, it was a bit sloppy on our part.'

*'Just because it upset the lobby groups-?'*

Bronze: 'Not because it upset people. I don't mind upsetting people if one can, you know, if it's accurate, but we had a couple of things in the book which *weren't* inaccurate, but were a bit one-sided. And I think in that particular spread, we should have been a bit fairer. You know, within the industry it attracted quite a lot of attention at the time.'

favour of a more direct alignment with the perceived environmental concerns of children.

'I mean this whole Scott [arms to Iraq enquiry] affair has been seen [...] as being a huge priority. Now of course adults have a vote, and therefore they can determine the government of this country; children don't, so politics to a young audience is irrelevant. What kids *do* care about is if they see a bulldozer coming in and actually knocking down forests or local woodland, you know and in a sense because children are disenfranchised, they have much more in common with the direct action organisations, who also feel disenfranchised because they feel that the political parties aren't representing their point of view. Children *aren't* represented, therefore long-running stories about politics, long-running industrial stories, long-running social affairs stories, are not necessarily hugely relevant to our audience. That leaves more space for us to deal with some of the *real* issues that we face in the world, without the distraction in a sense of having to spend quarter of an hour in a twenty minute bulletin or whatever it might be, on politics, economics and social affairs'.

*Newsround's* approach is therefore significantly different from that of the mainstream, 'adult' news. The traditional news values, which Heathcote is well aware of, but consciously rejects, are replaced with an agenda which prioritises issues concerning the environment, education and youth, and takes more seriously other issues associated with the rise of new social movements (Melucci, 1989, 1995; Dalton & Kuechler, 1990; Eyerman & Jamison, 1991; Diani, 1992; Kriesi *et al*, 1995; Maheu, 1995; Scott, 1995).

Far from being a repressed mainstream journalist who would prefer to be doing 'serious' adult news, Heathcote regards the *Newsround* agenda as more important than that in any case, and enjoys 'the luxury [...] of not having our bulletins clogged up with all those other stories', and therefore being 'able to spend more time doing [environmental] stories better than other people'. News regarded as a priority by mainstream television news editors is treated with near derision by Heathcote:

'You know, something like the Scott Report happens, or John Major decides to step down as leader of the Conservative Party, and the world stops still as far as the environment's concerned. You can have the strongest environmental story in the *world*, but if it happens on the day that John Major steps down as leader of the Tory Party, it isn't going to get on the air. And nobody's going to hear about it. And this is what's happening on a day-in, day-out basis, in the main newsrooms. [...] That is the awful, crude reality that we live in. The definition of news is, in a sense, dominated – I think – by over-zealous paranoia about politics – and it's in part a lot to do with the backgrounds of people who come into journalism'.

This implicit manifesto would suggest that *Newsround*, more than *Blue Peter*, is characteristic of the 'epoch' said to have begun in 1968, which some writers have described as 'postpolitical' (Negri, 1996; Surin, 1996). This period is

characterised by work becoming centred in social and information fields, rather than labour, with the worker becoming less political, and more social and individual; market-led consumption; and the globalisation of markets and communications (Negri, 1996). This period could also be seen to be one in which, for the generation born within its bounds, the traditional social priorities of national party politics, labour disputes, and domestic social concerns such as the health of the royal family – values reflected, amongst other places, in mainstream television news – are becoming less important. Such concerns can be seen to be being replaced with a more global awareness, and a corresponding interest in the environment, as well as political concerns directed towards particular *issues*, rather than parties.

This epoch has been associated with a ‘new paradigm’ of West European politics (Offe, 1985), and has seen the corresponding rise of new social movements<sup>84</sup>, which have already been linked to *Newsround*’s content above, but which have also been clearly influential upon its whole approach. This new era was heralded – along with innumerable other factors – by the call of E.P. Thompson, Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall, in their New Left *May Day Manifesto* of 1967, for people to withdraw their allegiance from the ‘political machines’ and to ‘resume our own initiatives’ in extra-parliamentary activity (Hall *et al*, eds, 1968). In addition, the late 1960s saw anarchism enjoying ‘a remarkable and unexpected revival’ (Marshall, 1993, p. 558). Whilst Heathcote is not an eco-anarchist in the revolutionary vein of Murray Bookchin (1989, 1990), his prioritising of environmental stories on *Newsround* – with a conscious disregard for the very different news values of his counterparts in ‘adult news’ – is a very distinctive use of his position<sup>85</sup>. He sees this role as being to increase public awareness of environmental issues, which he regards as ‘fundamental’, and ‘so serious that... we can’t afford to ignore them’<sup>86</sup>.

Despite their differences, however, the Editors of both *Blue Peter* and *Newsround* do seem to hope that their work will have contributed, in some way,

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<sup>84</sup> For an account of the connections between the New Left radicalism of 1968–70 and more recent social movements, see Carl Boggs (1995).

<sup>85</sup> A position supported, it has to be said, by Heathcote’s dedicated staff and, implicitly, by his superiors at the BBC.

<sup>86</sup> These urgency of these emphases are, however, reminiscent of Bookchin’s work, dating back as far as the 1965 essay *Ecology and Revolutionary Thought* (reprinted in Bookchin, 1986). Even then, Bookchin believed that young people were predisposed to an environmentally-concerned ‘intuitive anarchism’ (p. 92), and argued that they were disenfranchised with the democratic political system, having more in common with the philosophy of direct action.

to a raised awareness of the environment amongst young people. Lewis Bronze says:

‘I think that *Blue Peter* has identified itself with these issues, I think it *has* played a role, and I think it *has* helped... I don’t have any statistics here, beyond sales of books, I mean I can’t point to ‘x’-thousand people who recycle *because* of *Blue Peter*. All I can say is we do these things and there is some measurable effect, somewhere, in some areas’.

Nick Heathcote has a typically more marked conception of the way in which *Newsround* viewers could have an impact:

‘By being informed about the debate, [children] can actually exert quite a lot of influence, in a indirect sense. I mean, they are effectively like environmental organisations, which don’t have a vote but they can actually bring about a lot of pressure, and it is not in any way unusual – in fact it is *common* that I talk to adults and they say ‘Oh *Newsround*, you’re responsible for my daughter constantly lobbying me about rainforest destruction, or pollution’, and adults do acknowledge that that is happening, and I think it *does* influence them and their views’.

As seen above, *The Animals of Farthing Wood*, on the other hand, was not made with particular pro-environmental effects in mind, although any such impact was regarded as a welcome by-product. Being a fictional programme, its power to involve the audience’s *emotions* in the material is potentially higher. In addition to the strength which this gives it in conveying environmental points, as discussed above, the vitality of having all the animals living and working together – united in a common struggle for survival – might also make an impression upon the audience in a way which a factual programme would be unable to. (This, indeed, is one of the reasons why the series was selected by the 19 nations, in the run-up to 1992, when the unification of Europe was being much hyped). In this way, the series might be an effective carrier of ‘intercultural education’, a concept proposed as a bridge between the too-long divided camps of the liberal multicultural approach, which would prefer to treat differences as invisible, and the more radical anti-racist view, which seeks to confront racism more directly (Fyfe, 1993; Gauntlett, 1995b). Interculturalism denotes ‘the active process of intergroup relationships and the educational response to this [multicultural] reality’ (Fyfe, 1993, p. 47). Whilst children may not necessarily make connections between the harmonious mini-society of the *Animals* and their own multicultural experience, and the point goes unresearched, the case remains that a fictional programme has the potential to highlight such aspects of life, which factual shows would have difficulty in covering.

## Themes and silences in environmental TV

Whilst the producers of the programmes discussed above had divergent notions of the importance of environmental issues, both in terms of the world in general, and as reflected within their particular media products in particular, they were all notably reticent to apportion *blame* for anti-environmental events. Given their position – and what this means about who they are (their ambitions, their chosen sphere of work), as well as the obvious legal and political need for caution in making questionable accusations – this may not be surprising. Nonetheless, there is a distinction to be made between *showing* that anti-environmental situations occur in the world – which *Newsround*, for example, indisputably does a lot – and *accounting* for such events in social or political terms.

Delli Carpini & Williams (1994) offer some interesting conclusions from their detailed analysis of three U.S. television programmes which covered the environment in different ways: a populist documentary, a feature-length drama, and an elaborate multi-genre televisual feast in celebration of ‘Earth Day’. It was observed that the solutions presented were individual, not collective or political; even industrial pollution was to be limited by “every one of us [doing] our part” (p. 91). The authors note that ‘while institutions are portrayed as flawed and inadequate, the solution is never political organisation aimed at institutional reform or change’ (p. 94). This can make the proffered answers appear conspicuously inadequate:

‘Thus, on *The Earth Day Special*, after two hours of horror stories about the illness of Mother Earth, the only thing the stars can ask us to do is to recycle our cans and bottles, actions unlikely to significantly affect the destruction of the rain forests, the extinction of many plant and animal species, global warming, or the choking air pollution in many Third World cities (all problems briefly alluded to on the show)’ (p. 95).

Delli Carpini & Williams argue that television output, taken as a whole, is ‘firmly situated within and supportive of a consumer culture hostile to any but the most modest forms of oppositional political action’ (*ibid*). Whilst the programmes analysed in their study were liberal in relation to the issues, and somewhat critical of institutions such as government and business, their fundamental message undermined these aspects by failing to challenge consumer culture, economics, industrialism, or any significant aspect of the status quo.

This analysis broadly applies to the programmes which I have discussed in this chapter. Although *Newsround* may critically examine the behaviour of particular companies or government departments, the impression generated is consistent with the ‘bad apple’ thesis, that the fault lies in the particular sub-institution in

question, rather than being an aspect of a broader social system which broadly supports its anti-environmental activity, even if it may find it regrettable. The inclusion of environmental matters in *Blue Peter* is notably less analytical than in *Newsround's* coverage; whilst the background to problems may be explained, the *Blue Peter* approach is more centred upon the question of what viewers can *do* about a particular situation<sup>87</sup>. The case of *The Animals of Farthing Wood* is perhaps more complex, since the series set out to simply reflect the possible *reality* of modern life for the animals in question; as a fictional series with no authoritative voice-over narration to spell out the 'lessons' to the audience, the text is more polysemic. It therefore may be the case that viewers will conclude, for example, that farming and fox-hunting are wholly problematic occupations, but it is just as possible that their representations may be disregarded as either isolated cases, or pure fiction.

Overall, whilst the presentation of environmental matters on such television programmes may be entirely consistent with the norms of the medium, and audience expectations, the focus on individualistic solutions and minor reforms to address problems which have no apparent institutionalised cause – 'The world is in your hands,' as the *Blue Peter Green Book* tells children – cannot be ignored. It would be wrong, of course, to deride programmes for seeking to empower children in some way, or to suggest that individual actions can make no difference at all. Nevertheless, the invigorating but broadly reassuring tone of much children's environmental coverage can paint a deceptive picture.

### A different perspective: *Undercurrents*

Some particular absences in the agenda of mainstream television news and other programmes are highlighted when alternatives are produced outside of the conventional sphere. Small World Media, now called Undercurrents Productions, was established in 1993 by individuals working in broadcasting, and environmental activists, who had become disenfranchised with mainstream

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<sup>87</sup> As *Newsround* editor Nick Heathcote says, *Blue Peter* covers the environment 'in a different way to *Newsround*, it tends to in a sense be rather more involving, but rather less analytical, I think, of some of the problems. So whereas *Newsround* might explain the concerns, the dangers, it might actually air the argument, *Blue Peter* doesn't tend to air the argument, it's more about the 'collecting of bottle tops' [appeals], so I think the two compliment each other. It's quite distinctively different coverage – we don't involve the audience in those sorts of projects. We *report* on what other organisations like the RSPB are doing, or the World Wide Fund for Nature, or Greenpeace and so on, and then if the kids want to join those organisations they can do. *Blue Peter* I think is a much greater influence in terms of actively involving kids in projects that are programme-related'.

television's coverage of social and environmental issues (Oakes, 1995). Jamie Hartzell, an environmental film-maker and former editor at the BBC's Natural History Unit, and Thomas Harding, formerly of the Television Trust for the Environment (TVE), had found that they could not get their environmental films shown since distributors felt that they were 'too political' (Hattenstone, 1994). Similarly, Paul O'Connor and Zoë Broughton, protesting against the M11 extension in east London, had found TV news to be disappointing and inadequate in representing their actions (Malyon, 1995). Together, the four formed a non-profitmaking company with two others, and created a channel for more radical material: *Undercurrents*, an alternative news service distributed every three months on video cassette<sup>88</sup>. The first issue was published in the spring of 1994, and by mid-1996, the subscription base was doubling every six months, with 'an estimated 40,000 people' watching each issue (Undercurrents, 1996). The project was partly funded by a £50,000 grant from a European Commission environmental project in 1995, but now survives on sales of archive footage to TV documentaries. It has won the 1995 BT/WWF Community Award, as well as awards from the British 'Green Screen' Environmental Film Festival (1995), the French International Environmental Film Festival (1995), and Germany's Okomedia film festival (1994).

*Undercurrents* aims 'to empower people to control their *own* media'<sup>89</sup>. Rather than having campaigns covered by outsiders, as is obviously the norm for TV news, *Undercurrents* provide equipment and training to campaigners, who then produce the films themselves, reflecting their own priorities and perspectives. The *Undercurrents* video is then a platform for the distribution of these films. *Newsround* editor Nick Heathcote's remarks about the Westminster-centred agenda of British mainstream news, and the difficulty which environmental correspondents have in getting their reports into the news programmes, are echoed by Ted Oakes of *Undercurrents*:

'At the heart of the encouraging response to *Undercurrents* is surely a healthy suspicion of the television media and its methods of determining what is 'news'. The uniformity of scope and content presented by the four terrestrial television channels suggests that mainstream news providers are underestimating people's needs' (1995, p. 15).

*Undercurrents* is also, of course, free from the 'balance' requirements of terrestrial television news, and can report from a committed environmentalist

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<sup>88</sup> Eighty per cent of the videos are sold through mail order. Undercurrents Productions can be contacted at 16B Cherwell Street, Oxford OX4 1BG.

<sup>89</sup> Paul O'Connor, co-director of Undercurrents Productions, letter, July 1996.

perspective. Like some aspects of *Newsround*, it also presents a news agenda which can be seen as more responsible and mature than most popular audience-seeking TV news. As Oakes notes,

*'Undercurrents* uses news coverage to pose questions about why broadcasters choose particular items. An extensive ITN piece in which Dame Barbara Cartland criticises Prince Charles's dress sense is placed alongside a rejected story of 77 people dying in a Chinese mining accident which happened on the same day. [Similarly,] a newsreader's version of events at a live export protest is compared with eye-witness accounts' (*ibid*).

This reflects another kind of disenfranchisement which prompted the creation – and success – of *Undercurrents*: that it reflects levels of feeling about issues which go undocumented by mainstream news. Paul O'Connor, an *Undercurrents* director, recalls:

*'We used to go on actions in the early days. Then we'd rush back, see the news, and feel so deflated. Either they missed the story completely, or they missed the point. It was really frustrating. So then we wanted to get our own stuff on TV.'* (Quoted in Malyon, 1995, p. 24).

In this way, the video magazine can be seen as one of the many counter-initiatives which have appeared since the planning and introduction of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 – as Hardwick (1995, p. 29) has noted, *Undercurrents* is 'symptomatic of a DIY culture spawned by oppressive state legislation'. As a result, the video programmes cover civil liberty concerns such as the rights of travellers, squatters, ravers and protesters – and the violent infringement of those rights by police and private security<sup>90</sup> – as well as environmental issues such as road-building, industrial pollution, fox-hunting, and other abuses of the national and global environment.

According to campaigners, the presence of video cameras at protests also acts as a 'calming influence', since the increasingly-ubiquitous private security guards and others are less likely to assault protesters when their actions are being recorded (Hardwick, 1995; Bellos, 1996). But in broader terms, Thomas Harding hopes that the videos thus made will have empowering and political consequences:

*'The idea is to empower the movement... Camcorder footage is more immediate and emotional. It gets you involved. Our criteria is whether it will bring about change, the concrete political effect of the film.'* (Quoted in Moreton, 1995).

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<sup>90</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the impact of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act on travelling peoples, see O'Nions (1995).

The comparison between *Undercurrents* and broadcast media, which is often implicit in the alternative videos, makes clear not only the obvious differences in their agendas, but also makes more conspicuous the latent values and subjectivity behind television news, and other programmes: the straightforward notion that they are simply selecting important issues of the day and covering them in a balanced manner comes to appear contrived, contradictory, and ideological. The impact upon the audience of this authoritative but partial selection of key social issues, and definition of 'fair' treatment, is a central question for media audience research.

## 7. On video and methodology

This chapter describes and discusses the video project methodology in full. Notes on the standard procedure, and the children involved, are followed by a consideration of the philosophy underpinning the method, and its claims to knowledge. The process is compared with ethnographic, action research and other methods, and defended against the positivist critique of qualitative studies. Connections are then made with previous studies of video practice from historical, pedagogical and individual-political perspectives.

### Basic methodological procedure

Seven different videos about 'the environment' were made, with groups of around seven or eight children, over the course of several weekly sessions. (The details of the schools, the groups, and the time spent, appear in the section below this). Here, the process which each of the groups went through is outlined.

In the first week, the children were introduced to the researcher<sup>91</sup>, who then led a group discussion which explored what the children understood by the term 'the environment', what came to mind in relation to 'environmental issues' and 'environmental problems', and where they had learned about these subjects – their sources of information. Picture cards were passed around the group, each suggesting a particular environmental concern – such as industrial pollution, litter, deforestation, recycling, nuclear power, acid rain, the ozone layer – to see if the children recognised and could comment on those subjects. The children were also asked about their level of interest in, and *concern* about, these issues. The discussion then focused on television in particular, and the children's recall of environmental material from that source. The group would then be told that they would be making a video about 'the environment', under the supervision of the researcher, over the course of the following weeks. Some discussion of ideas for the video would follow, and the children were shown how to work the video camera, and each had a turn at filming and performing for the camera. Suggestions of material for inclusion in the video came from the children, and were not proposed by the researcher.

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<sup>91</sup> In all cases the researcher was myself. The video project fieldwork was conducted between January and July, 1995.

Over the following weeks, once the children had got used to using the camera (which they all did very quickly), the video was produced<sup>92</sup>. (The scope of what could be filmed varied from school to school, depending upon the extent to which the children were allowed to leave the school grounds, and other such constraints upon available locations). The filming and presenting roles were continuously rotated so that each of the children had opportunities to work on both sides of the camera. In the final week of production, the children were encouraged to interview each other, on camera, about the experience of making the video, as well as their feelings about the environment more generally. This footage served multiple purposes, providing interesting material for inclusion in the edited video – whether as a ‘talking head’ or as an audio track to accompany other shots of the subject in question – as well as being valuable for research purposes, highlighting the children’s concerns at the end of the several weeks of video work, both through the questions asked and answers given.

Observations of the production activity with each group appear in the following chapter. The study of this whole *process* of producing each video – the ideas, the planning, comments and suggestions made during filming, debates which took place between the children, the narrative style and tone favoured, and so on – is at least as important as the finished video, to the project as a research method. Indeed, the final video – with music, titles, and a basic structure – was edited together by the researcher after the production process with the children was complete. Although each ‘polished’ video was put together with the intention of representing as closely as possible the themes and concerns which the children had apparently sought to highlight, and generally included all of the usable and meaningful footage, this finished presentation could almost be seen as irrelevant to the research. Each video provides the best available summary of the material produced by the group, but was carefully edited – with the addition of effects such as music and on-screen credits – more as a gift to the children and the school, than for research purposes.

### **The children and the schools**

All of the schools involved in this study were in the city of Leeds, the commercial, industrial and financial centre of West Yorkshire in the North of

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<sup>92</sup> This process involved more than just running around and filming; although some aspects of each video were recorded relatively spontaneously, the planning of the contents included, for example, discussions of what the children regarded as a good and bad environment, looking at maps of the local area where relevant, and debates about how best to represent some subjects on screen.

England. The fourth largest city in Britain, Leeds has a resident multi-ethnic population of over 705,000. Five of the seven schools were within one and a half miles of the city centre (see Table 7.1). The city's Asian population, of 25,000 people, predominantly reside in inner-city areas which include those around these schools. Trouble in these areas, in the mid-1990s, has generally been centred around white drugs-and-crime problems, rather than racial tensions. In July 1995, as the last of these video projects were being completed, apparently frustrated young people initiated some violent disturbances – including a public house and several cars being burnt out – in an area right next to Royal Park Primary School, close to Brudenell, and half a mile from Burley St. Matthias<sup>93</sup>.

The general pupil population of four of the schools would be described as working class; two other schools had a mix of working and lower middle class children; and one school, located in suburban Far Headingley, had a notably white middle-class population. These labels are obviously crude, and this particular range of schools was not intended to represent schools in Leeds, or elsewhere, more generally. The school populations do differ sufficiently, however, for comparisons to be made.

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<sup>93</sup> *The Guardian*, on Wednesday 12 July 1995 (p. 5), reported: 'A pocket of extreme deprivation in Leeds, exploited by a small group of drug-dealing thieves, erupted into violence two days after local churches finished a devastating survey of youth problems, it emerged yesterday. A gang estimated by local people at fewer than 30 ripped timbers from streetlights [...] before burning down a previously much-targeted pub. Twelve cars were also set alight on Monday night. Firemen were pelted with missiles before 150 police in riot gear drove the crowd away without arrests'. The survey had found 34 per cent unemployment in the area, with 81 per cent of residents on benefits and much housing sub-standard.

<b>Table 7.1: The schools and children involved in the study</b>		
<b>School</b>	<b>Population<sup>94</sup></b>	<b>Distance from Leeds centre</b>
Royal Park Primary School	Inner-city working class, mixed ethnic backgrounds	1.3 miles
Brudenell Primary School	Inner-city working class, mostly Asian	1.6 miles
Little London Primary School	Inner-city working class, mixed ethnic backgrounds	0.7 miles
Burley St Matthias Primary School	Inner-city working class, mostly white	1.6 miles
Blenheim Primary School	Inner-city mix of working and lower middle class, mixed ethnic backgrounds	0.6 miles
Beckett Park Primary School	Suburban mix of working and lower middle class, mostly white	2.6 miles
Weetwood Primary School	Suburban middle class, mostly white	2.7 miles

The size of the groups at each school, their age range, the number of weekly visits made to the school to produce each video, and their duration, are all shown in Table 7.2. The overall age range of children in the study was seven to eleven, with an average age of just less than nine and a half years old. This age group was selected for a number of reasons. Much of the published material on making videos of any substance with children involves those in their teenage years, and it was felt that it would be more interesting to test the capacities of younger children. Such findings could also be compared more directly with those of the psychological and effects studies which seem to credit children with few constructive capabilities, and also tend to involve younger children. On the other hand, the research had to exclude children *so* young that we could not expect them to have seen a variety of television material about the environment, or who could not reasonably be expected to do anything meaningful with a video camera. Children aged seven to eleven were therefore ideal, and are an age group whose media interests have been less fully researched, even though it is the period in which children watch most television (Buckingham, 1993, p. 34).

<sup>94</sup> The labels relating to ethnic origin, like those for social class, are obviously crude. Most, but not all, of the children described here as 'Asian' had been born in Britain. 'Mixed ethnic backgrounds' refers predominantly, but not exclusively, to a mix of white British and Asian children. Much of Leeds' Afro-Caribbean population (of 11,000 people), incidentally, live in areas of Leeds which happen not to have been included in this sample.

The children in each group were chosen by their teacher, prior to their first session with the researcher. This was either done by ‘pulling names out of a hat’, or by the teacher selecting children from across the ability range. Teachers were asked to avoid choosing a group of the most ‘able’ children.

A total of over 66 hours was spent working with the children, the equivalent of spending one and a quarter hours with each of the 53 children. The children recorded a considerable amount of footage between them, with the total length of the videos in their final, pacy *edited* form being 95 minutes.

**Table 7.2: Group sizes, ages, and time spent making the videos**

School	Size of group	Age range	No. of weeks	Hours /week	Total hours
Royal Park Primary School	10	10–11	6	1½	9
Little London Primary School	6	7–8	6	2	12
Blenheim Primary School	7	8–10	6	1½	9
Burley St Matthias Primary School	8	10–11	5	2	10
Weetwood Primary School	7	9–10	5	2	10
Brudenell Primary School	8	7–9	5	1½	7½
Beckett Park Primary School	7	10–11	5	1¾	8¾

### **The video method: philosophical foundations**

Although Hammersley & Atkinson (1995) assert that positivism ‘has become little more than a term of abuse among social scientists’ (p. 3), one still feels the need to make a full defence of a method such as the one developed here, which side-steps any attempt to shroud its procedures and results in conventional scientific rhetoric, and which puts the act of creating not only the content but some of the form of the research ‘data’ into the hands of the research participants. The basic thinking behind the method is elaborated below. Particular themes should be illustrated further as the reader makes their way through these three chapters.

The use of the video equipment in this new method means that mediated perceptions of contemporary society can be explored with the media tools of that culture. The researcher spends time with the subjects, in the manner of ethnography, but the video camera provides a structure and a focus for the use of that time. The subjects themselves are able to make a statement about society

or experience through the video material they produce. This will not be 'pure' in the sense that they cannot record the image of their dreams or hopes, and because it is likely to be affected by their experience of television, the popular version of the medium. Nevertheless, these factors add further layers of interest, and the method's open invitation to creative response has the benefit of allowing the researcher to collect complex and mediated responses which it is impossible to obtain with the rigid and formal procedures of experimental and questionnaire survey research, these being methods which define the responses which they are looking for *in advance*.

Anthony Giddens, in his *New Rules of Sociological Method* (1976), argues that three types of interpretative sociology – Shutz's version of phenomenology, Garfinkel's ethnomethodology, and Winch's 'post-Wittgensteinian philosophy' – can be drawn together to suggest common conclusions which are of 'profound importance to any assessment of the sociological method' (p. 52). Recognising that the quest to understand the meaning which others give to their actions (*verstehen*) is not the sole domain of the sociologist, but is what individuals naturally attempt all the time, Giddens notes that the social investigator relies on the same resources as 'laymen' in the attempt to understand social life. The flipside of this is that 'the "practical theorising" of laymen cannot merely be dismissed by the observer as an obstacle to the "scientific" understanding of social conduct, but is a vital element whereby that conduct is *constituted* or "made to happen" by social actors' (pp. 52–53). The sociologist's concepts depend on and incorporate a prior understanding of those used by the 'lay' person; and these in turn rest on a stock of taken for granted 'knowledge' which agents may not be able to express, and which, Giddens notes, cannot be sensibly related to scientific ideals of precise definition and testability in any case. Whilst this should not be taken to suggest that the sociologist can never have anything to contribute, it does mean that they cannot claim to have *automatically superior* insights. The argument still allows space for us to find value in the considered findings of a good social researcher, just as we might be similarly interested in the words of a wise 'lay' person, journalist, novelist or musician. Furthermore, through gathering data on how individuals express their experience of the world, the sociologist can construct an informed picture of aspects of social life as lived.

In drawing upon these interpretative perspectives, Giddens is not necessarily lending them his support; indeed, he notes, for example, that this approach to social interactions largely ignores questions of power between individuals, and can contribute little to the understanding of institutional transformation, or

history. Nevertheless, the common thread of argument underpinning these interpretative sociologies would suggest that the video project, in giving participants an opportunity to record a mediation of their own perceptions of the social world – in particular leading children to produce accounts of their perceptions of anti-environmental factors, and the workings of certain social institutions (such as ‘the Council’ or ‘the government’) – can be a valuable tool towards some kind of sociological understanding.

The researcher’s own involvement is also essential to the method. Giddens, in one of his ‘new rules’, and in common with generations of ethnographers, asserts that ‘Immersion in a form of life is the necessary and only means whereby an observer is able to generate... “recognizable” characterizations... of social activity’ (p. 161)<sup>95</sup>. The ‘forms of life’ under investigation here – those of Leeds primary school children – are much better understood by spending the time with them as they make their videos, than they would be, for example, by the researcher making a singular visit to record interviews, or hand out questionnaires. Of course the adult investigator can never claim to have become a ‘full member’ of the community of children, or profess to have come to fully understand that culture; and an interested teacher, spending every day with the children, would probably have a much closer idea of their ‘true’ feelings and beliefs about issues such as the environment than a researcher visiting just once a week<sup>96</sup>.

It is clear, then, that ethnographic methods have insights to offer media research which have not yet been fully exploited. Whilst David Morley’s focus group study of audience responses to *Nationwide* (1980) is rightly well-recognised as having ‘opened the route to the “ethnographic” approach to the audience’, as Colin Sparks puts it (1996, p. 93), the tradition which it has spawned – whilst often estimable qualitative work – is ‘ethnography’ only in the broadest of senses. Burgess & Harrison (1993) have noted that the term is often misused in

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<sup>95</sup> To provide the relevant context for this extracted ‘rule’, Giddens’s broader concern here is the description and analysis of how human action produces and reproduces society, and how social structures are both formed by and themselves shape human agency.

<sup>96</sup> On the other hand, my own (relative) youth, and non-teacher status, meant that the children generally treated me more informally than they would their teachers. They shared ‘secrets’ and ‘gossip’ – about each other, and school staff – without the reticence which they were seen to have with teachers, and seemed to regard the video project as different to other school work (which was not always to my advantage when I needed to ‘get’ the children to do something). Knowing that it was a video project also seemed to raise their expectations from the start, so that they required the sessions to be exciting and different from beginning to end, and were less willing to accept the kinds of activity, such as producing anything written, which would be the norm for regular classroom work.

media research, being applied to studies which fail to spend any length of time with the communities under study. Indeed, in his book *Interpreting Audiences: The Ethnography of Media Consumption*, Shaun Moores (1993) is forced to note that:

‘With few exceptions, the studies I will be discussing in [this book] have relied mainly on audio-taped conversations with viewers, listeners and readers which may not last much more than an hour each’ (p. 4).

In his own lucid discussion of ethnography as a method for understanding television audiences, David Morley (1992) argues, as does his sometime collaborator Roger Silverstone (1994), that the study of television is the study of everyday life. Television is so integrated with the rest of experience that one cannot be studied in isolation from the other. A paralysis has developed in the field, however, given that watching people watching television – however intensively or protractedly – tells the researcher remarkably little, whilst the task of including the broader contexts of daily life, as Ien Ang (1996, pp. 66–81) has noted, is theoretically limitless and therefore practically impossible. Whilst scholars such as Morley and Silverstone are obviously right that television is indeed deeply embedded in viewers’ lives, this seems to have led to a situation where media ethnography has stalled even before it really got started. The methodology is exhorted in absurdly protracted theoretical texts – often arguing rather basic points – but not actually done, to any analogous extent, in practice (see Silverstone, 1994).

Apparently unable to imagine new methods or approaches, media audience researchers have increasingly been overcome, according to Ang, with ‘a sense of crisis’ (1996, p. 66). However, it is not as though any amount of substantial ethnographic work has ever been produced on media audiences, although Patricia Palmer (1986), Ann Gray (1992), and Marie Gillespie (1995) have all made important contributions. Ethnographic methods do not lack *potential*, and if a whole body of academics are truly caught in a kind of postmodern paralysis as Ang suggests, they could hardly be accused of wanton adventurousness in research. Ethnography may not always be able to record all of the social contexts relevant to media uses and interpretations, but it beats any other methodological school at producing insights from which further theory may spring. As Gemma Moss (1993) has noted, it can be used ‘to make implicit knowledge explicit’ (p. 179), and to enhance understandings of how media texts contribute to the structuring of social relations. On a more basic level, through spending time with those media consumers being studied, the researcher gains an understanding of the way in which their views of the media are ‘truthful’ for them, as well as the

detail and texture of the meanings which they develop from media texts, and the 'lifeworld' which informs them.

Shaun Moores (1993), noting the lack of observation studies of viewers in 'everyday micro-settings' such as at home, points out that, 'If a central aim of reception ethnography is to understand the lived experiences of media consumers... then it has to engage with the situational contexts in which the media are used and interpreted' (p. 32). As indicated above, however, 'watching viewers watching' might not be the most fruitful form of ethnographic research. I am proposing here, of course, the value of leading viewers to make their *own* material. Indeed, as suggested by the points above, the video production project outlined in this chapter is more extensive and akin to participant observation than most cases of 'ethnographic' media research to date.

Only ethnographic methods, after all, will be able to avoid collecting the 'artificial' kind of talk about television which Peter Dahlgren (1988) has noted is usually produced in the relatively formal contexts of an interview or focus group. By their very nature, such kinds of research will produce data which reflect how people speak about the media when engaged in conventional public dialogue, but not necessarily the kinds of 'back stage' talk reserved for chat with friends or acquaintances. Dahlgren sought to get around this by making subsequent notes about casual conversations which he had 'steered' towards his area of interest in the media, TV news – 'in a "natural" way', he insists (p. 293) – in informal situations such as at parties, with neighbours, and on public transport. By involving relatively relaxed and informal work developed with children over a period of time, the video projects similarly allowed some access to 'back stage' talk about the media and the environment, and meant that observations could be drawn about disparities between what the children said in the first week of the work, and their more precise feelings which became apparent as the research went on<sup>97</sup>.

The method therefore recognises Adorno's warning that people's 'primary, immediate reactions are insufficient as a basis for sociological knowledge

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<sup>97</sup> The fact that the video camera was being used ostensibly for making the environmental video meant that some of these conversations and debates could be recorded, in circumstances where the children *knew* they were being recorded, but would not necessarily have thought that this would become material for analysis as part of the research. Therefore this satisfied both the need for data which is accurately recorded, but not affected by the presence of recording equipment, *and* the ethical concerns about covert recording. (See, for example, the debates between the children about personal levels of environmental concern transcribed in the section 'Making the Beckett Park video' in the following chapter).

because they are themselves conditioned'<sup>98</sup>, since it ideally, and at least potentially, allows the research participants to produce a more careful and cogitated response. This may be subject to 'conditioning' – such as the influence of media traditions and expectations – but at least these are reasonably identifiable. At the same time, the method allows children to demonstrate their knowledge of *environmental discourses*. These would not come naturally to the fore in questionnaire responses, and *might* surface in interviews, but most likely not in circumstances where children could apply and connect them directly to concrete aspects of everyday life. The video project, over a number of weeks, gives children both the leisure and the opportunity to reveal their actual knowledge of environmental concerns, and ability to connect this – where available – to relevant parts of their lives.

Recent contributions to the relatively new field of the sociology of childhood (Jenks, 1996) have also acknowledged the value of ethnographic methods for the study of children in particular, although, as in media studies, examples of actual field research are still uncommon. Alan Prout & Allison James nevertheless include the ethnographic method in their six-point 'emergent paradigm' for childhood sociology, noting that it 'allows children a more direct voice and participation in the production of sociological data than is usually possible through experimental or survey styles of research' (1990, pp. 8–9). Obviously, the video method presented here aims to give children an *even greater* degree of expression and control over the data than traditional ethnography could permit.

In bringing a group together to engage in discourse about a particular, pre-selected subject, the video method also bears similarities to focus group research. An obvious related concern here is that the videos which were ultimately produced, like the overall string of talk and impression of consensus generated by a focus group, might have been influenced in a particular direction (or directions) by particular dominant group members (see May, 1993, p. 95). Corner, Richardson & Fenton (1990), for example, found that in their focus groups' discussions of television programmes about nuclear power<sup>99</sup>, negotiations between divergent views of the material within a group could 'contribute significantly to the group's sense of direction' (p. 102). Some individuals were also observed to defend *aspects* of a programme, whilst conforming in broader terms with an oppositional group consensus (p. 103).

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<sup>98</sup> Adorno, quoted in Gillian Rose (1978, p. 98), from her own translation of Adorno's 1969 essay, 'Wissenschaftliche Erfahrung in Amerika'.

<sup>99</sup> This study was discussed in greater detail in the previous chapter.

Whilst any suppression of contrary views within a group would be unfortunate, we might note that the ascendancy of some opinions held by dominant group members over the views of others simply reflects a common facet of social life. Because the groups were supervised so that, for example, particularly authoritarian boys were not able to seize control of the project, it can be assumed that any predominant 'angles' in a video must at least be the product of *negotiation* within the group. In other words, when certain views were represented more than others, this must necessarily have been for some *reason*.

### Authoring the video

For six of the videos, the material was edited together in an order which seemed most 'natural' or as the children would have intended. However, of course, this involves some selection and supposition being imposed on the finished project by the researcher, and weakens any claim that the final video represents the children's collective view alone. This weakness was circumvented at the seventh school, where a brief description of all of the usable sections of video was written on separate pieces of paper, and then the children – with much discussion – ordered the clips into a running order, effectively planning the edit. The video was then edited in this order (with only some additional stylistic overlaps of pictures with sound being introduced). Obviously, this addition to the method enhances the children's claim to complete authorship of the finished video.

The making of videos by schoolchildren within a research context, and the way in which these videos are then read by the researcher, is a situation which cannot escape the tensions of the debate characterised by Moores (1993) as 'creativity versus constraint'. The 'creativity' perspective stresses 'the capacity of consumers to actively appropriate commodities and put them to creative use in the construction of everyday cultures', whilst the 'constraint' angle gives 'more weight to the structural constraints that impose themselves on consumers – the limited economic and cultural resources available to those creative agents as a consequence of their social positionings' (p. 117)<sup>100</sup>. This debate within media-use research is also related to the issue of the audience's capacity for resistance (as celebrated by Fiske) versus subjection, as touched upon in chapter four, and reflects the broader debate within social theory between the forces of individual

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<sup>100</sup> Jenks (1996) points out that virtually all sociological theories and perspectives have characterised childhood as nothing other than a state of constraint. 'Even that large section of the discipline which is clearly critical of any existing form of social relations and thus dedicated to its change, even this body of work, seems unable to mobilize the potentiality of the child as an agent of such change,' he notes (p. 46).

agency (creativity) and social structure (constraint). In considering the children's videos, I find myself invoking aspects of both positions. On the one hand, the young video-makers are undeniably reflexive and media-literate producers of original material, amply demonstrating the thesis (Buckingham, 1993; Gauntlett, 1995a) that children have an understanding of the media which is much more sophisticated and creative than media researchers have traditionally assumed. At the same time, in my model, the particular mode of presentation of environmental issues on television is taken to be sufficiently powerful that it is considered to be eminently understandable that the children should follow its general pattern. This latter consideration is not seen as a product of domination or direct effects, however – the constraint is rather because, to refer back to chapter four again, the available discourses have been subject to 'hegemonic bending', away from any social or institutional accounts and towards a focus on individualist actions.

### **Action research, and the question of 'science'**

The method is a form of action research, in that it involves the researcher making an intervention in children's activity, and then observing and recording that process and its visible consequences. The present video project was not, of course, seeking to find a solution to a particular problem in a particular situation, and – for obvious and valid reasons – was not conducted by the teacher or person most usually in charge at the research location, which are common features of action research in educational settings (McNiff, 1988; McKernan, 1991; Cohen & Mannion, 1994). As we have seen, it can also be distinguished from the more controlled and experimental methods of applied research, which seek to isolate contributory factors in a way which we have concluded – from the critique of previous effects research in chapters two and three – is untenable for the complex subject of media influences.

Also rather obviously, the method does not simply involve changes in some form of classroom practice, but has the subjects doing something entirely new and special for the purposes of the research. More unusual still is that the subjects produce data both in the form of their behaviour and remarks during the production process, but also in the final videotape material which survives after the event, as a concrete product of their activities.

The method is, however, open to some of the criticisms which have been levelled at action research. Cohen & Mannion (1994, p. 193) note:

‘That the method should be lacking in scientific rigour [according to critics]... is not surprising since the very factors which make it distinctively what it is – and therefore of value in certain contexts – are the antithesis of true experimental research. The points usually made are: that its objective is situational and specific...; its sample is restricted and unrepresentative; it has little or no control over independent variables; and its findings are not generalizable but are restricted to the environment in which the research is carried out.’

Since the present research was conducted in a number of different schools, some of these criticisms are weakened somewhat; and since the research addressed a broader question rather than a site-specific one, the potential problem of findings having only local relevance was much reduced. However, the research remains ‘unscientific’ inasmuch as the findings are based partly on semi-participant observation, which has no complete permanent record and few objectively quantifiable features. The videotape produced, whilst concrete, is interpreted subjectively; and the teachers’ feelings and responses to their children’s work are also on that necessarily subjective level – although conversely, of course, their empirically recorded statements are as valid as any other social science data.

Indeed, it is worth pausing here to tackle directly the arguments which are outwardly in favour of ‘science’ and ‘objectivity’, against which several parts of this chapter are an implicit defence. The central point here is that since social reality is inextricably bound up in the conceptions and subjectivities of the members of that society, there is not an ‘objective’ feature of social understandings or action which can be reasonably distinguished from the ‘subjective’ aspects. As John Hughes (1990) has noted,

‘By relegating the elements of meaning to a “subjective” role as merely versions of social reality, [this way of thinking] confuses “objectivity” and “subjectivity” as, briefly, “inner” and “outer” features of human action with standards to do with the appraisal of some claim as being partial or impartial. When, for example, we describe someone’s opinion as “subjective” we are not commenting on its ontological status, but asserting that it is partial, formed without weighing up the alternatives, unreasonably blind to facts, and so on. Confusions such as these rampage through the objective–subjective dichotomy’ (p. 116).

Hughes suggests that studies of individuals and society can be dressed up in ‘scientific’ paraphernalia as much as one likes, but they still ultimately address social concepts and are produced in social settings, and are therefore always dependent upon ‘subjective’ terms and meanings. Max Weber had made a similar point in 1904, observing that ‘All knowledge of cultural reality... is always knowledge from *particular points of view*’, and that the notion of an ““objective” analysis of cultural events’, therefore, ‘is meaningless’ (1949, p. 80–81). Hughes adds that ‘Social scientific concepts, whatever else is done with

them by way of research operations, are parasitic for their sense on concepts available within the culture and language – concepts, that is, in everyday use’ (p. 123). Subjectivities must therefore, rather obviously, be explored for us to establish an ‘objective’ picture of social reality.

The present study, in having children do what they like with video cameras, may be superficially dismissed as being overtly ‘subjective’. However, such a criticism would be misplaced, confusing the *subject* of the qualitative study, which is the subjective understanding of the environment and its problems, with the *nature* of the study, which still aims to be as detailed and precise, and therefore objective, as possible<sup>101</sup>. The way to improve the ‘scientific’ credentials of this study would not be to change the method, or to insert more traditionally ‘positivist’ procedures, but would simply be to do a larger-scale version of the *same* video production method, with even more participants, and even more time spent.

### ‘Home-made’ video

Video is a medium which can capture the imagination. It is not difficult to use; skills and practice are helpful, but almost anyone can make something. It is instant, both to make and to watch. It invites creativity, there being so many effects and different shots or sequences that can be invented on the spot. It has the magic of television and moving pictures generally, and then in addition the excitement of having produced that which was previously prepackaged and perhaps somewhat revered material oneself. The equipment is reasonably easy to get hold of, from schools and community centres, and of course gets continually cheaper to buy. Patricia Zimmerman (1995) observes that whilst the expense (and perhaps also the aesthetic ‘feel’) of making domestic celluloid films in the days before video meant that home-movie makers tended to be somewhat

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<sup>101</sup> To clarify: a quantitative survey, collecting data on sources of environmental information and attitudes to the environment, would probe individual subjectivities *less*, and so would produce findings which were certainly no more ‘objective’. Furthermore, having most likely failed to get at the meanings which respondents brought to their survey responses, let alone having taken the time to find the deeper feelings and intentions behind those initially stated views, the findings would be less reliable, and therefore less valuable. In short, this study would not become more ‘scientific’ if we were to replace the video production method with a large survey. A survey would not be a useless *addition*, in that it could indicate the distribution of some of the basic attitude and opinion findings suggested by the video method. However, a survey would be wholly unable to explore children’s media literacy in any depth, for example, and on its own – for any aspect of the questions considered in this work – would produce data which would be more superficial, and less reflective of the experience of the subjects.

concerned with the form and artistry of the end product, video has led to a discourse about domestic production which celebrates the lack of need for technological control or aesthetic planning.

‘Metaphorically, the machine approximates invisibility. On another level, the discourse on these machines positions videography as a labour-free pursuit, a pure phenomenological state of flux and integration with environment, requiring no involvement from the maker, only the noninterventionist mediation of technology’ (p. 151).

The immediacy of video almost seems to lead to a conclusion for many people that aesthetics, and even the basic fact of the picture’s constructed nature, not only became uninteresting but actually ceased to exist when Kodak made its last home-movie camera in 1981.

It is this very accessibility which particularly excites Sean Cubitt in his *Timeshift: On video culture* (1991), perhaps the most elegant extended theoretical consideration of video to date. He sees video ‘in its relation to the building of a democratic media culture. Video... thrusts the instability of the present in your face and shouts in your ear: “It doesn’t have to be this way”. Hence its option on democracy’ (p. 1). This breathless view undoubtedly overestimates the power of video in the wider scheme of things, but perhaps can be more meaningful when read as a somewhat exaggerated ‘ideal type’ of the potential which video may have, in turning the viewer into an active curator or producer of their own video experiences. In Cubitt’s later (1993) discussions of video as ‘art and culture’, however, he curiously fails to spend any amount of time on the kind of domestically-produced camcorder videos which constitute a huge mountain of videotape beside the (relatively) tiny number of self-conscious video ‘art’ installations which he considers, engagingly enough, at length<sup>102</sup>. Whilst Cubitt purports to be in favour of ‘active engagement in [the] sphere of production,

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<sup>102</sup> The aesthetics of wedding videos are, however, considered briefly; Cubitt makes the point that most wedding videos are structurally and almost literally identical, but each product, to the viewing friends and participants, is unique. This feature is, of course, shared by actual wedding ceremonies themselves, on video or not. He notes that the video takes on some of the sacred quality of the wedding ceremony itself – whether involving religious content or not – and thus becomes difficult to criticise for aesthetics, content or technique.

More interesting is his assessment of the sources of humour in the home-video disaster show *You’ve Been Framed*, in which the audience are invited to laugh at accidents, or apparent accidents, captured on tape by ‘you, the public’. One of the key ingredients, Cubitt suggests, is the ‘deflation of posing’ (p. 9), where a participant’s self-conscious performance for the camera has its metaphorical frame broken by a chance event, in which the cold but ultimately humorous reality of home-made TV – and everyday life – collides incongruously with the video-maker’s aspirations to professionalism. Thus ‘proper’ television demonstrates its ability to subsume its antithesis within its own veneered and smoothly managed world.

which is so signally lacking in the postmodern analysis of culture' (1993, p. 101), we can only presume (from the works which he goes on to discuss) that the author must feel that video works are more relevant and interesting when produced by intellectuals or 'artists', rather than the general population. Whilst artists have always commented usefully on contemporary culture, and one cannot dismiss Cubitt simply because he has particular interests which differ from one's own, the failure to consider the potential value of the interpretive work done on the world by 'ordinary' camcorder users seems not simply odd, but – given his own declared interests in cultural commentary and the democratic possibilities of video – somewhat wrongheaded.

Patricia Zimmerman's (1995) social history of amateur film-making, meanwhile, shows that the home production of moving pictures has been consistently derided since the 1920s, when Hollywood had set a technical standard against which all other products came to be judged. From the 1950s, amateur film was additionally associated with the nuclear family, becoming 'a nonserious, leisure-time activity bolstering family solidarity and consumption' (p. 145). Seen as an undistinguished techno-sentimental pastime for introspective fathers, amateur film-making was marginalised in discourse as 'a *retreat* from social and political participation' (p. 146, my emphasis). This conception of the normative uses of home movie-making equipment has certainly survived into the video age; indeed, Zimmerman argues that the ideology of familialism can be seen 'in almost any representation or discussion of home-video usage' (p. 183). The domestic, simple and cheap quality of camcorder video, which appeals to those who wish to immortalise their family life on tape, has also not surprisingly attracted those who wish to show alternative visions, with lesbian and gay videomakers in particular taking the opportunity to challenge the emphasis on the heterosexual nuclear family in the long histories of both the mass media in general and amateur film-making in particular. As Zimmerman notes, 'Home-video technologies have offered a means of communication by which marginalized and silenced voices can explore the tortured constructions of identity, the oppressiveness of social norms, and the ravages of AIDS' (p. 154). A notable phenomenon here is the 'video diary' format, of which there are several examples made by people with HIV+/AIDS, and which illustrate the powerful autobiographical function of video which the increasingly lightweight, small and simple technology allows. On the other hand, whilst CCTV proliferates in cities, workplaces and institutions, home video presents the potential for citizens to conduct counter-surveillance on the state, although George Holliday's video

recording of police officers beating Rodney King in 1991 remains one of the few notable examples.

## Video work as media education

The process of video production almost cannot help but contribute to the participants' media education. In making them 'writers' as well as 'readers' of the visual media (Buckingham, 1993, p. 297), they come to understand the implications of how the mass media can represent any bits of the world in different ways, highlight them or leave them out. Hands-on experience short-circuits much of the need for the often rather patronising and alarmist pedagogy of more didactic media education, whilst also breaking down some of the distinction between media producers and consumers.

However, concern over the feared ideological effects of the media have in the past tainted schools media education with a suspicion of practical work. Len Masterman, leading light of the paradigm in which teachers are seen to hold the 'correct', demystified readings of media which their pupils should be brought to share, as Buckingham & Sefton-Green have noted (1994, p. 185), condemns students' creative efforts in strong terms:

'In my experience [students produce] an endless wilderness of dreary third-rate imitative "pop"-shows, embarrassing video dramas, and derivative documentaries courageously condemning war or poverty, much of it condoned by teachers to whom technique is all and the medium the only message' (Masterman, 1980, p. 140).

This ungenerous and Olympian view of students' productions must be shortsighted even in Masterman's own terms, since his students' work can hardly fail to have involved the irony, satire and parody which implicitly makes the kind of deconstructionist points which he would prefer to see them to express explicitly – even if such dry exposition might actually involve less subtlety and cleverness. Closer attention to the processes of discussion and decision-making during production of videos such as those which Masterman refers to, might reveal that the students are not as uncritically imitative as he suggests.

Media productions made in the classroom which involve the parodic imitation of particular mass media genres or stereotypes cannot necessarily be taken to have a conscious critique of those products as their primary motivation, however. Unsurprisingly, there may be a substantial distance between the researcher's and the pupil's surface priorities, as is starkly revealed in this passage from Buckingham & Sefton-Green (1994, p. 190), covering the production of a parody women's magazine, *Slutmopolitan*, by a group of female A-Level media

studies students (some eight years older than the average child in my Leeds groups):

‘There was a theory behind *Slutmo*, but it only emerged during the process of production and (as we shall see) with considerable contradictions. [...]

[Julian Sefton-Green]: So you’re criticising the representation of femininity in woman’s magazines?

Clare: We just want to have a laugh.

[...] ‘Having a laugh’, not taking things seriously, very effectively provides a kind of ambiguity, a space for play, in which meanings cannot be fixed once and for all. ... The kind of parody produced by these girls can be read in a variety of ways, not just by us but by the girls themselves; yet in a sense, this is precisely the point of it.’

Whilst very different from the reproduction of academic writing styles which media studies pupils are required to produce to demonstrate their ‘critical’ skills, the more natural ‘having a laugh’ approach – clearly found to be a favoured option for some participants in my Leeds video projects – nonetheless enables pupils to engage with serious issues, and in a less artificial way. Indeed, the failure to recognise the *value* within this kind of intelligently-silly student production weakens some of the more traditional media studies approaches. As Buckingham & Sefton-Green argue,

‘One of the weaknesses of the Vygotskyian approach [which requires that students reflect on and intellectualise their experiences of reading and writing media texts] is that it privileges the cognitive over the affective. It offers us no way of making sense of humour, which we would argue is often central to learning, particularly when it concerns questions of cultural identity. The “laugh” had by all at the *Slutmo* group is about more than just having a good time. As Bakhtin argued in his analysis of Rabelais, the carnival allows structured subversion of the dominant order. ... *Slutmo* might well be seen as a kind of carnival or “heteroglossic” (multiple-voiced) text; and as such, it embodies its own form of critical discourse’ (1994, p. 207).

The wit required to produce satire which works on any level is bound to be at least as worthwhile as that needed to produce a flat ‘critique’, and would suggest a greater ability to imagine alternatives. As will be seen in the following chapters, the humour and play within the Leeds children’s environmental videos in no way detracted from their status as considered critiques of ecological problems. Rather, those elements only served to enhance the accessibility of the presentations – the importance of which should not be underestimated for easily-distracted primary school pupils – and the satisfaction which the videos gave both to their makers, and subsequent viewers at the schools.

It should also be noted that the video projects allow ‘media education’ to work in both directions, with children having the opportunity to demonstrate their views and skills to their adult guardians, teachers, and researchers. As

Buckingham (1993) has noted, 'Mainstream research on children and television has tended to define children as more or less "incompetent" viewers. What children do with television is typically compared with adult norms, and thereby found wanting' (p. 282). As will be seen in the following chapters, the considerable media literacy demonstrated by the really very young people involved in this study would suggest that any assumptions that children are ignorant and passive viewers, unable to recognise the constructed nature of television, are in need of re-evaluation.

### **Video work as empowerment**

The video project gives children a way to express their ideas and experience which is different from the more commonplace forms such as writing and straight talk (and which might therefore be particularly liberating for those whose skills with written English, or other forms of artistic expression, are not so fully developed<sup>103</sup>). The speed with which these texts can be produced is also important – a property of video which was recognised early by Tony Dowmunt (1980), whose work with young people and Sony Portapak had led to a belief that the immediacy of video production 'is particularly valuable when working with less confident young people, whose other experiences of learning may have led to them being labelled, or feeling themselves to be, failures' (p. 4). A wide range of images and arguments can be compiled on video relatively quickly. Al Garthwaite, a videographer who has worked with children in a number of Leeds schools<sup>104</sup>, argues that 'Children have a lot more ideas – at primary age particularly – than they're able to physically write down, or to get articulated; whereas with a video camera you are given a lot more scope to portray those ideas, in a way that's still obvious, in a different medium'. Having prepared a presentation of environmental problems, the children can feel not only ownership of the video product, but also some responsibility towards the problems themselves; and the empowering experience of pointing the camera and creating 'television' images may help to hold back some of the apathy or helplessness which can be overwhelming responses to such issues.

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<sup>103</sup> For more on this, see "Race" issues' in chapter nine.

<sup>104</sup> Garthwaite is one of the partners in Vera Productions, a company who co-ordinate video activity in Leeds schools, with funding from Leeds City Council, and Leeds Training and Enterprise Council. Interviewed in November 1994. A number of videos made within this scheme on environmental themes, gave children an opportunity to discuss and evaluate their local community, as well as encouraging cooperation between pupils, developing their communication skills, and fostering positive reflection on diversity (see Gauntlett, 1995b).

These are somewhat 'ideal' outcomes, of course, since some pupils might remain indifferent throughout any project, but the unique nature of video production seems to be one of the most likely ways to rouse reluctant learners. As Bower (1992) has enthused, about a video project at his school in the Peak District, 'Asking pupils to articulate their views is a vital step to their own understanding of issues and of their position, and giving them the means to communicate those views is a liberating process which will hopefully empower them to influence others' (p. 317). Furthermore, Stuart Hall has argued that 'it is important to get people into producing their own images because... they can then contrast the images they produce of themselves against the dominant images which they are offered, and so they know that social communication is a matter of conflict between alternative readings of society' (quoted in Grahame, 1991, p. 149). By producing alternative representations of themselves – their own expressions of identity – young people may gain a more positive sense of themselves and their communities, even if this is necessarily achieved through resistance of more dominant conceptions (see Dewdney & Lister, 1988).

We should note, however, that it has been suggested that the notion of empowerment may represent little more than academics and teachers idealising their own position, and expecting pupils to desire the supposedly 'powerful' knowledge of which they are the keepers. As Buckingham & Sefton-Green note, 'While the idea that knowledge is power may be reassuring for those who possess educational capital, it may not necessarily be shared by those who lack economic capital' (1994, p. 209). This is reminiscent of novelist William Gibson's anecdote about the LA riots, during which he witnessed a Radio Shack shop being enthusiastically stripped of its stereos and beatboxes, whilst the Apple PowerBooks in the next store stayed put. 'That's when I knew that it was too late,' Gibson has said; 'That my vision of the future wasn't going to happen. I wanted to tell them they were looting the wrong store. I'm fondest of the idea that the minorities and the poor can be empowered by this technology, but I don't see it happening in the real world' (quoted in Beard, 1995).

This kind of global pessimism should not be taken to mean, however, that video projects (or similar media production activities) are of no value, or are unable to make any kind of change, however small, in the experience of individuals. Research based on actual classroom video work (such as Sarland, 1991; Bower, 1992; Dewar, 1992; Emerson, 1993; Brown, 1993; Berg & Turner, 1993; Gauntlett, 1995b)<sup>105</sup> has found it to be valuable and enjoyable for the children, at

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<sup>105</sup> Some studies of photography work in schools are also of relevance here, such as Elizabeth Lawrence's project (1990) in which students were able to explore their 'experiences of

least, and whilst an affective variable such as ‘empowerment’ is difficult to measure in any meaningful way, it is at least a possible outcome.

### **Advantages of the video production method in summary**

As in other ethnographic methods, the amount of time spent with the participants means that the researcher is able to access talk about the issues under investigation which is more likely to be representative of their deeper feelings about a subject than the ‘staged’ discourse produced in one-off interview or focus group settings. The video camera and brief to make a particular kind of film, however, structures the use of that time, and gives participants an opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding of discourses relevant to the subject in question. Observation of every aspect of the process of producing the video provides one substantial block of research data, but at the end of the project we also have the videos thus produced – constructed, mediated accounts of a selection of the perceptions of the social world held by the group members. Combined with the understanding of the circumstances in which these came to be put onto videotape, gained in the time spent ‘immersed’ with each group throughout production, the videos themselves provide a companion block of data for analysis.

The method may also have benefits for the children involved as well, serving as a form of media education, potentially empowering them about the issues in question, and giving young people a way of expressing themselves which is generally found to be novel, exciting and unusual. Perhaps most importantly, the method constitutes a real break from those investigations of media use and impact which have confined the participants’ responses to those available within a predetermined range. Whilst effects studies have traditionally based their approaches on a ‘seek and you shall find’ model, the video project researcher celebrates their own inability to predict what will happen – a ‘risk’ worth taking.

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growing up a black minority in a white majority society’ (p. 25). Lawrence records that the students felt that the project gave them confidence in dealing with racism, and in expressing themselves (pp. 28–29). The work gave students the opportunity ‘to think through and discuss crucial aspects of their lives, on both a personal and social level’ (p. 30).

## 8. 'Our Environment': The video research in action

Video-making as a research method is as much about process as outcomes, and this chapter discusses something of both. Interviewed in the first week, the children often gave impressions of their environmental attitudes which had to be amended during the more exploratory video-making of subsequent weeks. The children in all groups were very quick to pick up the rudiments of filming, and on the whole performed in front of the camera with a rapidly-developed confidence; their ability to communicate through the medium need not be doubted. Somewhere between the initial interviews, the weeks in production, and the final edited video, we find clues towards what the children regarded as important and unimportant in the complex and sometimes contradictory web of their young lives.

### **First impressions: the initial group interviews**

This section provides an overview of what the children imparted during the group interviews conducted at the start of each project. The areas these focus-group style semi-structured interviews sought to probe were the children's knowledge of the environment, television programmes which they had seen on the subject, and how they felt they had come to learn about environmental matters.

#### **(i) Knowledge of environmental issues**

There did not appear to be any individual, in any of the groups, who did not have some knowledge or awareness of environmental matters. The term 'the environment' was meaningful in all cases, and understanding of it seemed to be sufficiently great that a generous range of topics and concerns were brought into the discussion – and ultimately the videos – on the subject. The coverage of the individual projects below describes the varying degrees of knowledge between the different groups in different schools. Nevertheless, there was a general base of information and (more often than not) concern across all of the groups, which included litter, pollution, and wildlife, and an understanding of recycling. Many children also had a grasp of more complex matters such as acid rain, and the felling of rainforests.

Whilst awareness was generally about more global rather than local problems, children in all groups were keenest to make a video about the environment on

their doorsteps. Of course, this was the choice which was more practical, and allowed the children to go out and about more. It also showed that they were able to connect the two spheres, and link the abstract general to the local specific. (However, this choice will be discussed further in the next chapter).

## (ii) Television programmes

When asked to name programmes on which they had seen material about the environment, all groups were able to come up with a few. *Newsround* was the factual programme most often mentioned, followed by *Blue Peter*. The most commonly named fictional programme was *Captain Planet*, followed by *Toxic Crusaders* and *The Animals of Farthing Wood*, all animated series. As Table 8.1 shows, over two-thirds of the programmes mentioned (15 out of 22) were on one of the two BBC channels.

Few of the programmes were discussed with any enthusiasm, however. Nevertheless, *Captain Planet* was thought of with some affection by members of four of the seven groups. Charlotte at Blenheim Primary recalled themes from it: 'Litter, pollution... The bad people made pollution and sewage', whilst Sophie at Brudenell had a videotape of episodes she had compiled. At Beckett Park, Alan immediately launched into the theme song ('Captain Planet, he's our hero, gonna get pollution down to zero...'), and Izoduwa explained how the series 'makes you understand' about the issues, because (she implied) they are integral to the plot of the stories. Inevitably, others felt the cartoon to be 'naff' or childish.

The long-running magazine programme *Blue Peter* was not generally highly regarded, the older groups at Royal Park and Beckett Park in particular finding the programme laughably dull. However, the middle-class children of the same age at Weetwood almost uniformly quite liked the programme, and found no shame in that view<sup>106</sup>; one boy even owned a copy of the 1990 *Blue Peter Green Book*. The younger groups also had time for the programme, and Sophie at Brudenell had held a 'bring and buy' sale for the *Blue Peter* Water for Africa appeal, which others were familiar with.

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<sup>106</sup> This finding might be considered in the light of the evidence from several research studies which indicates that socioeconomic status is related to environmental concern, with middle and upper classes being more concerned than lower classes (Lyons & Breakwell, 1994). Finding this in their own study of 13–16 year olds, Lyons & Breakwell suggest possible explanations: parental influence, academic achievement, different priorities, and the different curricula of middle- and working-class schools (1994, p. 235).

Pupils generally were more sympathetic towards *Newsround*, the Children's BBC news programme, despite a reasonably widespread knowledge of the differences between its news values (seen as an emphasis on wildlife and school dinner stories) and those of the 'proper' news, which were implicitly accepted as superior. At Beckett Park, for example, Chris noted, 'It's kid's news, innit, it's kid's news', but his friend Martyn added 'I like watching it' too. It appeared to be quite common knowledge that *Newsround* would be a strong source of environmental information.

There were also some less obvious nominations. Adam at Blenheim animatedly suggested that the movie *Hook* had a pro-environmental theme, because in the lair of the villain, Captain Hook, 'It's all messy... the environment's bad'. Laura and others at Beckett Park suggested *The New Adventures of Superman* [US title: *Lois and Clark*], which they found enjoyable, and rightly noted that a couple of episodes had involved plots based around environmental issues.

**Table 8.1****Programmes mentioned by children as having environmental content (22 different items, in alphabetical order)**

*Animal Hospital* (BBC)  
*The Animals of Farthing Wood* (Children's BBC)  
*Blue Peter* (Children's BBC)  
*Calendar* (ITV local magazine)  
*Captain Planet and the Planeteers* (Children's ITV)  
*Channel Four News* (C4)  
*Close Up North* (BBC local)  
*Go Wild!* (Children's ITV)  
*GMTV* (ITV breakfast magazine)  
*Hook* (movie)  
*Horizon* (BBC)  
*The Natural World* (BBC)  
*The New Adventures of Superman* (BBC)  
News programmes (other)  
*Newsround* (Children's BBC)  
*The Private Life of Plants* (BBC)  
*The Really Wild Show* (Children's BBC)  
*Six O'Clock News* (BBC)  
*Tomorrow's World* (BBC)  
*Toxic Crusaders* (Children's BBC)  
*Watch This Space* (Children's BBC)  
*Zig Zag* (BBC schools)

**(iii) Sources of environmental information**

The children had learned about environmental matters from a number of sources, but the primary reference points were usually television and school. The degrees varied, naturally, but in general, television was seen as the single most important source. At Burley St. Matthias and Brudenell schools, the children had done almost nothing on environmental issues or problems in the classroom, and so television was a fundamental information source for them. The children of Blenheim, by comparison, had covered quite a number of areas in class, but this

seemed also to cultivate enthusiasm for television material on those themes. When asked whether they thought they got more information from television or school, the group opinion was divided, but television won 60-40, or 70-30. A similar debate at Beckett Park concluded that environmental information came from a variety of sources, but that television was the most important.

In all of the schools the children were able to suggest a number of other possible sources of environmental information, such as the radio, newspapers, books, teletext, computers, libraries, supermarket leaflets, and videos. In the main, such lists seemed to be more catalogues of *potential* media, rather than necessarily being sources which the children would regularly use for that purpose themselves, although the middle-class children of Weetwood school apparently *did* refer to the newspapers, and even CD-ROMS and the internet, which they mentioned. All groups noted that their parents *might* talk about the environment, but, with a few exceptions, rarely did.

### **The videos, school by school**

This section includes both description of each of the completed, edited videos, and notes on the process of their production. As indicated in the previous chapter, the edited videos did not contain all of the footage recorded, but included the effective and relevant material. Whilst poststructuralism may have undermined the notion of a simple relationship between texts and readings, there was no evidence to suggest that such concerns impinged upon the understanding of the videos for the children, or even their teachers. The video descriptions below are therefore straightforward attempts to report the content of each video. It should be noted that, for brevity, the outlines below do not quote every utterance which appears in the films.

## Royal Park Primary School

### **The edited video (8 minutes 4 seconds)**

*Titles: the camera pulls back from a tower block to show a wider view of inner Leeds, with its packed-in terraced houses and a poorly maintained field, as seen from a school window.*

*We cut to Ryan, with the school behind him, as he shows us the state of the field he is in. Benches have been burnt and people have been making fires. 'The Council should have made this into a park,' Ryan asserts. Asif shows us in more detail, noting, 'Before three years this place used to be really nice. These used to be benches'. 'If the council didn't want all this,' says Amaz, indicating the mess, 'they should have made it into a park'. Ryan shows us a substantial pile of dumped rubbish. 'A few months ago people were complaining that they found syringes. My little nephew got scratched by one'.*

*Maryam argues that if only the Council would maintain the park properly, it would be a very good resource for the school and children living locally. Tabrez and Fozia then shows us some houses typical of the area.*

*We cut to Omar, seated in school, who is asked by Amaz from off-camera, 'What place do you not like, any why?'. Omar: 'I do not like... the field, because it is dirty.' Amaz: 'Why's it dirty?'. Omar: 'Because there's been a lot of litter there'.*

*Fozia (being interviewed): 'Hyde Park's more interesting to play there, and the field isn't, because it's messy'. We see Farzana and Shazia at the start of the path into Hyde Park, from their school. 'This is Hyde Park!' they announce happily.*

*We cut to Maryam (being interviewed): 'Because in Hyde Park the area's so greenery and so much trees'. Amaz and Omar (at the park entrance) show us where the school is in relation to the park.*

*Interviewing in school, Maryam (off-camera) asks Yasir, 'Which places do you like best?'. Yasir: 'I like Hyde Park best. I like to play, everywhere in the park'. Maryam: 'Why do you like it?'. Yasir: 'Because there are all things there. And friends, to play with'.*

*Ryan shows us the Hyde Park allotments: 'People around this area grow their vegetables in here'. In school, Amaz asks Omar, 'Did you enjoy going places?'*



Royal Park Primary School: Ryan discusses litter and discarded syringes: 'My little nephew got scratched by one'



The Royal Park group at the statue: 'We all like Hyde Park!'

*'Yes, especially the park'. 'Why?'. 'Because it's nice, and if you go to some places it's quiet'.*

*Yasir, and then Fozia, point to the university, and some students, and note that many students live in the area. Maryam shows us the many paths in the park, and then the statue; 'It's built in 1852'. We are also shown the nearby church, and dentist's.*

*We approach the play area, as Fozia tells us, 'This is a nice place for the children to play. It has not got a lot of litter on it'. Farzana is asked, 'What did you like about Hyde Park?'. Her reply: 'Playing on the swings!'. In the park, Amaz kicks a crisp bag with a cry of 'Football!', and we launch into a musical sequence where the children 'demonstrate' the recreational uses of the equipment to the full, playing on the slide, swings and climbing frames. As the music dies, we find the ten children gathered at the foot of the statue. 'We all like Hyde Park,' they shout, then jump off, caught in a freeze-frame as we go into the end titles, which show us their names accompanied by a shot of each child.*

### **Making the Royal Park video**

The local concerns reflected in the completed video had emerged, generally, in the first week's discussion. Interest was clearly focused on making a video about the local area, rather than more global issues. Indeed, no interest was shown in 'environmental issues' *per se*, but local concerns included the vandalism of public telephones, which the children didn't approve of, and that the area was not 'clean and tidy'. The parks were seen as 'getting messy' (Tabrez), and the theme of the neighbouring field, which it was felt the Council should have turned into a properly-maintained park, was first mentioned here. There was little agreement on whether or not they *liked* the area, but the children knew that a lot of people did not, because of the frequency of domestic burglaries in the area. Asked why people might burgle houses, the group quickly produced the answer 'to get money', and asked what they might want that for, Ryan suggested 'drugs'. Another area of Leeds, Chapeltown, was seen as a worse place to live, with Yasir saying that there were 'too much fights going on. They've got guns round there' – a view illustrated by (somewhat excited) talk of taxis being held up at gunpoint.

The local streets were deemed not safe to play in, particularly because 'people nick cars and go mad'. Yasir noted that the speeding ramps promised for the area had not been put in yet, with Tabrez noting, 'It's a good idea, because the people

that joyride knocked some people over'. The fair which visits Woodhouse Moor – which the children call 'Hyde Park' – every six months was seen as a more positive thing, although it didn't come often enough and was 'too dear'. Ryan agreed with Yasir's declared wish to live in Blackpool, so that they could go to the fair every day.

In the first and second weeks the children produced some video around the school with a surprising degree of competence and confidence. This work was intended as video-making 'practice', but it became apparent that such rehearsal was not particularly necessary. In the third week we visited the field next to the school, and although in the first week's discussion the children had expressed neither interest nor concern about 'environmental issues' in the abstract, here they produced several arguments about the local field, 'naturally' and without prompting, and clearly felt quite strongly that the dumping of waste, and burning of benches and other matter was bad, and that the field could and indeed *should* be made into a much nicer park to serve the local community. In the following couple of weeks, filming around the school and in 'Hyde Park', environmental talk was largely limited to some appreciation of the relative merits of plant life around the school, and a clean, peaceful park. Comparisons were made, however, between the disappointingly unappealing field, and the park, which was deemed to be far superior.

In the final week, the children interviewed each other, on video, in groups of three (one to operate the camera, one interviewer, one interviewee – all roles being rotated). Some clips from these appear in the final edited video, but some other comments are worth noting.

Some of the children clearly found being on screen a rewarding and positive experience. Amaz, asked whether he liked to be seen on camera by his schoolmates, said 'I should be proud of myself'. Omar said he did not like to appear before his friends, 'because I was ashamed'; but he liked making the video 'very much – because it's fun'. Fozia too liked making the video, 'because it was interesting'. Asif enjoyed 'learning about the camera and playing on the swings'. Being in charge of the camera held a clear appeal, particularly when combined with some human interest. Yasir said he most liked 'making film of people', whilst Tabrez also liked to operate the camera, 'because you could film people'.

The project cannot claim to have heightened environmental awareness across the board, however – at least not in an explicit sense. Amaz's appreciation of the park, according to his interview, was entirely due to the fact that he got the

chance to play in it, for example. Nevertheless, all of the children said that they had enjoyed making the video.

## Summary

The initial impression these children gave was that they were the victims of environmental ennui; they had heard about the subject on television often enough, and were familiar with some problems and related terms. However, they had little apparent interest in it. Their work on the video demonstrated, however, that when faced with environmental matters on their own doorstep, they became usually eloquent and energised about the subject. Whilst they remained ambivalent about the area in general, and still relatively unconcerned about environmentalism as a broader subject, the differences between the field and the park were clearly quite important to them, and it was this contrast – suggested by the children themselves, with no adult interventions – which structured the whole completed video.

## Little London Primary School

### The edited video (11 minutes 48 seconds)

*Titles: Tower blocks and a gas works loom large over the school, which we see in various shots with the children outside.*

*The children (the youngest of all video groups) say 'This is our school. Hurray!' and jump in the air. We cut to Mariam dancing and singing, vaguely but with some gusto, with an umbrella. Then we cut to Vicky: 'Hello, my name is Vicky, and I will be talking about the trees, right? I like trees because in the summer the leaves grow on the trees but in autumn the leaves fall down. And in summer, right, blossom grows on the trees, and I like blossom. [...] Birds make nests in trees. And there's a pub next to us and that in't got no trees, look! We've got trees all around the school because we like them so much. And I don't know who planted these trees, but they're very good to plant them'.*

*Maryam talks about the playground, noting that you can play, read stories, or have a picnic; she wishes the viewers luck in these activities.*

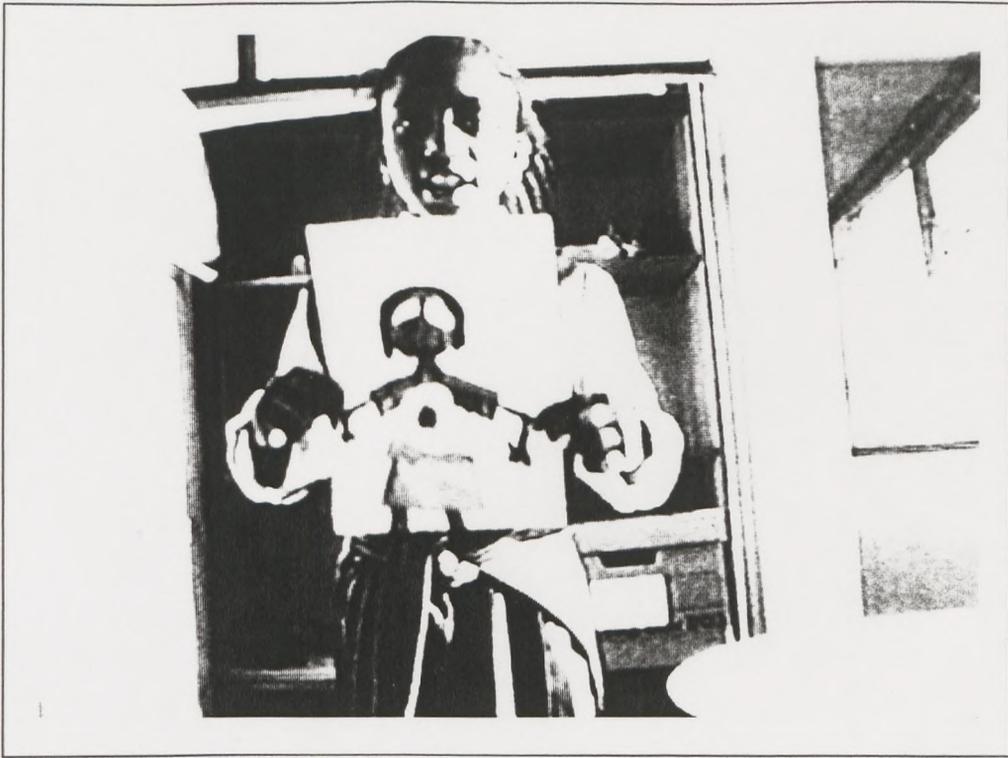
*Josiah, by some litter-strewn grass in the school grounds, says: 'My name is Josiah and I'm going to be talking about litter. Some people leave litter around.*



Little London Primary School: 'This is our school. Hurray!'



Celie demonstrates her love of trees to her interviewer, Vicky



Little London Primary School: Deneika dreams of Africa



Mariam gives viewers a stern environmental warning

*I don't like it when people leave it on the floor, do you? There's some there, there's a Ribena there, and a McDonald's drink over there, lots of things, all sorts of things'.*

*Amanda notes the large amount of traffic on the road which is very close to the school, a potential danger to young children. Celie talks about a tree, which has no leaves since it is February: 'It must be cold'. Deneika talks about an area of grass which has turned to mud with children walking over it in the wet weather. Vicky discusses and demonstrates use of the coloured play benches beside the playground. Josiah and then Mariam talk about another area of school 'garden' which has just turned to mud. 'I don't like it,' says Mariam.*

*The camera goes in through the school doors, leading into some classroom presentations. First is Celie, seated with a book: 'I'm going to be talking about pollution. And this is my book. That's what pollution is [pointing to picture of trash dumped in a river], that's all, all rubbish, and it spoils the environment. And there's the bird that's been in the sea, and an oil tanker's spilled out some oil on him. I'll show you the worst picture, it's a fish and it's been by a sewage tank. It's horrible, innit?'*

*Next is Deneika, seated in the library with a book, who talks shyly about her special interest, Africa. She adds [wholly unprompted], 'Some people don't like Black people, and it's not very nice to do it'.*

*Mariam, in the classroom, talks about some tulips ('shulips'), which she has cultivated, and seems to love. 'I used to water them every Monday... I like shulips because they beautiful'.*

*Josiah in the library, with a book: 'My name's Josiah and I'm going to be talking about litter. I don't like litter when it's on the beach, it makes a horrible mess. And here are some people taking the rubbish away'.*

*Mariam is asked, 'Did you enjoy doing the video?'. 'Oh I loved it, I enjoyed it, I enjoyed it very much. [Yeah?] Yeah.' And we swing into a musical sequence with the children around various parts of the school, talking and dancing, which leads into the end titles.*

## **Making the Little London video**

In stark contrast to the Royal Park group's initial response, these children appeared very excited to be doing something on the environment – even before they knew it was a video activity – and gave a very enthusiastic response when asked if they found work on the environment to be interesting. They had studied

the environment in school previously, mostly in relation to litter. They were aware of problems such as pollution, and the advantages of recycling, but did not seem to know about acid rain, or the ozone layer.

Asked for a definition of the environment, Celie suggested that it is 'everything', 'everything around us'. As for whether they were worried about environmental problems, the answer was generally no. Asked what they would do when they're older if the problems have got worse: 'Then we'll go somewhere else'.

This group approached even the first week's 'practice' video presentation with some enterprise; for example, when invited to talk spontaneously on their chosen subjects, they decided that the *proper* way to do it was to write *scripts*. They consequently all sat down and started writing. In addition, most of them chose to talk about things which were related to the environment even though they had not particularly been asked to – Mariam on her favourite tulips, Vicky on recycling, Deneika on flowers, and Celie spoke about animals, 'particularly the animals in the sea who get polluted from the oil spills, like seals and sea birds', and 'endangered animals like tigers, polar bears, gorillas, and pandas'.

In the second week, the children produced a substantial amount of material around the school. Being aged only seven and eight seemed to make them, if anything, less reticent about talking at length to the camera. This also meant, however, that they were less good at keeping quiet when *not* on camera (at one memorable point, Josiah, who was operating the camera, yelled into the microphone 'I want to go to the toilet', and ran off). The children were also able to interview each other on camera comfortably.

In the remaining four weeks, whilst the appeal of running around and in particular, for this group, dancing (including some imitation of rather thrusting dances from *Top of the Pops*) remained strong, the children kept to an environment-related agenda with little need for reminders. Indeed, they produced more unprompted surprises than most groups, as seen in Deneika's enthusiasm for Africa, coupled with an awareness of racism in Britain, and Vicky and Mariam's ability to talk about almost anything at some length. Significantly, without being told to, the children performed for the camera in a way which anticipated an audience of others, asking the 'viewers' rhetorical questions, wishing them well, and signposting their presentations (almost all of which were prefaced with 'Hello, my name is ... and I am going to be talking about ...', and closed with 'And that is the end of my story'). They also captured interesting visual material on tape, such as a broad range of scenery, movement, stepping into shot, their ubiquitous dancing, and minor gymnastics. The children also

seemed aware of the opportunity for individual expression, so that, for example, when one child was suggesting words to Josiah, Celie hissed ‘Don’t *tell* him what to say’ – not to deny Josiah assistance, but in favour of letting him express things *himself*.

The following exchange, from the final week where the children interviewed each other on camera, shows how the children had – on the *whole* – remained focused upon the aims of the project:

*Celie*: What have you been doing in this project?

*Vicky*: I have been talking about the environment, and talking about litter, and talking about rubbish, and talking about grass, and everything.

*Celie*: Did you enjoy filming?

*Vicky*: Yes I did actually, I enjoyed filming and I enjoyed doing the talking and that.

*Celie*: Did you enjoy talking about the environment?

*Vicky*: Yeah I did. But I still wanted to talk about dancing.

Mariam, a working-class Black girl aged seven, was able to speak at particular length to the camera, and rather than being repetitive or with little point, her utterances were often surprisingly complex. In the following example, Mariam speaks of the excitement and variety of environmental video work with an enthusiasm and scope which threatens to reach beyond her basic language ability, and which was accompanied by many expressive gestures:

*Amanda*: Which bits did you find interesting?

*Mariam*: The interesting thing of filming is you can talk about something, and talk about flowers, and roads, and playground, and slide, and some environment work, about trees: we talk about loads of things. Maybe you could, if you have camera, you could film, your friend could film you or you could film yourself; it is very lovely, and I *mean* it is very lovely, because if you look out for anyplace or playground, you see loads of things you could do with environment work. Everywhere you go you can see something that you do about the environment. And I *really* mean it. Because if you see out the schools, or you go to buy something, the environment is *there*. That’s the end of my story.

The ideas about the ‘everywhereness’ of the environment at the heart of this speech are ones which Mariam has thought of and developed herself, as far as can be gathered, and they are expressed in her own terms. Whilst not conforming to the highest adult standards of clear presentation, her speech reflects an environmental awareness and enthusiasm which was not so evident in most of the other, older children in this study.

## Summary

This group were particularly enthusiastic about 'the environment', as an abstract term, when the topic was first mentioned to them – going so far as to cheer 'hurray!' and show tangible excitement. The video-making process did not show this passionate response to be false, exactly, but did reveal that the zeal related to the term 'the environment' was, to an extent, superficial. Concern about specific issues – notably litter, pollution and wildlife – seemed real enough, but generally did not appear to have extended to broader issues, or a determination necessarily to do anything about the problems. Given the children's age, however, this lack of generalisation may be entirely natural, and their ability to interpret 'environment' in varied ways for the video production was impressive.

Certainly, some concern for the environment was demonstrated by each of the children. Mariam, in particular, whose background was no different to the other children, showed an awareness of the environment which seemed to have been enhanced by the video project, such that she could produce quite eloquent statements on the subject by the final week. In all, the quality of the video work produced by these seven year olds in a disadvantaged school was notably high.

### Blenheim Primary School

#### The edited video (17 minutes 21 seconds)

*Titles: To the sound of a song about the environment performed by the children (written by Charlotte & Rebekah), we see shots of the school, in sunshine and in snow. The song begins, 'People, people, you are mean, You don't keep our environment clean...', and ends, 'This has gone on far too long, you think you're right but you are wrong!'.*

*We cut to Ryan in the playground: 'This is our school!'. Then to Charlotte, in the school grounds, holding a map. She shows us where we are, and says, 'We want to tell you about the environment, and about litter, and all this mess that's around here. If you look around there's all rubbish and cans and bottles and plastic bags. All plants have died out, and it's very awful'. Then Rebekah shows us the monument and church nearby, and notes all the litter around.*

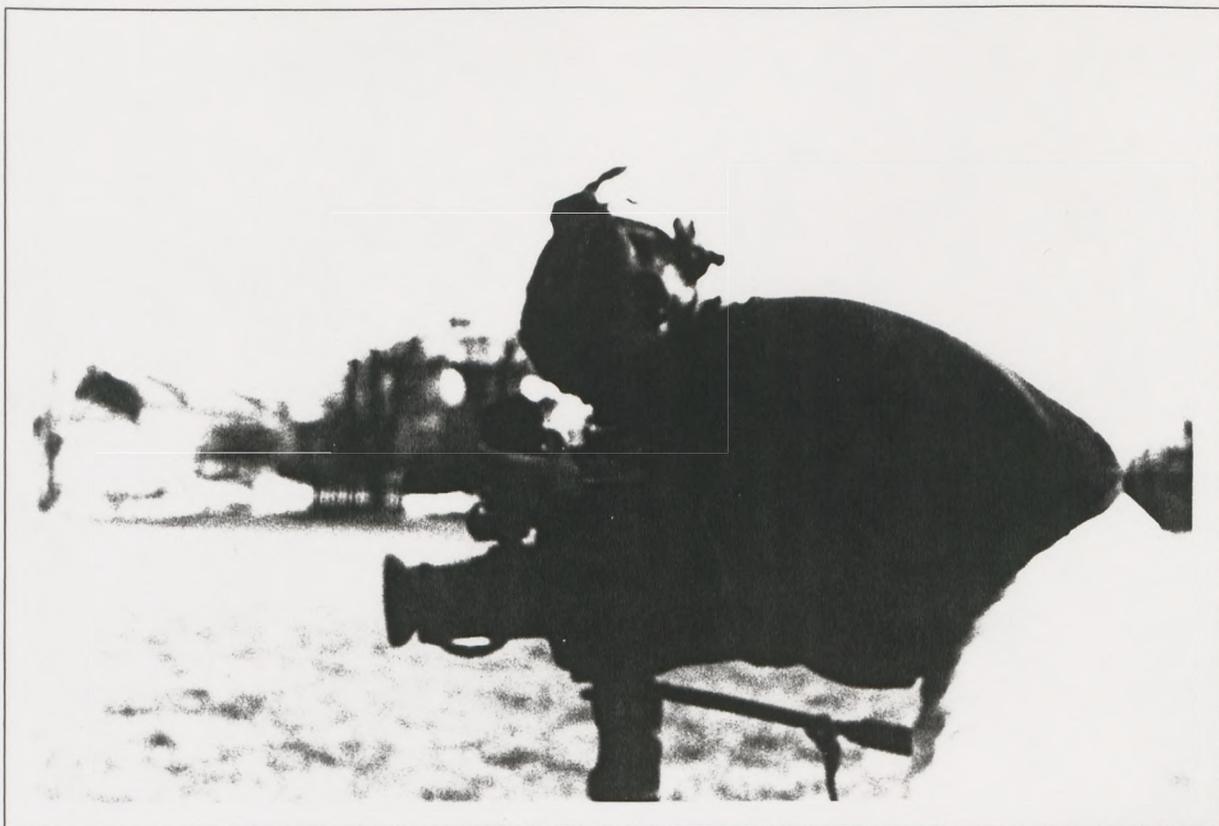
*Charlotte, Rebekah and Anna show us a place in the same area where there is further litter – 'And it's all because of people like you', says Charlotte, 'who are throwing it all on the ground. It's destroying it and it's making it look*



Blenheim Primary School: Charlotte addresses viewers about the disused site, where she would build a community centre for the homeless and elderly



Chabu phones the Council's planning department to discuss the matter



Blenheim Primary School: Rebekah films on the school field



Ryan films the 'very horrible' waste ground



Blenheim Primary School: Rebekah helps Charlotte with her recording



Some of the Blenheim Crew

*awful'. Anna expresses concerns that tree growth may be impaired, and then all three of them note a messily broken-down fence. Charlotte and Anna criticise those who spoil the grass instead of taking the path across the school field. Majid criticises litter and damage caused to a bush.*

*Then Adam introduces us to a 'very horrible' area of land at the bottom of the school field where there was once a Catholic school, which had a fire and was demolished. Now there is just rubble and waste ground. Chabu elaborates: 'People are just putting all their rubbish here. You could now change it into something else. What would you like it change it into? You could change it into some meadows. Or a swimming pool'.*

*Charlotte, inside school, explains that the group wants to know what is going to happen to the Catholic school site. 'We are going to write a letter to the Leeds City Council about what they are going to do with it. Chabu is going to ring them up and ask why'.*

*To music, the camera (held by Ryan) follows Chabu and Majid through the school to the secretary's office. Chabu dials the Council. We see his phone call, intercut with shots of the waste ground in question. 'Um hello, I'm a pupil from Blenheim Primary School and we're doing a project about the environment. Who could we write to ask about the Rosary Roman Catholic School and what are they going to do with the er land?... Pardon, what did you say? The wh? Planning?... Yeah... Yeah... Yeah, so it's erm write to P. Cook, the Headrow building, Leeds 1. Okay. Bye'. Then Chabu reports back on the conversation, which he did not find particularly helpful.*

*We cut to Rebekah, who reads us her letter to the Council, and then Anna, followed by Adam, then Majid, who do the same. All note that the wasteground is spoiling the environment, and ask the Council what they are going to do about it.*

*We cut to some shots from the library, where the children have interviewed each other. Rebekah likes the school; Adam, asked how much of the land is polluted, replies 'About three-quarters'; Ryan on the local environment: 'Some of it's pleasant and some of it's unpleasant'. Charlotte gets heated about those who drop litter near the school – 'They're too lazy, and they feel that they're big because they're throwing litter on the floor and are making our environment dirty and messy and horrible. They wouldn't like it if it was their gardens'. Chabu insists that children shouldn't be lazy and should pick their litter up.*

*Rebekah shows us the contrast in an area on the edge of the school grounds where there are both attractive daffodils, but also litter. Chabu shows us the*

*large road next to the school – ‘All you can hear is the cars that are passing by’.*

*Adam in another corner of the school field: ‘I don’t like this very much. It’s got no daffodils and all this rubbish’. Anna reads a poem against people who drop litter (‘Only plants and flowers cheer us up / People shouldn’t be allowed to mess it up’). Ryan reads his poem, which ends, ‘Keep the school environment free / So I can grow like our trees’.*

*Anna: ‘We’ve got our letters from the Council at last. Here’s mine’. The letter explains that the Council does not own the land, but outlines some ideas about what they might like to see it used for, agreeing in vague terms with some of the children’s suggestions.*

*Chabu explains that the group have decided that they would like the site to be used for ‘a community centre for old people, disabled people and homeless people’. Charlotte outlines the ideas of an all-night canteen for homeless people, TV and bingo for the elderly people, and sports ‘like netball, basketball and hockey’ for the disabled people; ‘and they will be a youth club for youths’. Rebekah proposes a possible floor plan for the centre.*

*The children sing a song (which they had learned previously in school) about pollution, accompanied by relevant shots from the school grounds, and then the end titles.*

### **Making the Blenheim video**

This group, interviewed in the first week of the project, had a moderate amount of knowledge about environmental matters and problems, and seemed reasonably concerned about the subject. When asked what the environment is, they suggested ‘nature’, but also ‘Greenpeace’; and were able to list environmental problems such as ‘throwing litter’, ‘waste’, ‘pollution’, ‘sewage’, and ‘cutting down trees to make paper’. ‘Recycling’ was given as a solution to this, and the children were able to name many recyclable products. Anna was able to explain acid rain and how it occurs, and about the ozone layer and how it protects the earth. They had learnt a song about pollution (featured in the video), which they performed on the spot. They explained that the song is about air pollution and water pollution. Discussion later developed about whether people would all be best off moving to the North Pole.

As the completed video clearly shows, the children were particularly animated and interested when they could focus on particular environmental matters on

their doorstep. They went about making the video with considerable enthusiasm and were frequently coming up with ideas – some of them much too adventurous for the time available – of new things to do. Whilst the idea of writing to the Council was suggested by their class teacher, the disgust with the site was their own, as was the idea of telephoning the Council with their enquiry – which was a particularly good and unusual sequence to capture on videotape. The children's letters to the Council were notable for going beyond the most basic possible form, again reflecting their interest in the subject. The group also seemed keen to produce material, such as songs and poems, in their own time, for the video – the most notable product of this being Charlotte and Rebekah's song, which opens the presentation.

Interviewing each other about the environment, the group became quite authoritarian on behalf of the environment, calling for fines and prosecutions for those who drop litter, or messily trespass on the school grounds. They were also full of suggestions for improvements which could be made, such as the planting of further trees and flowers, and the provision of more litter bins. Their poems reflected a generally positive feeling about the school, combined with concern primarily, again, about litter.

In the final week, once the Council's replies had been received, there was a lengthy discussion about what the children themselves would like to see the waste ground used for. A detailed – and at times wildly ambitious – plan emerged for a multi-level community centre serving elderly people, disabled people, the homeless *and* youth, the most basic details of which are presented in the video. The children's image of disabled people was positive, with their thoughts turning immediately to sporting activities for them.

## Summary

This video had a more distinct structure than most, beginning with an assessment of the school environment, moving into criticism of the waste land at the bottom of the school field, followed by the attempts to find out what the Council intended to do, and then reaching some resolution with the children's own ideas for the site. Other material about the environment also appeared throughout.

The children had been moderately concerned about the environment generally at the start of the project, and the process of making the video seemed to have developed their awareness of local problems, and led them to consider the area more imaginatively. After the screening of the completed video, both the class teacher and the classroom assistant were extremely impressed with the work

which the children had produced, since they had not been the most 'able' children, but represented a range of abilities across the middle band. Their comments suggested that the video project had brought out abilities in the children which, in some cases in particular, had previously been less than conspicuous.

## **Burley St. Matthias Primary School**

### **The edited video (13 minutes 7 seconds)**

*Titles: Shots of people and cars going about their business in Burley on a sunny day in March, as seen from school windows.*

*We cut to the group, standing in a Burley street. Aaron: 'This is our video about Burley, and its environment'.*

*Rebecca and Natalie show us what used to be 'a nice corner of the green area, but now it's a rubbish dump'. Sam shows us a bench which has been vandalised and 'has graffiti all over it. [...] It makes the whole area look completely disgusting, when there's writing and graffiti all over benches'.*

*Natalie paddles around the school field, which due to a bad design, she explains, is always waterlogged. Then, to music, we move on to Burley village green. Aaron is standing by the edge of the green, which is covered in litter and waste paper. 'Here is just some of the rubbish that is put everywhere. I don't think people should be allowed just to dump rubbish anywhere. I think the police should, er, give tougher action'.*

*To music, we see cars pour past the school as the children wait to cross the busy road to Burley Park, which we then see some scenes of. We cut to Sam and an elderly woman who is passing through the park. Sam asks her what she thinks of Burley Park. 'I think it's a very good park, for everybody really. A lot of people come here with their dogs, well I do actually, and other people play tennis or cricket or football, so it's a good park really. [...] I like to go round by the gardens and see the flowers'.*

*Tom shows us the bowling green, where people are playing. Then we go to Aaron in the rose garden: 'People come here on nice hot summer's days like this to sit and read, or just to listen to the sound of the birds'.*



The Burley St. Matthias Primary School crew:  
'This is our video about Burley, and its environment'



Sam interviews the public in Burley Park: 'It's a good park really.  
I like to go round by the gardens and see the flowers.'

*Sam interviews a man about the park; Aaron interviews two other men on a bench about it; and Richard Mc sits with a woman to discuss it. All of them seem to like the park, with its relative quiet, its greenery, flowers, and open spaces.*

*Aaron expresses frustration about rubbish dumped by the scout hut. We then see shots of the children playing in the park, followed by views over Burley from a hill opposite the school. Natalie and Rebecca read their poem about the pollution and the environment, which suggests, 'Stop killing the environment, it's done nothing to you,' and concludes, 'Save the environment now, it's up to you'. Then Sam reads his poem, which encourages people to walk rather than drive cars.*

*Sam, by a stretch of river: 'This is the River Aire. It's not exactly the cleanest river in the world, but this is it: the river that runs through Leeds'. Then we go to Aaron, by the Leeds and Liverpool Canal: 'This is one of the nice parts of Burley Canal. It has just been cleaned out recently. But in the other parts of the canal there are a lot of dirty places where people are just chucking their rubbish in'.*

*In the classroom, Sam asks Natalie, 'What do you think of the general environment in Burley?'. 'Well, it's got quite a lot of greenery, but [...] it's got too many cars really'. Natalie asks Rebecca, 'What do you like about the canal?'. Rebecca: 'Well, not a lot really. One, it's smelly, two, there's dead fish in it, and three, there's a lot of unpleasant people hanging round'. Natalie: 'What do you think about the amount of rubbish in the city?'. Rebecca: 'I think it's disgraceful really. There's bins around; people should put their rubbish in the bins'. Natalie: 'Do you ever walk down by the canal by yourself?' Rebecca: 'No, I never do anyway, it's too dangerous. [Why?] There's lots of people hanging round who could rob you, or things like that'.*

*Natalie, seated in the classroom: 'It's disgraceful the amount of rubbish that people drop. There's litter bins for people to put it in, so they shouldn't go dumping it, and even if they couldn't find a litter bin, they should put it in pockets till they got home and then put it in a rubbish bin'.*

*Aaron reads us his (unmailed) letter, in angry mode: 'To Leeds City Council, get off your hinds and do something about the environment. You're the ones with the cash, so go and do something about it before it's too late. Yours sincerely, Mr A. Smith. P.S. – No offence'.*

*End titles – shots of the children, as named, around and about in Burley, plus other shots of the children, the area, and daffodils.*

## Making the Burley St. Matthias video

This group seemed to begin the project with a moderate amount of knowledge about environmental issues, almost none of which, apparently, had been acquired in school. The environment was said to be 'the surroundings, like the trees', and on a bigger scale, 'the world'. The children quickly thought of places where they wanted to film – notably the canal and Burley Park – and were aware that the local factories, although often producing 'not a lot, any more' (Aaron), created pollution – 'Rubbish, different gases which they release into the air' (Sam), 'Carbon monoxide' (Aaron).

The group were able to name many environmental problems, such as pollution from factories, cars, general rubbish, oil tankers, sewage, radioactive waste from Sellafield, and nuclear bombs. Some of them, at least, understood and were able to explain about acid rain, the ozone layer and global warming, and they knew about recycling: glass, plastic bottles, paper, tin cans, clothes, and Aaron knew that polystyrene can't be recycled – 'You can't burn it and it doesn't rot down'.

Phrases such as 'Save the whales' came readily to their lips (with Aaron indulging in an explanation – 'Hunting, greed, slaughter – it's the Japs'). They also named several endangered animals, and were aware that the rainforests were being cut down, with Tom explaining that land was cleared so that animals, being reared for meat, could graze.

These rather abstract concerns were related to the local area, with it being mentioned that the lions by Leeds Town Hall have been eroded by acid rain-like pollution, for example, and that factories were polluting the local canal. Demonstrating some imagination, in the first week it was suggested that we could take a sample from the canal and compare it with tap water – a suitably *visual* thing to do on the video.

As an abstract 'issue', the environment had only moderately enthused the children. In the second week, however, they had a *lot* to say on the matter of the local environment of their school, and, to a slightly lesser extent, the surrounding area. They were keen to bring up various matters – which, without prompting, they all seemed to quite correctly think of as environmental – about the school field, pond and gardens, and litter dumped by the school. Agreement that parks with flowers are good things was immediate, and not gender-specific.

The children were enthusiastic about filming in the area, came up with many ideas, and were keen to fit as much into the available time as possible. Concerns

which emerged during the production process included the children's awareness of crime in the area, and a drug problem, which they understood to be linked.

When interviewing each other, the interesting question 'Would you live in Burley by choice?' came up, with most of those asked deciding that they probably would. The video project was seen as enjoyable and interesting.

*Natalie:* Do you enjoy making this video?

*Rebecca:* Yeah, it's really good fun. You can get some laughs out of it as well.

Aaron said that 'a lot of the good points [about the video project] are walking round looking at things that you'd never notice before'. In common with the other children, he had an awareness of the area 'starting to go downhill [...] My Nana says you could swim in the canal and things like that [years ago], because it wasn't as dirty'. In addition, the economics of environmentalism had not gone unnoticed:

*Tom:* What would you do to improve the area?

*Aaron:* First of all I'd clean it up, then —

*Tom (interrupting):* How, how would you clean it up?

*Aaron:* If I had the money I'd pay for it cleaning, hiring a lot of people to clean it and getting the streets cleaned properly.

*Tom:* Where would you get the money from?

*Aaron:* No, I didn't say I had the money, I said *if* I had the money...

More than any other, this group repeatedly made clear the view that Leeds City Council had a responsibility to fix almost any local problem. The Council was far from deified, however, as we can perhaps most simply note from one boy's unmailed letter to them, which expresses the concerns in a manner not uncharacteristic of this school's population: 'To Leeds City Council, Do some people cleaning up Burley or you're dead. You better clean up our street or you are dead, sucker'.

## Summary

This group, a random selection from what was not regarded as 'a good year', seemed to surprise their teachers with the quality of their video work. The more truculent and undisciplined children were still able to contribute something to the project, and showed a concern for their area which avoided easy cynicism. As at Royal Park, although most of the children had been far from committed environmentalists in a general sense, when faced with their local surroundings they became enthused with ideas and complaints, and apparently came to see both good and bad aspects which they had not previously noted or discussed.

## Weetwood Primary School

### **The edited video (20 minutes 14 seconds)**

*The titles are accompanied by shots of children playing outside the school, flowers in the school garden, and local scenery, which includes more natural beauty than we have seen in previous videos.*

*Alisa and Fiona introduce us to the school, then Lindsay shows us the entrance to Meanwood Park. We cut to Hannah, standing amongst much greenery in the park: 'Hello. This is one of Meanwood's many becks. Under this bridge here, although you can't see it, there is lots of bits of plastic, and it is very overgrown. [...] It is very polluted around here, and not at all nice to swim in'.*

*Alisa, on a bridge, says: 'This is one of the many becks in Meanwood. It has got a lot of pollution in it, and if there were fishes in it, they would be dead'. Then we go to Thomas, on another bridge: 'This is the main beck of Meanwood Park. As you can see, they drop quite a lot of sewage in here, because they don't have enough facilities to dump them in anywhere else, so they come and just pump it into the beck'.*

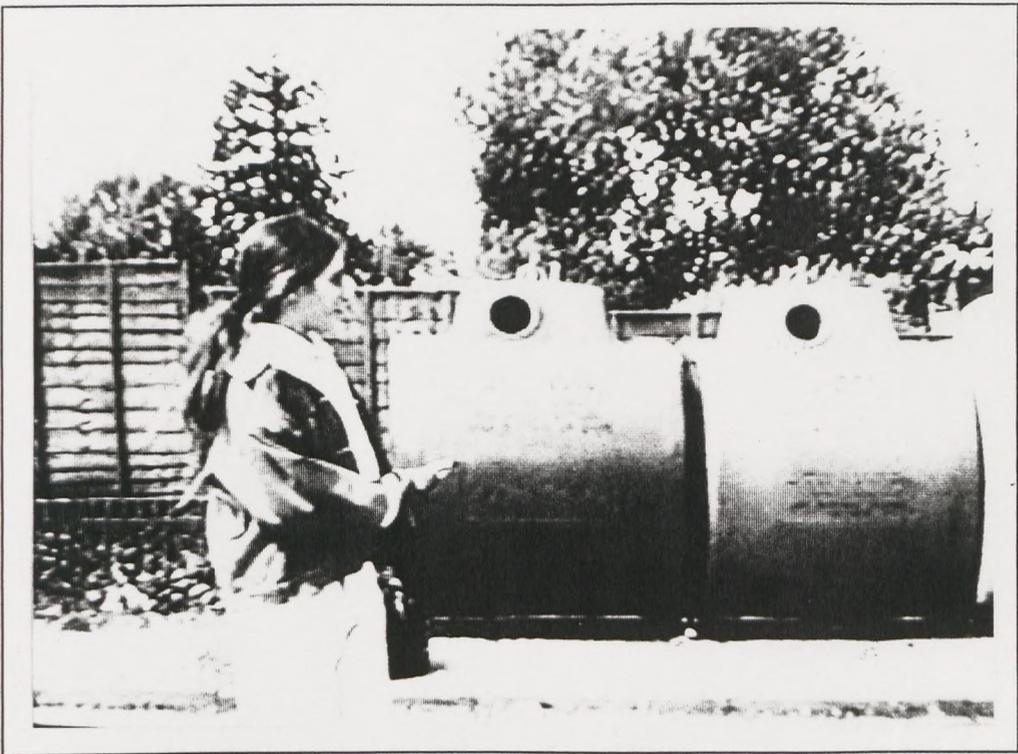
*Andrew shows us the grassy expanses of the park. 'People come here for picnics, and there's football pitches over there, and there's a kids' playground just round there'. Music starts up, and we see the group demonstrating the play facilities. Then, as we watch policemen cross the park on horseback, we hear Hannah talking about the contrast between the largely clean and tidy park, and the pollution in its becks. She also mentions the traffic pollution on Otley Road.*

*Lindsay and Alisa admire the bluebells and other flowers in the park. Fiona shows us the ducks in the duck pond. 'Earlier on in spring, you can see lots of frogspawn in the pond, and, um, some people take the frogspawn from the pond, and put it in their ponds at home'. Lindsay tells us that she has tadpoles from this pond.*

*The children are seen walking off into the woods, whilst Alisa sits down wearily on a rock: 'I'm enjoying the nature. Ahh!'. Lindsay, seated on another rock, tells us about Meanwood Park's woods: 'In the woods, you can see lots of squirrels, and birds. If you're lucky you might be able to see a rabbit. I haven't seen one yet. In winter and autumn, people put out bins and people collect acorns in them, and then they sell them, and raise money. You can also see that there are lots of stones, and hills to climb, like this one'.*



Weetwood Primary School: Fiona finds a polluted beck in Meanwood Park



Hannah on recycling



The Weetwood group quiz the boomerang man in Beckett Park:  
'Yeah, it's good here. Not many people to hit'



Hannah explains the acid rain frieze

*Hannah reads us a warning notice, strapped to a tree: 'Danger – pollution. Water contact should be avoided. Untreated human sewage may be present...'. Then, to music, we see the group walking through gardens, and examining a war memorial, until we arrive at a church, to the sound of its chiming bells. Fiona and Hannah tell us about it. The group are then seen examining the sunny graveyard, and then cutting through woods towards Beckett Park, which Andrew introduces us to.*

*As we watch a man, in the distance, throwing his boomerang in the park, we hear Thomas ask Hannah, 'Why have you done this video?'. She replies: 'To show other people what they can do, and what is actually happening to their environment'. Music starts as we see the boomerang man at closer quarters. Then Thomas interviews him about boomerangs, and the park. The man is impressed by the park: 'I'm amazed how quiet it is. [...] Yeah, it's good here. Not many people to hit'. Then we see all of the children, gathered around, asking him about the activity, and techniques. Next, to music, the children try out various boomerangs in the park.*

*We cut to a busy road, with traffic pouring along. Hannah: 'This is Otley Road. It is one of the busiest roads near our school. In the mornings and the evenings, during the rush hour, there are usually lots and lots of traffic jams'. Then we see more noisy traffic, with the sound fading so that we can hear a poem about pollution, by a classmate of the group, which concludes 'Dead fish float in the dirty water / So much waste adds to the slaughter / Acid rain destroys the trees / Dirty leaves blown by a strong breeze / Men's hunger for paper kills the wood / Will they stop? They really should'.*

*Then we cut to the interior of the local Post Office, where Alisa and Hannah interview the shopkeeper. He thinks the pollution from the road must be quite bad, but the litter problem is less severe, except after Friday and Saturday nights. He likes the area very much.*

*In a nearby delicatessen, the shopkeeper – interviewed by Hannah and Alisa – echoes these views. 'The air's horrible [...] There's a lot of traffic pollution [...] Once you get away from that road, it's very nice indeed'. Continuing along the Otley Road, Hannah notes more dumped rubbish. Interviewing the proprietor of a restaurant, Alisa and Lindsay find more accounts of traffic pollution, but are pleased to note that the restaurant recycles its wine bottles.*

*In the school garden, Lindsay asks Alisa, 'Did you enjoy making the video?'. She replies, 'Yes, we had a lot of fun'. Then Alisa interviews Fiona: 'Did you enjoy it?'. 'Yes, I did'. 'What did you learn about the environment?'. 'Well, I*

*learnt that the environment round us can be nice, but the problem is sometimes you find there's pollution as well'.*

*Then we enter the closing title sequence, featuring shots of the children, including Hannah explaining acid rain before a large frieze in class; and a squirrel in Beckett Park.*

### **Making the Weetwood video**

There was a notable difference in social status between the children of this group and those of the others. Coming from one of Leeds' more affluent areas, with parents who included architects and senior managers, the children had more middle-class voices and styles of expression, as well as being more conscious of standards of 'good behaviour'. Interestingly, however, beyond some advantages of articulacy, this did not make them superior videographers.

The children appeared, from the first-week group interview, to be interested and concerned about the environment, but often in quite a passive way. Their knowledge of environmental problems, from school and other sources, was quite comprehensive, and well spread throughout the group. This is what previous research suggests we might expect for middle-class children (Lyons & Breakwell, 1994). They knew, for example, about various kinds of pollution, and recycling, were all familiar with the process by which acid rain is produced, and were aware of the dangers to and function of the ozone layer ('protects us from the sun', said several of them immediately). Their awareness of the problems of nuclear power, and why rainforests are being felled was, however, patchy.

Quite unlike children in some of the other groups in this study, however, these children had been immersed in a culture of knowledge-gathering, such that their level of knowledge about the environment was perhaps less impressive than at other schools where there was little or no peer credibility attached to being so informed. Asked about aspects of their local area which were environmentally disappointing, the children had some difficulty; uppermost in their minds seemed to be the school dustbins, although pollution in the River Aire was also suggested.

In some ways these polite middle-class children were less effective film-makers than their counterparts at other schools. Their patience often meant that greater amounts of dull material were recorded at greater length, where the more assertive working-class children would simply have switched the camera off and moved on to the next setup. Their more passive approach to video-making also meant that they seemed not to think of doing different things with, for example,

their presenters in shots. It is certainly not to be denied that these children's articulacy, as well as a general inclination to work reasonably hard in school time, made for an intelligent and engaging video. The point is rather that the levels of creativity and ideas put into their video were equal, but were no greater, than at any of the less well-heeled schools.

By the final week of the project, when interviewing each other, the children were quicker to produce pro-environmental responses than they had been at first, and seemed to have an enhanced appreciation of the local area, as well as awareness of its problems – pollution in particular. Their enjoyment of the project was also clear.

## **Summary**

Unlike those at other schools, these children had a general interest in producing good schoolwork, which might have made the extent to which they had been genuinely concerned about the subject less clear. However, as time went on, it became apparent that most of them did have a broad interest in the environment, the local aspect of which was focused by the project. The children did not suggest grand visual ideas, or much of a structure for the video, but simply made competent material of a relatively unplanned nature. In contrast to children in other groups, they were, at least initially, sometimes less confident on both sides of the camera, perhaps due to an upbringing which might more often have emphasised the importance of behaving respectfully towards expensive technology, and maintaining dignity when under surveillance.

## **Brudenell Primary School**

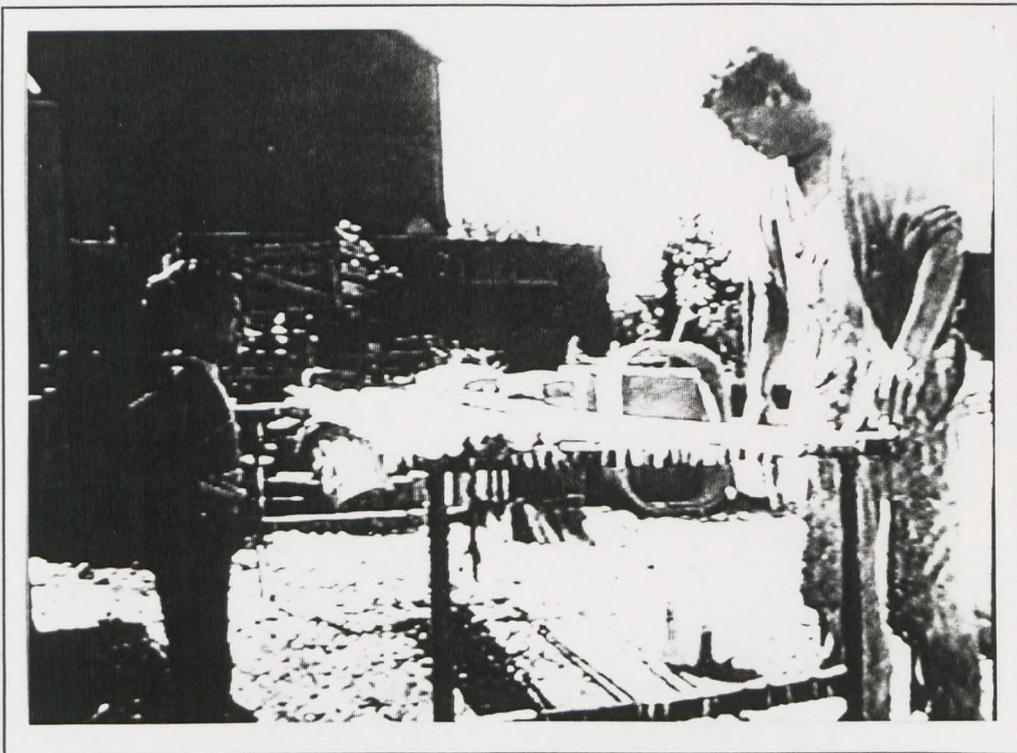
### **The edited video (12 minutes 29 seconds)**

*To the opening titles, we see scenes of life in the Hyde Park area of Leeds, including people visiting shops, a scrap collector with horse and cart, and the children walking the terraced streets, then returning with video equipment through the school gates.*

*We are greeted by Vinesh, who happily introduces us to the school. Jing-Dan then shows us the previous school's ornamental girls' and boys' entrance headers, which are now preserved in the brickwork of the new: 'This old stone symbol reminds us of the past, so it's nice to have this still stand here'.*



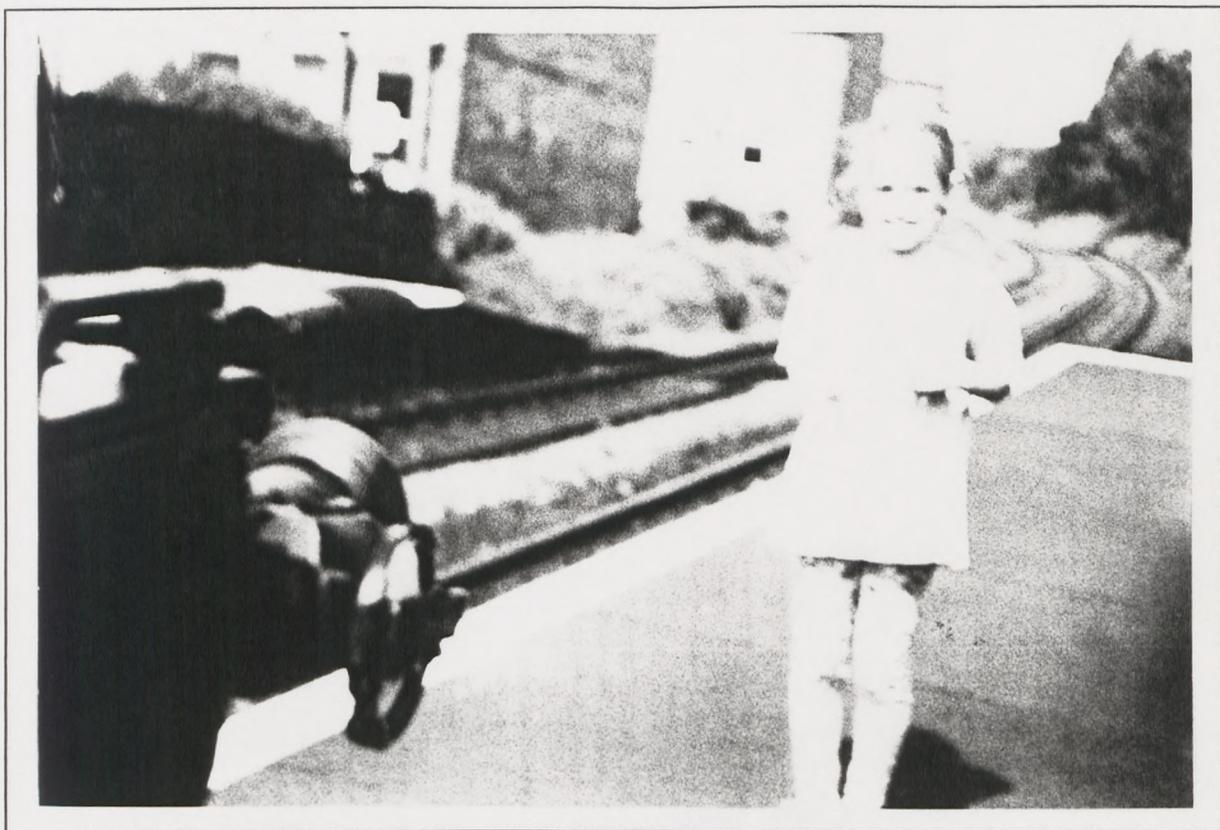
Brudenell Primary School: Asim outside Hyde Park cinema,  
which is noted as 'quite good'



Vinesh questions the locals



Brudenell Primary School: Jing-Dan gives his history lesson to camera



Sophie discusses public transport at Burley Park railway station

*On a street near the school, Jing-Dan tells us the history of the local Botanical and Zoological Gardens, built on land donated by Lord Cardigan and Lady Brudenell, and opened in 1840, but closed within ten years. In turn, Sophie, Fergus, Jing-Dan, and Imran show us old maps from different periods, showing how the land around the gardens has changed and developed.*

*Then we cut to Imran outside the old bear pit (now the only remaining part of the Gardens), which he explains. We see other shots of the site, including a sign describing its history, whilst we hear the children's views. Jing-Dan: 'Do you think that keeping a bear in a bear pit was a good idea?'. Vinesh: 'No, because it's being cruel to the animals'. Sophie: 'I think it was a bad idea, because it's not nice to the bears'.*

*Vinesh and then Asim tell us about the fountain and lake, which we can no longer see. Josiah tells us that the gardens were built near to a station, so that people could visit by train. 'Before the gardens were built, there's all fields and oak trees, and not as many houses as seen today, and Headingley was a quiet place. Leeds City Council planted some oak trees in nowadays, to remind us of the past'.*

*To music, we see a long shot of the station from a bridge over the line, and then from the platform we see a train pull in, deposit and collect some passengers, then pull away. Sophie: 'This is the Burley train station. It's partly good and it's partly bad. It's good because it takes a lot of people and it doesn't use up much pollution. And I don't like it because it's smelly and it uses pollution'.*

*In school, Josiah asks Imran, 'Do you like your community?'. He replies, 'Yes, very much'. Josiah: 'What different people live in your area?'. Imran, smiling: 'Lots of different people'.*

*We cut to Vinesh, interviewing a man painting wood in a builder's yard. They have a leisurely chat which reveals that the man likes the area. Then we cut to Nagina, who shows us 'Vinesh's dad's friend's shop'.*

*Next we see Imran before a sunlit building: 'Now we are at Hyde Park cinema, in Queen's Road. People go to Hyde Park cinema because they watch films. I sometimes go to Hyde Park cinema because I live next to it'. Jing-Dan tells us a little more about it, concluding, 'So, it's quite good'.*

*Vinesh is standing in front of a mass of bill posters stuck to the side of a building. 'The posters on this wall doesn't look, make it look very nice. And it doesn't make it look very nice because there's all litter on the streets and road.*

*There are lots of houses for sale, and this road is a very busy road too [...] And I don't like the idea of the posters'.*

*A little further along, Vinesh has found some graffiti. 'This is also very messy. People writing on the walls. I think that is a very bad thing.' He looks plaintive: 'Why are they doing this to our world?'*

*In school, Vinesh asks Sophie, 'What do you think of the environment?'. She replies, 'I think our environment's very polluted, and I don't like it very much'. Vinesh asks Jing-Dan: 'What do you think about pollution?'. He says, 'It makes a dirty area for us'. Then Jing-Dan asks, 'What about the litter in the street?'. Vinesh: 'Well it doesn't make our streets look nice, and it's horrible'.*

*End titles, with shots of each of the children, and some local scenery. After the music, Vinesh, being interviewed, appears and says thoughtfully, 'It was fun to make a video'.*

### **Making the Brudenell video**

This video project, unlike the others, had a certain remit requested by the class teacher, that the children record some material about the Botanical and Zoological Gardens which were a feature of the locality 150 years ago. These gardens had already been the subject of a project by the children in class, and the teacher felt it would be useful to have the video tape as a resource to show to children in subsequent years. The requirement did not affect the aims of the present study, however, since the coverage of the historical site was simply recorded as we went around the area in a manner which was otherwise comparable to the other projects.

This group were the second youngest, aged between seven and nine. Interviewed in the first week, the children demonstrated that they had studied the local area, with a particular focus on local history, but had not covered the environment in terms of environmental *problems*, or the global environment. Their collective knowledge about the history of the old gardens was impressive, however.

Asked to list environmental problems, the children came up with litter, pollution, toxic waste, and endangered wildlife, but few others, letting their nominations wander on to somewhat more general (but not inappropriate) choices such as earthquakes, volcanoes and war – and, eventually, traffic, which was seen as both dangerous and polluting. However, the children did not apparently know about the ozone layer, and were vague about acid rain.

Nevertheless, they agreed that they were generally *concerned* about environmental problems, and could each name a concern, mostly about endangered animals and hunting. It later emerged that three of the six children were vegetarians, stemming from a belief that animals should not be killed to be eaten – one had made this choice three years previously (his parents weren't), whilst the other two had vegetarian parents, but said that they would stay that way by choice now anyway.

Making the video around and about in the Hyde Park residential area, the children were very enthusiastic, and were eager to fit a great deal of filming into the available time. They showed some awareness of the potential structure of the video when edited, for example by recording first the material with the maps in the classroom, and appearing to understand that this could be mixed with their location work later in the process.

### **Summary**

Their responses when the group interviewed each other in the final week, showed the children talking much more comfortably about 'the environment' than they had at first. This could simply be because they by then knew what was meant by the term when questions were asked about it, but their ability to connect abstract knowledge about anti-environmental factors to their own neighbourhood did seem to have been enhanced.

The enthusiasm of the whole group meant that all contributed something, and children whose first language was not English were able to display their abilities to the full in this non-written form. The video project appeared to bring the subject of the environment 'alive' for the children concerned.

## Beckett Park Primary School

### The edited video (11 minutes 9 seconds)

*The opening titles are accompanied by shots of a local street, the children in Beckett Park, and the school itself.*

*We cut to a black-and-white 'widescreen' format – the style of the interview sections in this video – where Izoduwa is seated with a guest: 'Good morning, and in the show with me I've got Claire ———, on about the environment. If you want to call in and ask Claire questions, you know the number by now. [To Claire:] Where you live, is it tidy or is it messy?'. 'Pretty messy'. 'And being an environmental person, wouldn't you not think like it should be tidy?'. 'Yes'. 'So why don't you do something about it-?'*

*We cut to Chris in sunglasses, standing outside, by a sign: 'Round here, it's really, like, tree-ey, and it's like a sign behind me, and it says "no tipping", so it probably used to be like, really like messy round here, so that's why they've put that sign up, but it's still messy even though they've got that sign up'. Laura then shows us a similarly unkempt area.*

*We return to Izoduwa interviewing Claire: 'What do you think of your environment, the world environment?'. 'Some parts it's messy, some parts it's clean'. 'But what do you think of it? Do you think it should be tidy, do you think it should – what do you think about it exactly?'. 'More people should stop dropping litter'. 'And that's including yourself?'. 'Yeah'. 'Very well...'*

*Alan shows us another green but messy area near the school: 'There's litter all around the place, so it's not a nice area to play, for kids. Well, it could be if it got cleaned up, 'cause there's loads of trees and stuff, but it's just not nice, 'cause of all the litter'.*

*Music, and we go to the local shops, where we find Izoduwa. 'If you want to help our environment, then what you have to do is put your litter, after you've finished it, in the bin. Now you see round here is messy, all because of you. Now just because I live round here doesn't mean I drop the litter. I don't drop nothing. I always put it in these litter bins, so why don't you do the same?'. She then demonstrates by finishing her drink and dropping the can in the bin. 'See, that's all that you have to do. So this is an advertisement of all you have to do is put your rubbish in the bin, and you can help our environment. Thank you'.*



Beckett Park Primary School:  
Laura in the park: 'It's really nice round here'



Izoduwa finishes her drink: 'Just because I live round here  
doesn't mean I drop the litter. I don't drop nothing' . . .



Izoduwa: 'I always put it in these litter bins,  
so why don't you do the same?' . . .



. . . 'All you have to do is put your rubbish in the bin,  
and you can help our environment. Thank you.'



Beckett Park Primary School: Laura films Izoduwa at the college campus



Alan records his friends playing in the park

*We cut to Laura, being interviewed: 'The school, round here... we can pick up the litter. And people who live round here should do, like, a meeting or something, and pick it all up, like Greenpeace'.*

*Claire says, 'This is Beckett Park,' and to music we see the children playing on the slide and swings, which they energetically jump from. Laura shows us graffiti on the equipment, but says, 'It is a very nice place to come and play, and the grass is always cut round here'. Izoduwa shows us the park in more detail, and notes, 'There's trees all around it, so it's a nice site. There's not that much litter because there's a nice, stoney bin around the corner, and there's benches for you if you just want to sit down and read. So really, this is a beautiful park, for peace'. Alan then slides into shot, and adds further largely appreciative comments.*

*Laura shows us the 'beautiful' woods and flowers in the park, which the other children are playing in. 'It's really nice round here'.*

*In interview, Laura says that the town centre is particularly messy with litter: 'There's a lot of people that go round there and just drop it, and they couldn't care less'.*

*Martyn shows us people relaxing in the sunny park. We then see Izoduwa in a different part of the park: 'Okay, this is the environment that I'm in, and you're in, cameragirl, and I'd just like to say, all these things on the floor are a part of nature. [...] It's just peaceful, and it's a nice place for all of us to be'.*

*Chris tells us about the Beckett Park campus of the Metropolitan University. He decides, 'They've done a good job to make it look like this'. Izoduwa adds: 'One thing what's nice about this place, is that it's got a lovely nice park so you can come and study, like that lady over there. It's tidy, it's clean, and it's just a nice view to look at. There's no litter, it's, erm, got nice trees, and it's just a perfect place to come to'.*

*We cut to Alan, being interviewed, who says, quite thoughtfully and quietly, 'If nobody cared about the environment then it'd be, there'd be loads of litter, and everything about would stink, and stuff like that, and there'd be black clouds in the sky every day, there'd be acid rain and everything, so, there has to be somebody who cares about the environment'.*

*To music, we see other shots from the production, going into the end titles, including a shot of each child as they are named.*

## Making the Beckett Park video

This group, with some of the oldest children (year six – aged ten and eleven – as were those at Royal Park and Burley St. Matthias), were unlike any of the others in that they regularly called each other to account for anti-environmental behaviour, or hypocrisy, in an assertive or even aggressive manner. From the first week onwards, in characteristically lively discussion, they would frequently launch into vigorous argument with their groupmates regarding behaviour which contradicted their claimed views, or vice versa. For example, the hypocrisy of those in the group who complained of litter but also dropped it themselves, or who said they loved animals but were not vegetarian, was criticised in a manner which was not without humour, but was nevertheless robust. Entirely at the children's own instigation, their 'practice' video in the very first week became almost an impromptu court on behalf of the environment, with individuals hauled up to account for the difference between their stated beliefs and actual behaviour. For example, here Izoduwa was clearly finding Charlotte's responses unsatisfactory:

*Izoduwa:* So how do you feel about pollution then, about litter and everything?

*Charlotte:* Erm...

*Izoduwa:* So you don't care much about the environment then?

*Charlotte:* Yeah, it's just...

*Izoduwa:* I don't understand what you're going to do to try and help.

*Charlotte:* I've already told you.

*Izoduwa:* No, you said you were going to stop using paper, you're gonna *try* and stop using paper, you didn't say whether you were going to stop.

*Charlotte:* It's like giving up chocolate, it's very hard.

Soon more of the group joined in with each 'interview', and debate became even more heated, as in this extract from an extended session where Martyn was put on the spot:

*Chris:* Do you pick up litter?

*Martyn:* Yeah.

*Izoduwa:* Oh yeah, so how come there's still litter in that area then?

*Martyn:* Because you can't go round picking up all—

*Izoduwa:* So you're saying every single night you pick up litter?

*Martyn (slightly bemused by the onslaught):* Naw...

*Izoduwa:* Exactly. So you don't do anything for—

*Charlotte:* He didn't say that though.

*Izoduwa:* No, he said he picks up litter.

*Charlotte:* He didn't say he picks it up every night though did he?

*Izoduwa:* But how come there's still litter then?

*Charlotte:* Well he can't pick up everything, can he?

*Laura:* There's litter every night put there, by someone walking past, so you must be picking it up every night, so that—

*Izoduwa:* How you going to stop those people putting litter on the floor?

*Martyn:* Don't know. I couldn't stop them.

*Izoduwa:* Could you not do a parade or something, like a sign? See, I don't think you're ever serious about this environment. I don't think you deserve to be in it.

*Laura:* Do you eat animals?

*Martyn:* Yeah.

*Izoduwa:* Exactly. You don't care much about the environment at all.

*Laura:* Do you recycle?

*Martyn:* A bit, yeah.

*Laura:* Don't lie to me!!

*[Continues for a few more seconds, until Martyn is booed off camera].*

The children were clearly not interested in having a 'cosy' debate, nor even in being particularly nice to each other. Whilst some of these arguments were, to a certain extent, banter amongst friends, those being grilled did appear somewhat uncomfortable, and environmental justice was – temporarily at least – seemingly put above respect for individual feelings. This is illustrated again in one further example:

*Laura:* Do you care about the animals?

*Claire:* Yeah.

*Laura:* Why do you eat them then?

*[Claire laughs uncertainly]*

*Laura:* Perfectly good question.

*Izoduwa:* Are you nervous?

*[Edgy interview continues...]*

The group were able to name a large number of environmental problems, and generally seemed to understand the more complex processes causing acid rain, and the depletion of the ozone layer. Their answers were perhaps the most sophisticated of all the groups; for example, they noted (with no prompting) that acid rain could in turn harm animals who eat affected plants, could kill fish and other life in rivers, and that the damage done to trees would be bad not only in itself, but also for the animals that live in them. Izoduwa, a Black girl noted for her articulacy, added the Third World to the list as a place with problems. Her sister had taught her African history, and she was familiar with the history of

slavery. Izoduwa commented that Britain had left Africa poor, with and after the slave trade, and so should help the countries there now.

Apart from one boy, Chris, the group said that they were bothered about such environmental problems, although a couple said that they were more honestly only concerned 'sometimes'. Chris's lack of concern seemed linked to his image (and self-image) as a disobedient male pupil, and indeed this was made explicit in this interview on video:

*Alan:* Do you think where you live is, um, a tidy place?

*Chris:* Er, quite tidy, about one third, no two thirds tidy.

*Alan:* Two thirds tidy?

*Chris:* Yeah, so like, it could be more better, but it's quite good.

*Alan:* It could be more better but you don't bother to tidy it up?

*Chris:* No, because I can't.

*Alan:* You can't?

*Chris:* Because I'm harder. Because when you're hard, you can't.

*Alan:* What kind of things would you like to do to help the environment?

*Chris:* Nothing. Drop litter.

The direct connection between environmentalism and a concern for nature and others was clearly too much for Chris's notion of his own masculinity – being 'hard' – to allow. Nevertheless, as the completed video shows, even he could occasionally be heard to express appreciation of a clean environment.

## Summary

Most of this group both started and finished the project with quite strong pro-environmental views, making any potential changes difficult to spot. However, the children seemed to enjoy having the opportunity to make links between their views and the local area, and to examine inconsistencies between their groupmates' professed beliefs and actual behaviour. The class teacher believed them to be a middle-ability group, albeit ones who might be expected to have something to say for themselves, one way or the other. She was consequently impressed by the quality of their video work, and indeed was surprised to hear of specific pupils doing particularly well – producing interesting arguments or novel ideas – when their written work was generally of a lower standard.

The children's view of their local area did not seem to change substantially. In the first week it was said to be a mix of good and bad aspects, and the video made over subsequent weeks reinforced this thesis, although the group did rate

the local park highly. The video project clearly got the children thinking, however, and challenging each other's behaviour in a surprisingly forceful but certainly pro-environmental way.

## 9. Video project analyses and outcomes

This chapter explores the video projects through three types of analysis. Firstly, various aspects of the project experience are discussed in a collection of notes covering the positioning of children in relation to the environment in texts produced by others (adults) and themselves, the 'reading' of broadcast television texts, the 'writing' of video texts, and issues of race and gender. Secondly, a theme analysis of the videos is used to identify elements and conflicts common to all or most of the productions. Finally, a narrative analysis examines the videos in terms of the arguments or stories about the environment which the children constructed, as well as considering the environmental themes and perspectives which the children did *not* include.

### Analysis A: Notes on the project experience

#### Children's relationship to the environment

Reviewing recent sociological studies of the previously rather underresearched and undertheorised area of childhood, Brannen & O'Brien (1995) discuss some emergent themes relating to the condition and status of children today. They note how several studies suggest that children are simultaneously exposed to conflicting social processes. A growing *institutionalisation* of childhood means that children are compartmentalised into a different sphere both physically – in day care, school, and after-school care – as well as symbolically, with specific clothing, merchandise and media aimed at them. At the same time, as education takes up an increasing number of years for many young people, and parental expenditure on children grows for that and other reasons, the process of *familialisation* can increase children's dependency. Thirdly, however, children face a process of *individualisation*, which emphasises the rights, responsibilities and autonomy of the individual child. This process may appear somewhat at odds with those which locate children within institutions, mainstream-promoted subcultures, and families, but at the same time it is – in part at least – a product of them. Children are in a sense, then, increasingly identified as part of a specific and different group, whilst simultaneously being expected to perform as self-directed adults.

Children's role in relation to the environment is particularly strained between these conflicting themes, with environmental campaigns aimed at children

promoting a range of standards which adults themselves, as a group, have failed to maintain. Children are expected to act in a sensible – what we would otherwise call ‘adult’ or ‘grown-up’ – manner towards the environment, whilst being told that it is the adults and grown-ups who have brought about very serious ecological problems. Children are therefore being called upon, by adults, to grow up to be *unlike* the example set by present incumbents of that role. Similarly, the power of the individual is celebrated through the promotion of ‘green’ consumer choices, letter-writing and participation in appeals (– ‘You can make a difference!’ –), but environmental damage is inevitably revealed to be a product of the overwhelming power of industries and institutions. The individual’s duty and supposed capacity to bring about change is venerated, but news programmes – although they do not dwell on the point – inevitably draw attention to the seemingly invulnerable dominance of powerful corporations and authorities, and their ability to ignore or subdue ecological concerns. The individual child is thus required to save a society which has not, apparently, previously bothered to look after itself: a rather confusing scenario, one might expect, to have to explain to anyone.

The children in the video project did indeed seem to have some difficulty with *why* the environmental situation had managed to get as bad as they were often being told (and believed) it was. The construction of children as a somewhat different cultural group, however, seemed to have greatest potency here as the only way that children were able to see a way through what would otherwise be a conceptual roadblock: with adults and children being conceived as separate, different groups, children are able to see adults as the failed and foolish group who they, in time, will supersede. If children were seen as simply humans on a continuum which would bring them into adulthood, of course, there would be less scope for the optimism which can be produced where children are allowed to feel that adults are in some way a different, and less environmentally competent, species.

In each of the videos produced in this study there appears some element of criticism of adult behaviour, and the suggestion that the children would and can do better. At Royal Park the Council’s failure to maintain a field as a park which would benefit the local area was criticised, whilst at Blenheim the children asserted themselves even more by ‘taking on’ the Council by writing letters. They also saw the video as a useful resource to show to adults as part of their campaign to get some nearby waste ground put to better and more attractive use. All of the groups included appeals, poems or comments which implicitly positioned children as the ecosphere’s guardians who must appeal to adults to

improve their environmentally-related behaviour. The Council, authorities more broadly, and people in general, were criticised and advised in each of the videos in a way which reflected and reinforced the construction of young people as defenders of the planet – one which is at least more convincing when coming from children themselves, rather than broadcast television personalities.

### Reading the television texts

In a relatively diluted sense, the children could be seen to be producing ‘dominant’, ‘negotiated’ and ‘oppositional’ readings of the environmental TV programmes of which they spoke. These categories of reading are, of course, those suggested by Stuart Hall (1973) and utilised by David Morley (1980) in their groundbreaking work which challenged the basic implication of ‘Screen theory’ that receivers of the mass media were really only able to be subjected to the singular ideological message contained therein. (See Moores, 1993, for a lucid discussion of this debate). Naturally, several of the children I worked with, particularly in the younger groups, relayed information which they had seen on television, and seemed to accept the material as both true and important. Others seemed to allow themselves some behavioural leeway in terms of their own impact on the environment, however, putting their reading more into the sphere of ‘negotiated’ interpretation, accepting parts of the message, but not all. Some of the children took more oppositional approaches to programmes such as *Blue Peter*, which they clearly felt to be patronising, telling them what to do in a way which was seen as little different from being at school itself. In this context, television entertainment was not only that which was watched outside of the school environment, but was clearly expected to present alternative perspectives – or at the very least, to do things in a different style. For a number of these children, if the environmental messages were to be encountered at all, they might be believed, but would also be resented.

More likely still is that these latter encounters would fall into the ‘fourth’ category, only peripherally acknowledged at first by Morley (see Moores, 1993, p. 21, p. 29), of those who did not connect with a programme at all, and so barely began to form any interpretation. The parallel in Morley’s study of readings of the 1970s news magazine programme ‘*Nationwide*’ would be the group of Black further-education students who identified so little with the programme’s implicit values that their approach was not to construct an oppositional (or any other) reading, but rather to simply switch off. In the present study, this attitude was taken by a few of the older and more anti-school boys, who associated issues such as ‘the environment’ too closely with education

and its institutions for them to have any wish to engage with such material in their home leisure time.

### Writing the video texts

The writing of paper-and-pen texts in schools has been observed to occupy the dual role of learning the techniques of writing, and also of self-discovery – learning about oneself and the world through textual production (Gilbert, 1989). The child writers are encouraged to learn to communicate clearly, and also to develop a ‘personal style’ – requirements which can conflict, as pupils are aware that work is admired for spontaneity and the unexpected, but also that it must meet certain requirements (*ibid*, p. 166–167), with children at all levels of schooling in Britain now expected to meet specific prescribed standards. The production of the environmental videos was a process which, perhaps surprisingly, was not centrally focused on technique and the technicalities of production, and would be better characterised as one of discovery – albeit about the world, rather than the self. In this, it would seem to differ from school written work, which Pam Gilbert’s survey of research suggests – in secondary schools at least – is far from being the personal, liberating experience celebrated by English educationalists:

‘Studies which interview students overwhelmingly indicate that students consider school writing tasks uninteresting and teacher-directed... Students connect school writing with spelling, grammar, neatness, set length essays, and “being correct” – not with the general liberating concept of writing as self-expression espoused in popular practitioner guides’ (pp. 167–168).

In contrast, video production was entered into with enthusiasm, and the results regarded with considerable satisfaction. Whilst some media education specialists have suggested that making videos in class could ultimately be depressing for children, when their work is unable to match up to the high production standards of broadcast television (Craggs, 1992), this was not the case in the present study, nor in other projects which have found video work to be valuable and rewarding for children (see chapter seven). The children were not apparently inhibited by any expectations about a required standard, and signally did not enquire how their technique could imitate that of professionals.

At the same time, the process of video production involves the kind of textual production proposed by those educationalists who are opposed to the traditional, mythological approach to writing in schools. By the near-necessity of shooting material out of sequence and in bits, with the awareness that the material can be re-edited and restructured later, children’s attention is automatically drawn to the

constructedness of the text. This mirrors the approach to writing favoured by Gilbert:

‘A classroom concerned with textuality and intertextuality focuses on the way in which texts are constructed and readings are produced. In such a classroom the making of a text becomes important... The work of text construction becomes the classroom focus and the myths of authorship and creative inspiration are more critically considered’ (1989, p. 170).

However, although video *production* inevitably emphasises its selected, interpretive origins, the *content* of the children’s environmental videos was similar to most television counterparts in its framing as a ‘window on the world’. In Roland Barthes’ (1974) distinction between ‘writerly’ and ‘readerly’ texts, these are ‘readerly’ texts, which naturalise the process of their construction, ‘making them seem inevitable and therefore truthful’ (Moss, 1989, p. 82). Most non-fictional television works in this way, relying on the audience’s assumption that a camera crew ‘just happened’ to be passing to record any event. The organisation, co-ordination and cajoling required to bring about some action or utterance before the camera lens is generally invisible to the viewer, particularly in ‘serious’ television, where the audience is rarely given information about the circumstances in which an interviewee was found to give an account of a particular subject, or an official is led to say something ‘surprising’, or how cameras happened to be present to record a supposedly rare event.

Television texts accordingly tend to only be ‘writerly’ – making explicit the nature and circumstances of their recording – in lighthearted circumstances or for comic effect. (Of course, the audience are not necessarily taken in by the ingratiating ‘readerly’ text, for as John Corner & Kay Richardson (1986) have noted, viewers can make a ‘transparent’ reading, which accepts the ‘window on the world’ model, or can make a ‘mediation’ reading, which carries an awareness that the text is constructed by programme-makers with particular intentions). In general, the children’s videos mirrored this; whilst there were some humorous ‘writerly’ moments – notably the jumping into frame and cheerful address to ‘cameragirl’ in the Beckett Park video – most of the style was naturalistic, and presented as the bringing of information to the audience. Indeed, those speaking to camera frequently adopted an earnest and didactic (or sometimes hectoring) tone, a mode of address which they did not have the opportunity to use elsewhere. Most of the time, the children were direct and emphatically ‘readerly’ in their delivery, with a style resembling an emotive, first-person version of television news – the epitome of smooth, invisibly constructed presentation.

The difference in styles for video making compared to school writing meant that the children had the opportunity to relate messages in a different way, with the challenge of constructing a 'story' on the screen as well as in words. This was an alternative experience for all, and carried obvious advantages for those of lower written ability; it can also circumvent some of the problems encountered by non-white children in English schools, as discussed in the following section.

### **'Race' issues**

Watching their video, for most of the groups in this study, meant seeing more Black and Asian faces on a television screen than they otherwise would, most of the time. Almost all the children seemed to enjoy seeing themselves on screen, of course, but (as we shall see below) for some of the non-white children this seemed to be a particularly fine opportunity for personal expression.

The 'direct' communication of video gives the opportunity to redress problems of representation not only in the general sense, as compared to the typical content of the British mass media, but more particularly those imbalances which may be created directly for the children concerned in other areas of school work. For example, in Gemma Moss's (1989) study of stories written by children for secondary school English lessons (in particular the romantic fiction produced by girls), one of the case studies involves a Black girl who would like to write in patois, but is reprimanded for doing so by most of the teachers. She feels that she is not being allowed to express herself in her preferred and natural way, nor realistically portray the speech of her community; her culture is being denied. As the girl explains:

“I just know that if I start writing patois on a piece of paper, one of the teachers will come up to me and say 'What does this mean, what does that mean?' [. . .] I suppose it's normal 'cos they don't understand it, but I can't write patois in English because it's not patois.” (p. 72).

Since patois was seen by the teachers as incorrect use of English, and it could not be made to conform to the required style without losing its flavour – the very reason for its inclusion, as Moss notes (p. 73) – explicitly Black characters were thereafter not included in this girl's work.

Video work therefore offers non-white children an opportunity to create a text involving themselves and their culture which is more likely to side-step teachers' concerns about linguistic 'correctness', and which can record forms of expression directly, without there being a need to have them written as words on a page. Thus children who have limited abilities in written English become able

to demonstrate their creativity and intelligence, as can those whose forms of communication differ from the schools norm of 'standard' written English.

A good example is the video footage of Mariam talking (see 'Making the Little London video' in the previous chapter). In answer to one short question, the seven-year old talks for over one and a half minutes, with many arm gestures and emphases. To the inattentive or impatient observer she could appear to be a girl just 'chuntering on' in a rather vague way; but when one transcribes what she is saying and examines the paragraph which she has spontaneously produced, one finds it contains several ideas about the environment as something which is all around us, and about what one can do with a video camera to document it. The quality of these thoughts would not be something Mariam could have expressed in writing.

In a parallel example, Izoduwa at Beckett Park school (see previous chapter) was able to demonstrate her quick-thinking ability to analyse the claims of others and question any perceived inconsistencies. Whilst occasionally being deliberately argumentative, Izoduwa was able to use the on-the-spot immediacy of video to her own advantage, since she clearly had the ability to pursue an argument at a swift and indeed exhilarating rate which sometimes left the others behind. This meant that she was able to produce work which perhaps exceeded the quality of her written productions, which of course require patience – in addition to the other writing skills – more than the ability to think swiftly.

The children were also able to contribute their own concerns to the video. Examples of this include Deneika bringing her interest in Africa and statement on racism into the Little London video, and Izoduwa gaining the opportunity to talk about her interest in the history of slavery, during the Beckett Park production. The opportunity to deliver into a recorded medium some thoughts on subjects close to their hearts, seemed to be attractive and valuable to these children.

On a broader scale, and most probably to a limited extent which should not be exaggerated, the video-making process may have contributed to the sense of community-feeling which children had for their area, a function which some previous video activities in schools had been found to have (Gauntlett, 1995b). The videos in the present study, however, celebrated the community in a more tacit sense, and those elements which directly referred to it – such as Imran at Brudenell agreeing that he likes his community 'very much', and noting that 'lots of different people' live in the area – were infrequent, and only suggest value in the local mix of cultures by implication. Nevertheless, the generally positive view of each area supplied by the videos may have led, in some small sense, to a

greater appreciation of the variety of people and faces who make up that community.

## **Gender**

The division of labour between female and male pupils during the making of the videos was generally amicable and, when all groups are considered together, must be described as reasonably even-handed, since patterns which appeared at one school were reversed at another. In the middle-class and older group at Weetwood, for example, girls had most confidence in front of the camera, whilst the boys preferred to film, a pattern which also appeared with the youngest, working-class group at Little London. At Royal Park, the girls were most shy of both roles, whilst at Beckett Park it was the boys who were generally most reluctant to appear on camera. As a rule, however, the girls lacked no confidence in either role, whilst boys, if anything, had to be persuaded to appear on camera. This pattern was most pronounced at Weetwood, where the boys sought to assume 'professional' off-camera roles such as 'cameraman'.

Interest in or concern for the environment was not perceived by the children as gender-specific – with the singular exception of Chris at Beckett Park who, as described in the previous chapter, was expressly indifferent to the subject due to his macho self-image. Otherwise, 'green' concerns were distributed more evenly than gender stereotypes might lead us to expect, and were not subject to criticism or attack. For example, when Yassar at Royal Park declared that he wanted to show flowers in the video, because 'I like them', he encountered no voices of dissent or derision; and both the boys and girls at Burley – despite being rather competitive and image-conscious in other interpersonal matters – were able to agree that flowers in parks are good. In addition, it should be noted that there was little evidence that interest in the subject was subdivided into stereotypically gendered concerns, such as if boys were more exercised by the scientific explanation of ecological problems whilst girls were affected by images of nature. Rather, interests in either, or more commonly both of these spheres, where found at all, were balanced between the sexes.

## **Analysis B: Theme analysis**

A more systematic approach to the video material produced by the children involves theme analysis, a procedure intended to reveal a set of common concerns. The pursuit of cultural themes is a familiar component of ethnography and anthropology, and involves the discovery within a culture or subculture of

widely-held and approved assumptions or beliefs, whether implicit or explicit, which may restrict or stimulate behaviour (Spradley, 1979). In this case, our concern is rather more limited to identifying those environmentally-related aspects of these upper-primary children’s culture that are sufficiently common for them to be represented in videos made by different children in different schools.

Some common aspects are obvious, such as the concern about litter expressed in all of the videos, but a theme analysis also reveals *conflicts* which were common to the productions, as well as elements which are of interest since they seem to be of greater concern to the children than we would expect them to be to most adults. Tables 9.1 and 9.2 summarise these elements and conflicts, respectively, which are then discussed in greater detail below.

<b>Table 9.1: Ten common elements</b>
Appreciation of the locality
Environmental responsibility
The Council’s responsibility
Litter & pollution
Traffic
Parks, and the city
Trees
Community
Play
Audience-oriented performance & entertainment

<b>Table 9.2: Two central conflicts</b>	
<b>A . . . versus:</b>	<b>B</b>
Being environmentally responsible	Having an easy time
Children's own responsibility to change things and improve the environment	<i>Adult's</i> responsibility to change things and improve the environment

## The elements

### Appreciation of the locality

Whilst some of the pupils may have felt it was the video-maker's 'duty' to make a 'balanced' assessment of their environment, weighing up the pros and cons, an appreciation of their local areas shone through. Indeed, rather than the presentations consisting of a list of good things alongside a list of bad things, the line adopted in all of the videos can be expressed as 'We like our area (or parts of it) – although it is let down by certain aspects'. This stance appeared with such commonality that it can be seen as the *defining theme* of the videos when taken together, with the remaining themes appearing within the structure circumscribed by this prevailing thesis.

Whilst being critical is often easier, funnier, and – advantageous for many of the boys – 'tougher' in appearance, none of the children in the sample wanted to condemn their whole area absolutely: it was always, at least, 'alright'. Having criticised their nearby field, the Royal Park pupils were keen to emphasise the advantages of the superior park up the road; and the Brudenell and Beckett Park videos are warm evocations of a 'place we live', where the negative aspects are seen, as in most cases, as avoidable. The other videos noted otherwise nice parts of their areas being spoilt, often by litter or vandalism, and in Burley, a location which seemed to hold one of the lowest levels of physical attraction for its resident children, the pupils when interviewing each other nevertheless revealed a quite strong attachment to the place where they had grown up, and where their (often extended) families lived. The children at Weetwood, a more scenic suburb, to some extent 'discovered' a less agreeable underside to an area which they had always found pleasant, and Fiona's statement of what she had learnt at the end of

the project expresses this defining theme: 'I learnt that the environment round us *can* be nice, but the problem is sometimes you find there's pollution as well'.

### **Environmental responsibility**

Flaws and problems in the local environment were rarely seen as just 'the way things are'; the children's forceful sense of environmental responsibility – their own, and, often rather more emphatically, that of others – was a strong theme throughout the video productions. Messages such as 'Save the environment now, it's up to you' (Burley) put environmental fate into people's hands in a rather optimistic way, whilst other comments such as Vinesh's forlorn 'Why are they doing this to our world?' (Brudenell) identify people as the relevant agents in rather less happy terms. Sometimes the blame would fall close to home, such as when Charlotte at Blenheim told the video audience that litter is 'all because of people like *you*'; and this culpability was felt even more emphatically at Beckett Park, where the pupils directly accused each other, on camera, of contributing to the very problem that they were purporting to be concerned about.

In addition, the children's sense of environmental responsibility was reflected in the uses to which they felt their completed video could be put, characterised by Hannah at Weetwood as being 'to show other people what they can do, and what is actually happening to their environment'. Whilst of course the children were making their videos because it was good fun and because they had been invited to, this sense of the end product having a message worth conveying was evident, to varying degrees, in each of the groups.

In some cases, the need for responsibility blended into more authoritarian ideas. The litter problem, for example, brought calls for fines from Chabu at Blenheim school, and for a police clampdown from Aaron at Burley. In general, though, local environmental problems were seen as a collective predicament which should ideally be solved by more responsible behaviour from the whole community.

### **The Council's responsibility**

Whilst the community would ideally be expected to treat their environment more considerately, for some of the groups it was quite clear who should be resolving problems and cleaning up the area until such a time: 'the council', Leeds City Council. The two youngest groups did not declare much of an awareness of the Council's potential role (although Vicky at Little London gave thanks to its

invisible hand – ‘I don’t know who planted these trees, but they’re very good to plant them’), and the middle-class children at Weetwood seemed to tacitly hold a more privatised view of such responsibilities. For the older working-class groups, however, the Council was a salient if rather impotent force, which was charged with responsibilities such as cleaning up waste ground (Royal Park, Blenheim), and clearing litter from streets and parks (Burley, Beckett Park). Its failure to fulfil these duties prompted as much bitterness, for some, as that directed towards those who produced the messes in the first place.

### **Litter & pollution, and traffic**

Pollution in its many forms, most particularly as litter, was the environmental problem of greatest practical, local concern to the children in this study, and was a strong element in all of the videos produced. This reflects the findings of a 1993 MORI poll which found that litter was the most important local environmental issue for children aged eight to twelve (*Social Trends*, 1995, p. 188). The amount of litter was central to how much a location was appreciated, its presence producing expressions of disgust (such as in the field at Royal Park, the village green at Burley, the streets around Weetwood, or in the school grounds of Little London or Blenheim), whilst its absence in the better parks was noted with appreciation.

Pollution from noxious substances was also not only a concern, but something which most of the groups found visible evidence of to show to camera. Children in all of the groups drew attention to large amounts of traffic which were seen to be producing pollution, as well as being a safety hazard – traffic thus qualifying as a distinct common theme in the videos – but this was not the only example. The pupils from Burley were all too aware of the contamination of their local canal, whilst the warning signs in Weetwood’s nearby park concerning the presence of raw sewage in the otherwise attractive streams prompted some alarm, as well as making good footage. Concern about needles discarded by drug users was also expressed in two of the groups. Additional resources were deployed to show what might otherwise be a difficult subject to film, such as books (Little London), and a frieze about acid rain (Weetwood).

### **Parks, and the city**

The enthusiasm for parks demonstrated by children in this study suggests that such verdant public spaces may be of greater importance to young people than they are to the general adult population. Every group that could get to a park

eagerly filmed there at some length (Royal Park, Burley St. Matthias, Weetwood, Beckett Park); those which could not leave the school grounds nevertheless spoke of nearby parks (Little London, Blenheim), and the remaining group discussed the loss of a major park which had since been built over (Brudenell). The four groups who were able to film a park described their park's merits in unparalleled detail, through comments, interviews and admiring footage. Royal Park's video is particularly centred around the comparison between a park that the children all enjoy, and a field which they feel is a missed opportunity for development as another park.

All of the groups suggested local parks as important places to be filmed almost instantaneously, and were not prompted with leading enquiries. This response seems likely to exceed the value which most working adults might think to place on public parks, although perhaps these areas become more important again for those unemployed or retired. The children seemed to value their parks not only as places to play, but also as pleasant and quiet areas for relaxation and general enjoyment of the environment.

The prominence of parks in the videos is also a key to the 'unspoken' theme of the *city*, which is hidden within each of the productions. The city is wholly taken for granted, but is present inevitably in and around each film, and at times quite literally looming over the actual shots, with heavy traffic, dilapidated housing and tower blocks appearing in most of the videos. Nevertheless, these rather fundamental environmental ingredients go largely unremarked: at Little London, for example, where the school is most obviously dwarfed by multiple ageing residential blocks, as well as the giant cylinders of a gas works, the children's focus was instead on the trees and green areas around the school.

Parks are appreciated, then, partly as a respite from the city. Colin Ward (1994) notes the generally unremarked trend by which children's freedom of mobility in the city is becoming gradually eroded due to parents' growing concerns about safety, with research suggesting, for example, that the number of children allowed to cross roads on their own has fallen from three-quarters in 1971, to just half in 1990 (p. 151). Ward suggests that 'if we are attempting to evaluate the opportunities for childhoods in late twentieth-century Britain, we are bound to conclude that something precious has been lost in the range of environmental experiences open to children' (p. 152). Whilst the 'outdoor child' was regarded positively as recently as a couple of decades ago, today that characterisation is more likely to conjure thoughts of a troublesome delinquent; whereas the 'indoor child', taking advantage of the same consumer home comforts as adults, is at least a known quantity. With such pressures growing from concerned parents and

teachers, the park may have become one of the few outdoor places where children may legitimately pass the time.

## **Trees**

Whilst cosmetically similar to the appreciation of parks, trees form a separate common element since each one of the video productions included mention of trees as an appealing aspect of the environment. Almost all sections describing the appeal of an area such as school grounds or a park drew attention to the trees – Celie in the Little London video even gives one a loving embrace – and they are clearly an environmental feature which is actively valued.

## **Community**

The theme of community appeared in the videos both as a latently valued presence and – perhaps more strongly – as a regretted absence. Local facilities, particularly parks, were noted as an asset for everyone in their areas, and some of the videos – most notably that set in the Asian community and shopping area around Brudenell school – affirm (and, it must be said, in a sense *construct*) a positive picture of life in the district. In a greater number of cases, however, some community responsibility was perceived more as a *need* than as something already present. Laura’s suggestion in the Beckett Park video, for example, that ‘people who live round here should do, like, a meeting or something, and pick [all the litter] up’, is something which she is aware is not likely to happen. At least the possibility of community action is considered here, though, whereas in Weetwood’s middle-class suburb, as noted above in regard to expectations of the Council, the notion of collective or social action seemed weakest of all.

## **Play**

A more lightweight but nevertheless clearly an important theme to the children, play appeared wherever possible in most of the videos. One of the key assets of local parks was evidently the play opportunities which they afforded, for all of the children in the 7–11 age range sampled here, and they were quick to demonstrate these facilities for the camera. Play was also seen as important for others, as reflected in the ‘activities’ planned by the Blenheim children for the hypothetical, mostly adult residents of the community centre which they suggest could be built on the neighbouring waste ground site.

## **Audience-oriented performance & entertainment**

Finally, a theme of what is perhaps best described by the word ‘showmanship’ prevails in all of the videos. The youngest group of all, at Little London, launched from the first week onwards into spontaneous, energetic singing and dancing routines in any spare moments, which they never tired of viewing later. Like the other groups, they also – without any instruction – addressed the imaginary viewer directly through the camera, introducing themselves, asking hypothetical questions of the audience, raising warning fingers and making gestures, producing materials to show to the camera, and presenting information whilst performing in a visually interesting manner. Those in front of the camera often led the video operator from one point to another, a stylish example being the following of Chabu from his classroom to the Blenheim school office, where he telephoned the Council. The Blenheim children also produced a song, with instrumentation, for use in their video, whilst Burley, Brudenell and Weetwood pupils recorded interviews with local people to add another perspective to their productions. It was the desire to video interesting material which led the Weetwood pupils to ask a man using boomerangs in the park if they could question and film him, which also provided the opportunity for them to try out the unusual playthings.

All of the groups experimented (of their own accord) with shots which moved from one place *to* the presenter, or static shots into which the presenter would step or jump – small details, but adding some visual interest. As should be clear from these examples, and the video descriptions in the previous chapter, the children’s approach to video-making was imaginative both in terms of content *and* presentation. The age of pupils did not seem to be correlated with this theme.

## **The conflicts**

### **Being environmentally responsible, versus having an easy time**

Whilst the children did not, on the whole, associate environmental concern with having a *bad* time, there were some obvious conflicts between the impulse towards lazy enjoyment of life, and a more responsible attitude. This conflict is related to the more general tension between individual self-interest and the collective good, which can be seen to underlie many social choices. Tendencies

towards one or the other have been related to pro-environmental behaviour (Karp, 1996).

The most obvious example for the children in this study involved litter: the desire to simply drop it, versus the 'chore' of finding a bin or taking it home. The children did not expressly complain about the 'effort' of being environmentally faithful, and indeed the negligence of those who drop litter was frequently lambasted. However, the children did in most cases admit that they had dropped litter sometimes, or had done so in the past, and the more honest discussions or arguments between the children tended to reveal that they – like most people, no doubt – were not one hundred per cent environmentally friendly at all times. In short, they could not always be bothered. This did, however, seem to cause them some embarrassment in front of each other, and so represents a seam of internal conflict running throughout the video productions.

On a broader scale, active environmentalism presented other conflicts as to use of time. The children would suggest things to be done – such as local people getting organised to improve the area and tidy the streets – but seemed more inclined to spend any substantial portions of their own time in the traditional childhood activities of leisure and play. Such inclinations are not unreasonable, of course, particularly as children are generally brought up to expect adults to perform the 'responsible' activities. Nevertheless, the conflict lurks within the videos, and is a clue, perhaps, to a wider perception – that it's a problem, but it's someone else's problem – which means that the environment is rarely ever improved by children *or* adults.

### **Children's own environmental responsibility, versus that of adults**

A related conflict is that between knowing that it is the role of adults to be responsible, as noted above, whilst also being aware that adults have not been the environment's best friend so far, from the children's point of view, so that there is a need for young people to take on the task instead. Apart from basic decent behaviour towards the environment, the children perceived their other main role as a campaigning one; whilst local physical changes were left to adult authorities, the children did seem to believe they had *some* degree of power in changing attitudes or providing information.

There was a degree of confusion, however. Childhood is, after all, socially constructed as a period of dependency, with no need to worry about responsibilities (Morrow, 1994), and the children here knew for a fact that they were powerless in the face of any problem which was not small and local.

Questions they asked each other along the lines of 'What are you going to do about these environmental problems?', encountered some difficulty when the basic answer was 'I'd like to do something, but I'm not old enough'. The clash between children being called upon to save the planet, by television programmes and other sources, whilst also being fundamentally powerless, as noted earlier in this chapter, led to difficulties. As with the previous conflict, the children 'coped' with this problem, worked around it, but it nevertheless appears at times in each of the videos as a rather inescapable quandary.

### **Summary of theme analysis**

Within the framework of an appreciation of their locality, despite its defects, the children emphasised the responsibility of individuals to look after the area and not contribute to its environmental problems. Given the problems which were found to exist – chiefly centred around pollution, litter and traffic – it was felt that people in the community, as well as the Council in some cases, should work together to clear these up. The unlikelihood of this happening caused dismay. Public parks were frequently celebrated for their combination of appealing, restful scenery and play opportunities, and the children seemed to value parks more than other sectors of the community, although their value to all was emphasised by the video-makers. The videos were made with some panache, and even the youngest children seemed well aware of the hypothetical audience for whom they prepared stimulating and entertaining audio/visual presentations.

It is notable that the kinds of environmental problems focused upon in the videos – litter and some pollution – are generally 'old-fashioned' in the sense that they do not reflect the media attention given since the late 1980's to issues such as global warming, the ozone layer, acid rain, the rainforests and so on. This seems, however, to be due to the obvious reason that these are problems which are global, or apparent only elsewhere, and so could not be easily filmed – although it must be admitted that the children *could* have illustrated them with models and illustrations, but did not generally seem to think of doing such work. Being unleashed around and about the school with a video camera had led to more 'modern' environmental concerns falling, to an extent, by the wayside, although the interviews showed that the children were usually aware of them.

The two primary conflicts identified in the videos were both centred around responsibilities. The children had been able to reconcile liking their areas whilst also recognising the defects and problems which could be found there, so this did not present a conflict, but environmentalism comes hand-in-hand with a need

to do and change things, and naturally this need struggles against others. Children both wanted to take things easy, and leave responsibilities to adults, whilst also often quite strongly wanting to help the environment in any way they could. At the same time, they knew that they were largely powerless in the face of the bigger environmental picture. These conflicts are identifiable in each of the seven videos produced, but – by their nature – are not resolved.

## **Analysis C: Inside the narrative**

### **Constructing a form of narrative analysis**

There is no formal consensus on a singular method of narrative analysis, whether amongst handbooks or in research practice. The meaning of the term shifts in one work and another, and the ‘analysis of narratives’ blurs with ‘narrative analysis’. The integrated interpretation which I have produced for use in this study draws upon a number of sources – which are deployed as required, in ways which are not *necessarily* those intended by their original authors – and which are presented briefly here.

Firstly we need to address the question of what there is of interest in ‘narratives’: what can they tell us, beyond their obvious information content? James Deese (1983) notes that narratives are ‘accounts of events from a very human point of view’, and that ‘every narrative is realized in only one particular way out of the countless ways it might have been realized’ (p. xiii). Obviously, one aim of an analysis would therefore be to identify the reasoning behind the particular ‘take’ on the subject which the narrator has chosen – consciously or unconsciously – to use. Deese goes on to observe that ‘Narratives... structure events into episodes of goal-directed responses and internal reactions [... and] are often designed to illustrate a moral or morals’ (p. xv). Similarly, Hayes & Flower (1983) argue that the act of writing is goal-directed, providing logic and coherence to the process of narrative production ‘even when writers perceive their own experience as chaotic and unpredictable’ (p. 210). Indeed, the act of producing a narrative can trigger insights which lead to the discovery of substantial new goals for the work. Emotions and motives can be expected to be reflected in narratives, then, as well as their very telling being performed for a particular purpose. As well as the manifest content, narratives ‘also convey the subjective reactions of the narrator towards the tale as well as his or her feelings and attitudes about the persons to whom the narrative is addressed’ (Deese, 1983, p. xv). A range of latent information is available, behind the ‘surface’ of

the narrative, which can carry meaningful supplementary or even contradictory information to its audience.

Literary theories suggest similar if sometimes rather more overwrought ways of approaching narrative. Daniel Chamberlain's (1990) thesis on narrative perspective in fiction posits three dimensions central to its understanding: that of the narrative voice, that of the narrative world, and that of the reader's perspective. Each of these is affected on the one hand by language and perception mediated by discourse, and on the other by the medium through which the narrative is delivered. Leaving aside unconventional *readings*, as we did in the previous chapter, then, this would suggest that we should focus on both the *voice* of the narrative and the conceptual *world* in which it is made, as they are produced by the translation of children's perceptions into discourse, and then delivered with pictures through video recording.

Chamberlain refers to the work of Gérard Genette, whose observation that narrative 'always says less than it knows, but it often makes known more than it says' (1980, p. 198), neatly summarises the arguments in favour of narrative analysis. Things 'being said' underneath the manifest narrative should be identified not so much as an exercise in 'textual' archaeology, but because those things are given off by the videos, consciously or not, in any case. For the purposes of this analysis, the systematic breaking down of the children's narratives into constituent components, and their protracted examination in that fragmented state, is of little value; it is open to debate whether such activity is ever particularly worthwhile. However, Genette has usefully identified five functions which he argues correspond to the narrative voice (pp. 255–257):

- |                                  |   |
|----------------------------------|---|
| (1) The 'narrative' function     | – the telling of the story.                     |
| (2) The 'directing' function     | – the internal organisation of the narrative.   |
| (3) The 'communication' function | – the addressing of an audience.                |
| (4) The 'testimonial' function   | – the speaker's attitude to the subject matter. |
| (5) The 'ideological' function   | – the didactic aspect of the commentary.        |

These functions systematise the array of information which narratives can convey, although each may be more or less present in different texts, or different parts of a text (p. 257). Distinguishing each of them in narrative segments could be of value in exposing their full meanings. The testimonial and ideological functions, in particular, are likely to be of interest in environmental narratives, since they will convey the children's approach to the environment, and show which aspects of the subject are selected as arguments to be communicated to a wider audience.

Before such an analysis is attempted, however, we should consider a sample study of children's narratives. Gunilla Halldén (1994) sought to explore school children's views of the family by asking pupils to write and illustrate narratives about their imagined future family, which were collected together in booklets. Halldén looked at aspects of the stories such as which characters made decisions, who was the central figure, who broke rules, and features of the texts such as the presence of a strong mother character (who was found to be the main character in the stories by girls, but was absent from those by boys). On a more subtle level, attention was also paid to occasions on which the term 'we' was used; for example,

'In the girls' narratives, the actions of the "we" are directed by an organizing main character. In the boys' narratives, "we" most often refers to a group in which the main character is a participant but less often the organiser' (p. 74).

From such rather specific findings, Halldén is able to develop broader themes. For example, the differential uses of 'we' suggest that whilst the girls felt the family sphere to be a place where they had power and were in control,

'The boys often describe themselves as living in a family where they have no control over situations that arise and where comic incidents and the infraction of rules bring to light the chaotic aspects of family life' (*ibid*).

Some of Halldén's conclusions are arguably too polarised in their treatment of gender, considering that her analysis is based upon the work of only one school class – with boys' and girls' narratives treated as though gender was the only category or difference worth considering, and consequently suggesting that 'boys' and 'girls' are otherwise wholly homogeneous groups. The work is nevertheless a valuable example of how narratives can be examined to tease out insights which otherwise may have remained unearthed.

Even more focused is Carolyn Steedman's book, *The Tidy House* (1982), which explores in depth a single narrative of that name, written by three eight-year-old girls in school. The story is centred around families and parenthood, and questions of whether and how to bring up children in a background of material deprivation. Steedman notes that the text shows that the children are 'active, thoughtful and frequently resentful' participants in the process of socialisation (p. 31):

'Treated... as evidence of socialisation in working-class, mid-twentieth century Britain, it becomes clear that "The Tidy House" was used by the children who wrote it in two central ways: their episodic drama of family life articulated certain values and norms for the children; but, more than this, the text served as a way of questioning those values and of questioning the future that they saw lay before them.'

The narrative analysis here involves a literary study of themes, as well as a sociological exploration of what the story reflects about these girls' perspectives and knowledge about the world – or, more particularly, female social life. For example, the children's images in the narrative were found to centre around the house, the heart, the nest, the baby and the mother, and these traditionally 'feminine' concerns were theirs but in some way were resisted for being so. The detailed study of the narrative reveals these underlying tensions, and the girls' attempts to negotiate them from an early age.

### **An attempted narrative analysis of the videos**

Due to the nature of the children's environmental videos, which were made up of short bits of speaking and other pictures, and usually edited together by the researcher rather than the children themselves, there is not a 'pure' full-length *child*-produced narrative available to analyse. However, the narrative elements other than the holistic 'shape' imposed by editing can be examined, and these may suggest some of the general attitudes and worldview of those individuals who created them. It should also be noted that a full narrative analysis would incorporate the identification of general themes and conflicts, as already discussed in Analysis B. These should be assumed to be included in this analysis, although to avoid repetition those findings are not listed again here.

First, the range of basic narratives were identified. Whilst the editing process tended to introduce some elements of structure, the videos generally had segments, or an overall structure, characterised by an obvious narrative which was consciously devised at (or prior to) the time of filming. At Royal Park school, the 'story' involved a comparison between a field which the children felt should have been turned into a nice park by the Council, and Hyde Park, which they felt to be an appealing example of such a park. The Blenheim video, as mentioned previously, was structured around a very distinctive four-part narrative, in which the children assessed their local environment, wrote to the Council about an aspect of it, considered the replies, and then proposed their own ideas. The videos made at Burley, Weetwood, Brudenell and Beckett Park had less conspicuously 'designed' structures, but were each filmed as a series of tours around the neighbourhood which the children saw as building up to make one long consideration of their area, aspects of which they talked about in their filmed interviews in the final week, to be edited into their group's narrative at the relevant places. The video made by the youngest children, at Little London, was not made with any particularly clear narrative, but it can be seen that the video as a whole is telling a story about the 'everywhereness' of the environment

– which is the view expressed by Mariam when she was asked about the film (prior to her seeing the edited version).

The videos were built upon one or more of four basic sub-narratives, therefore (see Table 9.3), all of which are characterised by the central narrative which can be expressed as ‘This is our environment’, in which the children show the video audience both positive and negative aspects of the area in which they live and work. The four sub-narratives are far from being mutually exclusive: indeed, all of the videos included some aspects of the critical tour, noted that the environment is all around us, compared parts with other parts, and suggested improvements.

**Table 9.3: Four basic narratives**

This is our environment – a critical tour
This is our environment – all around us
This is our environment – a comparison of two areas
This is our environment – and how we would improve it

**Table 9.4: Two dominant narrative themes<sup>107</sup>**

The world is in a bad state → we must try to improve it
Other people are spoiling the environment → they must stop

If the narratives are taken more in terms of *how the story was told* (Table 9.4), it can be noted that the children’s video narratives almost uniformly applied a tone of constructive criticism; the basic story was that something was rotten in the state of the planet, but things could usually be done to alleviate the situation – although the problem was not seen as trivial, nor solutions easy. Interestingly, although the children were young, a chronological element appeared frequently, with the quality of the environment thought to have declined within recent times. Another basic story was that unspecified *other people* (not generally seen as a minority) were spoiling the environment, and it was the role of the narrator to persuade those people to stop, or encourage others to stop them. In general,

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<sup>107</sup> These are themes of narrative organisation. For general themes in the videos, see Table 9.1.

responsibility for environmental damage was seen to lie with individuals, rather than companies (apart from a couple of exceptions) or the government (never mentioned). The implied audience here was often other children – the demonstration of how to dispose of a fizzy drink can, for example, presumably being aimed at such an audience – although the narrating children themselves, whilst concerned about the value of aspects of the environment for children (such as good places to play), did not generally position themselves explicitly as ‘children’ within the narrative.

The tone of the narratives was uniformly assertive and decisive; the children knew what they did and did not like, and usually had a good reason why, and someone – a generic other – to blame. They seemed well aware that an admittance of their own bad behaviour would weaken the argument, and so a role of moral superiority was assumed. The category of people who were damaging the environment was never ‘we’, most often being ‘they’. On occasions such miscreants would be ‘you’ – instances which stand out as unexpectedly confrontational, not least because the broadcast media rarely uses this mode of address when apportioning blame for situations.

As noted previously, the primary unseen agents in each narrative, besides the generalised ‘people’, were ‘the Council’. Where other people were seen as harming the environment, largely on an unseen basis, the Council had the god-like and equally invisible role of being there to put things right. The children were not particularly optimistic believers, but neither did they have a naturalised expectation that the Council would be lethargic or useless. Only in some cases was there an awareness that the Council’s inaction might be due to a lack of resources. More frequently, the unspoken assumption seemed to be more that the Council were not *aware* of the problem in question, or had not yet got around to fixing it.

Standardised television genres were only occasionally deployed by the children. Some of the videos, in particular those made at Beckett Park and Little London, were presented in part as a ‘show’ about the environment, drawing somewhat on TV-presentation conventions. In the Beckett Park video, viewers were invited to phone in with questions, in the familiar style of programmes such as *Live and Kicking* (see chapter six), whilst in the early stages of production at Little London, the children performed their presentations as sections of their schools programme *Zig Zag*. In the Blenheim video, during the section where the children examined nearby waste ground and telephoned the Council about it, their video drew to an extent on the ‘investigative journalism’ genre (typified by ITV’s *The Cook Report*), following the standard narrative line of ‘We looked at

this situation — found it to be bad — now we are going to question the people responsible for it'. Also in common with this genre, the response was found to be unsatisfactory, and so the video producers suggested their own preferred outcome. Elsewhere in the children's videos, however, the presentation and interview styles only borrowed in a very general way from the styles of non-fictional, talking-to-camera television.

Of course, arguments can be made against genre imitation in children's work, since it might be seen to suggest a lack of original ideas, and could rely upon clichés; on the other hand, the opportunity to explore genres, making their forms more explicit to children, could be valuable and instructive, and producing a text within the confines of a genre is not an unchallenging exercise. As Moss (1989) has shown, children are able to deploy and subvert genres such as 'romance' or 'action-adventure', in their written work, to explore issues of gender and teenage sexuality. Moss suggests that teachers would be wrong to criticise such work for being clichéd or televisual, since the children in such cases have both demonstrated an understanding of genres, and an ability to turn their texts, *within* those forms, to address their own concerns.

On the whole, as the limited number and extent of genre-based examples above suggests, the children in the present study only occasionally borrowed from particular established televisual forms. A greater amount of planning prior to recording might have altered this situation, but the mix of personalities and sexes<sup>108</sup> in each group may have made agreement on a more sophisticated plan difficult to achieve in any case. Some suggestions and prompting from adults, which in this study the group supervisors deliberately *avoided* making, might also have spurred the children to attempt some dramatic or genre-derivative sequences. As it was, most of the children's planning discussions centred around what they should film, and (to a lesser extent) how they could illustrate particular points — such as the amount of pollution in a canal — rather than the overall *style* of presentation or filming, which were not discussed in broad terms.

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<sup>108</sup> Whilst I do not wish to presume that there are huge or predetermined distinctions between the kinds of videos which boys and girls might wish to make, the evidence regarding the situation at present is pretty unequivocal. Moss, for example, writes: 'From my own classroom observation I would say that teenage boys frequently take up the adventure theme in their writing, teenage girls the romance, but that it is rare for girls to write adventure stories centring round male heroes battling against innumerable odds and practically unheard of for boys to write romances' (1989, pp. 108–109).

## Silences in the videos

Having examined the issues and angles which the children included in their videos, this final section turns to the important matter of what they did *not* cover, and which perspectives were not favoured in the presentations. The range of possible alternative narratives is of course infinite, but two of the most obvious lines of commentary which were not produced by the children are indicated in Table 9.5. It will be recalled that whilst the basic narratives of the videos made by the children were divided into four types in Table 9.3, these could basically all be summarised under the single narrative line, ‘This is our environment – good and bad points’. The two primary narratives in the table below contrast sharply with this.

<b>Table 9.5: Two basic narratives not featured in the videos</b>
This is our global environment – and its problems
This is our environment – polluted and ruined by industry

In short, whole-world and structural perspectives were overlooked in favour of individualised explorations of the local environment and its problems. Furthermore, if we look at narrative *themes*, an explicit comparison can be made between the angles taken and those not used, as shown in Table 9.6.

<b>Table 9.6</b>	
<b>Two dominant narrative themes</b>	<b>...and two absent narrative themes</b>
The world is in a bad state → we must try to improve it	The world is in a bad state → government and industry must try to improve it
Other people are spoiling the environment → they must stop	Other people and institutions are spoiling the environment → they must be stopped

It could be argued that the form of the project, in giving the pupils an invitation to leave the confines of the school which they were usually unable to resist, contained an implicit direction towards local themes. However, opportunities to use aspects of the local environment to illustrate global themes, or to produce

models or simulations of global problems in the classroom, were not taken. Furthermore one could not say that the project promoted the *individualism* of the children's accounts of causes and solutions; there is nothing suggestive or implicit in the video method to cause the 'dominant narrative themes' in Table 9.6 to appear, or for the 'absent narrative themes' to be excluded.

We should note that the responsibility for environmental improvement was not presumed to be with individuals in all cases: the children at Burley, in particular, saw the cleaning-up of their area as the City Council's duty. However, this perceived need for state intervention was in a reactive, non-preventative role – tidying up after pollution, but not *stopping* that pollution in the first place.

To summarise, although the children in this study often identified adults as being an anti-environmental social group, this critique was almost never refined to focus on *organised* forms of adult action. The children had acquired a strong sense of environmental responsibility, which sometimes even – commendably – allowed them to see that they might be a part of the problem themselves. However, this was not tied to a parallel need for eco-unfriendly *institutions* to mend their ways in similar fashion, nor even much of a recognition that such institutions may be a bigger problem than the ecologically lax acts of individuals.

## 10. Conclusion: Effects, meanings and methods

When starting work on the video production research, with teams of children eager to race a camera around the neighbourhood, and even when developing areas of theory in resistance to what were clearly weak aspects of the effects paradigm, it was not at all apparent whether the various elements of this study would fall together into a cohesive whole. In the end, however, the parts assemble into a line which leads straight to some solid, basic conclusions which I have sought to set out in this final chapter. The more straightforward findings are followed by some theoretical consideration of their implications, and discussion of the methodology in that light. Unsurprisingly, it is found that more complex approaches produce much less simplistic answers.

### Basic findings

Clearly, the ‘findings’ of an interpretative and ethnographic qualitative study such as this cannot be presented as straightforwardly as those for a simple survey. The preceding chapters present detailed observations, and extrapolated arguments. To reduce these to a simple list of ‘findings’ would be counterproductive, and would contradict my own argument that information about people’s use of the media should be collected and handled sensitively, and not reduced to the level of the studies criticised elsewhere in this thesis for their maladroit simplicity and platitudinous accounts. Nevertheless, we can record some basic observations about the responses of the 53 children involved in this study. The sample is small, and not necessarily representative, but their attitudes to the environment have, at least, been explored in sufficient depth for us to be confident about the reliability of these points.

### Children’s media literacy

The most obvious and clear-cut finding of the study is that the children demonstrated a high level of media literacy in all age groups. Making a video came naturally to them. In their few years of experience as media *consumers* the children – some as young as seven – had learned elements of genre and presentation, as well as acquiring a lively awareness of the way in which things

could be represented and misrepresented on camera<sup>109</sup>. The children's familiarity with the constructedness of the media, their ability to conceive of the final text even as they recorded elements of it out of sequence, and the sheer speed with which they picked up how to operate the equipment and began creative activity, are all parts of the whole range of ethnographic findings which further convince this author that the effects paradigm can be cast aside as incapable of providing us with sensitive and pertinent understandings of the role of the media in the formation of consciousness. The study also shows powerfully that a methodology which avoids the patronising, positivistic stance of the psychology-based effects tradition, and allows children to show their intelligence and discretion in relation to the media, can transform the kind of conclusions which must be drawn.

### **Environmental concerns**

The children generally demonstrated a reasonably high level of concern about environmental issues, particularly pollution and the need for green, open spaces. Whilst the children were very adept at producing slogans of the 'save the planet – it's up to you' variety, as well as some more heartfelt pleas – such as 'why are they doing this to our world?' – their actual everyday behaviour in many cases, as they came to admit, was not entirely consistent with these eco-friendly views. Nevertheless, this fact was recognised with some embarrassment, and the commitment of many of the children to basic activities such as recycling is not to be denied.

The children related to environmental issues most closely at the local level, although some global extrapolations were made. However, the children did not focus on global issues primarily in their videos. Even at the level of their own individual actions, conflicts were observed between the idealistic desire to be environmentally friendly, and the more pragmatic or hedonistic pull of enjoying themselves and not bothering.

Social class did not seem to be a predictor of interest in or concern about the environment, although the middle-class children may have had slightly more detailed *knowledge* about certain areas. The older working-class children were more likely to engage in challenging debate, between themselves, about levels of purported concern and actual environmental behaviour, and inconsistencies

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<sup>109</sup> It is worth noting that there is no reason to think that the media literacy of the sample of children used in this study would be any different from that of any other children of the same age.

therein, than the middle-class children of the same age, whose politeness in relation to such fundamental points could be read as apathy<sup>110</sup>.

Age was also related to *knowledge* about environmental issues, in the obvious sense that the older children would have experienced more information-providing material, whether at school, through the media, or other sources, than their younger counterparts, and could be expected to have a greater capacity to understand complex issues. However, the younger children were if anything slightly more *enthusiastic* in their expressions of environmental concern, and about the video project itself. The younger children also seemed just as capable of dealing with ecological concepts, such as the holistic worldview which recognises an integrated continuum between humans and nature.

As discussed in the previous chapter, gender seemed to be generally unrelated to levels of environmental knowledge or concern. However, confident and engaging speakers on the subject were somewhat more likely to be found amongst the girls. Any indifference to the project shown by boys can only be attributed to the effect of gendered perceptions – in which ecological sympathies are associated with femininity – for a very small percentage of the older boys. If anything, the extent to which boys in the study *were* willing to express environmental concern was surprising.

### **The influence of television on perception of environmental matters**

Again, the theory underlying this study means that it is almost *necessarily* impossible to simply describe a recorded effect 'x' of size 'y'. Rather, the observations of the previous two chapters suggest some conclusions about the nature of the influence of television's depiction of environmental problems on the way in which children seem to understand those issues, and consequently approach and re-present them in their own video productions.

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<sup>110</sup> This finding differs from that of Lyons & Breakwell (1994), whose analysis of a survey of 13 to 16 year olds (a different age group, it must be noted), found that environmental concern was more likely to be found in children of a higher class. Although my sample is too small to seriously challenge these findings, we can note at least the *possible* alternative explanation that children of a higher social class may simply be more likely to respond in that way to *surveys*. Or it may be that class differences in environmental concern only develop in teenage years.

## **Environmental paralysis**

The conflicting messages from mass media coverage of the environment seem to have produced, if anything, a kind of paralysis. The pro-environmental activities which children are encouraged to participate in are small-scale, and so readily appear cosmetic and meaningless when the problems are put in a global context. Major environmental revolution, at the same time, is so profoundly unlikely that it is not even discussed. These confusions are further confounded when the media gives children a powerful potential role as planetary saviours on the one hand, emphasising the power of 'the kids' more unconvincingly than punks ever did, whilst children are still disenfranchised in much of the rest of social life and even, it could be said, within that patronising discourse itself.

Any element of pro-environmental inspiration is, then, quashed by a dampening force of at least equal power. Even the middle-class children in this study, whom we might expect to be more taken with the possibilities for bringing about change themselves, since they have greater realistic scope for seeing themselves as those 'in charge' in future years, seemed to feel as fundamentally powerless as any of the other children.

## **Adorno revisited**

As noted in chapter four, Adorno famously argued that the products of the culture industry kept people sufficiently occupied that they were unlikely to think critically about the capitalist system, much less seek to overthrow it and realise their true potential as human beings. This superficial satisfaction was not considered to be genuine contentment, of course; as Cashmore has put it, Adorno saw that the culture industry 'promised happiness, but delivered only amusement' (1994, p. 29).

An interesting situation therefore arises when individuals have the opportunity to produce videos, which inevitably bear some similarities to mass media products, but which apparently challenge the social order to a certain extent, through their environmentalist agenda. Whilst the children in this study were serious about the issues which they wanted to convey, superficial amusement could also be seen to have a role. The production of a video is empowering on the one hand, but could dilute the strength of feeling about the actual subject on the other, since the very novelty of video generates excitement at the expense of the non-stylistic content – the 'message'. As I argued in chapter four, the substitution of fundamentally harmless media participation in the place of real political action is one of the ways in which the status quo may be maintained. However, this argument

understates the degree of genuine, campaigning feeling put into the videos by many of the children, who felt that their work was worthwhile and contained an important message, and were keen for the videos to be shown to as many people as possible, sent to the City Council, or, ideally, broadcast on television. Most of the children involved in the project also expressed the feeling that the process of making a video had focused their attention on ecological matters, particularly in the local environments which they had explored on tape, and some felt that the video-making had established a link between their individual actions and the world around them.

The Adornoesque argument that mere media *reception* could replace political participation did nevertheless appear to have the beginnings of support in some of these children, whose pride that they had watched particular programmes suggested that they felt that they had done more than just watch a television show. Whilst the material had clearly stirred them intellectually or emotionally about ecological matters, an escalation of the satisfaction with having simply watched the programmes might be, for some, at the expense of actual related activity. Conversely, however, the palpable satisfaction might be because the children in question actually felt that they had ‘grown’ as a consequence of their viewing, and it remains a possibility that their media interests might inspire these children towards real-world environmentalist activity – or at least basic environmentally-responsible behaviour – in later years.

### **A new ecological paradigm for a new generation?**

Riley Dunlap & Kent Van Liere, and others, have suggested that a ‘new ecological paradigm’ is developing support in Western populations, in which human survival is understood to depend on the health of the global environment (Dunlap & Van Liere, 1978, 1984; Catton & Dunlap, 1980; Drengson, 1980; Noe & Snow, 1990; Stern, Dietz, & Guagnano, 1995)<sup>111</sup>. British TV viewers will recognise this as the weak version of the model which *Edge of Darkness* pressed upon them back in 1985. (The stronger version suggests that the planet will act to defend itself, by whatever means necessary<sup>112</sup>). This archetype can be

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<sup>111</sup> Catton & Dunlap (1980), furthermore, argue that this new ecological paradigm has fundamental implications for the basic paradigm of sociology (although it is debatable whether sociology has such a singular foundation), since humans can no longer be viewed as being a wholly unique and separate part of the global ecosystem, and the biophysical environment cannot be regarded as irrelevant to the causes and contexts of social life.

<sup>112</sup> The black flowers, referred to in the *Edge of Darkness* footnote in chapter one, would be one of these means: by producing fields of dark blooms at the North and South poles, the

contrasted with, say, the belief that human ingenuity and straightforward *instinct* for survival will be sufficient to overcome any problems, and is directly *opposed* to the view that the role of 'mankind' is to dominate nature. The new paradigm is accordingly associated with a loss of faith in the traditional dominant social paradigm's values of support for economic growth, individualism, private property rights and laissez faire government (Dunlap & Van Liere, 1984)<sup>113</sup>. Stern *et al* have equated the new ecological paradigm with 'a folk ecological theory' which takes a holistic and integrated view of the planet, its biosphere, and the future of humankind generally (1995, p. 726). With research having generally found that the relationship between *concern* about the environment and environmentally-friendly *behaviour* is almost non-existent (Hamid & Cheng, 1995, p. 680), and that sociodemographic variables have been 'ineffective' in accounting for environmental concern (Hallin, 1995, p. 559) – presumably because such concern has a widespread distribution in Western societies – this folk ecological theory is seen to provide a way of understanding which concepts and beliefs might actually encourage an individual to engage in positively pro-environmental actions<sup>114</sup>.

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Earth accelerates the melting of the polar ice caps, flooding the planet and destroying humankind, who would have outstayed their welcome. See Kennedy Martin (1990).

<sup>113</sup> Within the discipline of environmental science, we can see that the 'environmental management' approach, which considers the technical measures required to overcome the scientific causes of environmental problems, is correspondingly being joined, if not superseded, by a new paradigm concerned with the social causes of such problems, which are considered in global terms, and in relation to nature, natural resources, and basic sustainability (De Groot, 1992).

<sup>114</sup> However, David Scott & Fern Willits (1994) suggest – based on their own research, and that of others, showing only a 'modest' link between support for the new ecological paradigm's values, and actual behaviour – that media coverage of environmental matters may have led to a situation where 'many people have learned the language of environmentalism without developing a simultaneous behavioural commitment' (p. 255). Scott & Willits go on to note that, conversely, it may be that individuals are 'unaware of how their personal behaviour contributes to environmental denigration and thus may believe it is a problem for "someone else"'. Given that their survey-based data requires this kind of *speculative* interpretation, it is curious that they do not propose another explanation: that people *are* aware of the causes of environmental damage, but – consequently – feel that the major changes have to be made by industry and institutions, before they contribute their own drop to the ocean. This explanation seems to actually make more sense in logical terms, since the two volunteered by the authors contradict each other: if the media had promoted a high level of knowledge of environmental matters, as in the first proposed explanation, individuals *would not be* unaware of how their behaviour affected the environment, as suggested by the second. It would also explain the disparity between stated beliefs and reported behaviour, which the explanations proffered by Scott & Willits are unable to do. Whilst the media may well have made the public familiar with 'the language of environmentalism', individuals would not indicate mere recognition by indicating *agreement* with the statements, obviously,

The support for the ideas at the heart of the new ecological paradigm represents, of course, one of the most prominent of the 'new social movements' which are the subject of a growing sociological literature (as noted in chapter six). In Ron Eyerman & Andrew Jamison's (1991) study of new social movements as processes within which individuals 'create new kinds of social identities' – based in part on research on environmental movements in Sweden, Denmark and the Netherlands – the authors identify three dimensions of attitude and belief systems amongst environmentalists in such groups (pp. 66–78). These aspects provide us with a useful way of considering the character of the approaches to the environment which children in this study had taken to heart sufficiently for them to be conveyed in their videos. Firstly, Eyerman & Jamison's 'cosmological' dimension describes a general ecological worldview relating to ideas of balance in the relationship between nature and society, and directed towards a utopian vision of an ecologically harmonious world. The children incorporated some aspects of this worldview into their presentations – most notably a pressing feeling that humans should be kinder to the natural environment, and the occasional glimpse of a broader notion of an ecological, integrated system<sup>115</sup>. However, although a limited number of the children applied this model to several areas of their lives – including a few of them being vegetarians – none of them had taken such ideas on board wholesale.

Secondly, the 'technological' dimension refers to the specific topics of practical environmental concern, and their potential solutions. This informational area is where the children were most at home, demonstrating a reasonably abundant knowledge of environmental problems and potential reforms. Finally, the 'organizational' dimension refers to the anti-elitism of environmental movements, which – in common with other new social movements – aim to democratise the processes of knowledge production and dissemination, and deprofessionalise expertise. The children had not really adopted this aspect of environmentalism at all; whilst their videos reflected confidence that they, as children, had something to say about the environment, their behaviour in a

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unless they *meant* something by that. (Methodologically speaking, this debate illuminates, at least, the problem with non-qualitative surveys designed to assess psychological variables on predefined scales: we end up simply *guessing* at their meanings).

<sup>115</sup> Demonstrated, for example, in the long speech by seven-year-old Mariam at Little London (see 'Making the Little London video' in chapter eight), or some of the debates which took place at Beckett Park (see 'Making the Beckett Park video'), or Alan's argument, in that video, 'If nobody cared about the environment then... there'd be loads of litter, and everything about would stink... and there'd be black clouds in the sky every day, there'd be acid rain and everything, so, there has to be somebody who cares about the environment'.

group, and throughout the production process, did not seem to be informed by unusually egalitarian values.

Eyerman & Jamison argue that the combination of these three dimensions into a 'core identity' is what has made environmentalism into a social movement (p. 77)<sup>116</sup>. This movement is seen to have 'transformed a scientific theory into a way of life, but even more perhaps into a set of beliefs', thereby providing 'the social context for a new kind of knowledge to be practiced' (p. 73). In these terms, it would seem that television – in conjunction with whatever other sources of environmental input the children in this study had encountered – had been a carrier of environmentalism for some of the children, *within limits*. For others, it had been simply a carrier of environmental *information*, but not environmentalism. The 'transformation' of a collection of facts into a broader set of views and beliefs had progressed half way, for a number of the children, but had not blossomed into a full ecological consciousness. This, of course, is not surprising, not only because the group studied were so young, but because we would not expect the media to have such a dramatic effect in any case. Whilst Claus Offe (1985) has noted that new social movements seek 'to politicize the institutions of civil society in ways that are not constrained by the channels of representative-bureaucratic political institutions' (p. 820), thereby identifying *Newsround* (as well as the more radical *Undercurrents*) as sympathetic to such interests<sup>117</sup>, most of the individual-centred coverage of environmental problems and solutions in the media could not be expected to carry environmentalism, per se, as an ideology. In particular, the elements of established ideologies, such as anti-capitalism, which inform the ecological perspective (Scott, 1995), are shorn from environmental material in its journey through the media to the audience. The results of this study confirm these points: it would appear that those who had extrapolated broader worldview points from the environmental information provided by the media, had done so through the application of their own intelligence, rather than as a direct consequence of messages carried by the media.

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<sup>116</sup> A not dissimilar set of requirements for a cohesive 'environmentalist discourse' are established and discussed, with less coherence and more speculation, by Robert Brulle (1995).

<sup>117</sup> See chapter six for discussion of how *Newsround* and *Undercurrents* deliberately sidelined the agenda of party politics, central to mainstream TV news, in favour of a more ecologically-centred set of concerns.

## The hegemonic bending of environmental problem interpretations

At the end of the previous chapter we saw that the children's accounts of environmental damage and its solutions placed individual actions at their centre, rather than identifying institutions or social structures as the focus for causes, and change. Environmental problems were seen as due more to the carelessness and apathy of individual adults, and some children, rather than being a consequence of organised adult activity. In chapter six, an examination of environmental programmes showed that this was also the perspective suggested most commonly on television – problems caused by forgetful or ill-advised adults, to be solved by minor reforms and the individual environmentally-responsible actions of the public.

Whilst it would be too simplistic to infer that the children's approach to environmental matters has been brought in wholesale from television, we do know that the children considered television to be a primary source of environmental information (chapter eight). It is therefore reasonable to argue that children's perception of environmental matters has been influenced by television in a particular way<sup>118</sup>. To use the theoretical terms established in chapter four, their understanding of the agents relevant to environmental problems has been hegemonically bent, *away* from structural and societal explanations and towards personalised, individualistic accounts. Therefore the children *do know* about environmental issues – it is not that the subject has been kept from them. However, the characteristics of the way in which that material has been relayed to them – via programmes which cannot be too contentious even on an important subject, and which aim to be reasonably reassuring for children, and to convince young viewers that they can make a difference – has led to a particular interpretation of the problems being conveyed. Environmental damage is thus domesticated and individualised, and opposition to it is similarly disengaged from effectively focused action. At the same time, a degree of 'oppositional' action – at this individualised level – is *incorporated* into the

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<sup>118</sup> To distinguish this inductive process from that traditionally used in effects research, it should be noted that this study has established (1) that the children regarded television as a primary source of information about the environment, (2) that the television messages had a particular slant, and (3) that the children reproduced this approach when invited to produce their own material on the subject. This is in sharp contrast, therefore, to the studies of TV violence which rarely seek to ask subjects how instructive they find the medium's coverage of that subject, and almost never examine the approach of the TV content itself (which, for the effects hypothesis to run smoothly, would need to be distinctly *promoting* violence). Having obtained data on all three points, this study is much better able to provide support for a cohesive theory.

media world, with programmes (notably *Blue Peter*, but also less regular series such as ITV's *Go Wild!*) encouraging viewers to participate in environmentally-friendly schemes. Whilst apparently challenging on the one hand, this situation means that young viewers may feel that they are both well-informed and doing something about environmental matters, without being aware that these interpretations are, at least, partial and questionable.

The hegemonic bending of environmental coverage is not to be seen as a deliberate plan devised by broadcasters to protect the status quo: this is not a conspiracy theory. Rather, it is the consequence of a range of forces and choices – including the idea that children should be assured that they can do something about the problems, and the unspoken requirement that ‘political’ content should be avoided – which are part of the professional socialisation of journalists, broadcasters and producers, and implicitly prescribed by their normative working parameters. Whilst their presentations are generally informed by liberal values and are not intended to be conservative, their focus on the power or weakness of separate bricks, as it were, prevents children seeing the size and shape of the whole house.

### **Creative data: The video method in review**

The foundations and design of the video production methodology were discussed in chapter seven, prior to elucidation of the findings. In this final chapter we have the opportunity to examine the benefits of the method in the light of the data thus obtained. Unlike the psychological studies which have been much criticised in this thesis, where the researcher would define the variables and parameters of the study in advance and should normally be able to guess the results, the latitude and flexibility offered by this study meant that the researcher, frankly, had no idea what might be produced in the way of data, and almost necessarily had no expectations as to the outcome.

The findings more than bore out the assumption that the extended time spent with the groups, centred around the activity of making a video, would produce a greater level of understanding about their actual feelings about the environment. In several cases, it was found that the impressions generated in the first week's group interviews – the equivalent of the focus group that is the beginning and end of many ‘qualitative’ studies – were inaccurate to say the least, with some being distinctly misleading. Children who had seemed indifferent to the environment in conversation were found to have quite strong views on some issues (particularly where related to the quality of their own lives), whilst others

who had emerged from the focus group as keen environmentalists were found to be rather less committed where significant amounts of actual effort would be required. Over time it also became clear that the children were more familiar with environmentalist values and discourses than had been initially apparent.

These research achievements are not a matter of having ‘caught out’ the participants, but rather that those young people were ultimately able to present and specify their particular concerns once they had become comfortable with the research situation. The initial group interviews represented a kind of ‘brain dump’ of *potential* interests and concerns, which in subsequent weeks were sifted and filtered to reveal the more genuinely-felt opinions. The video-making process also gave the children a voice not only to provide considered answers, but to set their own questions. They were even able to use the persuasive vehicles of humour and satire to make their points. With childhood being traditionally seen both in society and in sociology as a time of limitation and constraint (Jenks, 1996), it is important to give child ‘subjects’ the opportunity to demonstrate creativity and transcendence over such prescribed roles. In terms of media literacy alone, the method gave children a unique key with which to break apart traditional expectations, and demonstrate their wit and discrimination in media use.

### **Potential other uses for the video project**

The method of video production research could obviously be applied to other areas. For example, conspicuous by its absence in the dominant discussions of television violence (see chapter two) is any consideration of the nature of the attractiveness of aggressive scenes in TV or film narratives – a question which only Annette Hill (1996) has explored in depth with actual audiences. To explore this area, young people could be presented with video equipment and invited to ‘make a movie’; in cases where the resultant film included scenes of interpersonal conflicts or violence, thorough discussion of why those elements were involved, coupled with examination of how the ideas came into being, and then how they were actually recorded, might shed some valuable light on this topical matter. Children’s attitudes to any other contemporary social issue could also be explored in much the same way as environmentalism was treated here. The particular benefits of making one’s own television images, such as consciousness-raising and empowerment for minorities, could also be investigated further in this way.

The method could be further refined, if working with older children or adults, if once the video was completed (and, ideally, edited by the group), the researcher discussed the final product with its makers, going through the film and asking why they had selected, filmed, framed and presented content in that particular way<sup>119</sup>. The information collected in that session would be a useful addition to the other material available, although one would not want to see the whole research process being reduced to the findings of the post-production focus group alone, with such data regarded as the final answers – ‘what was *really* going on’.

## **Methods, meanings and hegemonic bending**

Whilst it is well recognised in the social sciences that methodology can affect research results in a variety of ways, there can be few areas where method has had such a deterministic impact upon the understanding of an area as in the case of media effects. Different research approaches have not produced disparate perspectives upon similar findings, but rather have provided different answers altogether. Traditional effects research was seen, in chapters two to four, to approach the issues with neither a sound methodology nor any cogent theoretical foundation. Chapter five reflected upon the patronising and utilitarian approach to child ‘subjects’ at the heart of that paradigm, and chapter six sought to provide – as most effects studies do not – some background and analysis of examples of the actual media content under consideration.

Whilst the effects tradition represents a substantial proportion of previous media research, and would favour methods and modes of explanation which differ markedly from those of the present study, these chapters draw attention to a catalogue of deficiencies in the paradigm which, taken together, almost terminally weaken the claims made by those studies. Furthermore, whilst the consideration of influences on perception of social issues will always necessarily be complex and somewhat equivocal, this study can claim to have a more sound basis for its findings than many simpler projects because it established the nature and intentions of relevant mass media content prior to making inferences about its consequences; because it found that such media was of importance to

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<sup>119</sup> For this particular study, it was decided – after an unproductive attempt – that the children involved were too young to be asked for detailed reflections some time after the recordings had been made. However, had more time been available, material could have been reviewed at the end of each session for perhaps more fulfilling responses to be collected.

children's perception of the issues; and because of the extended and reasonably intensive time spent with research participants in an issue-focused activity.

This analysis has suggested that media coverage of environmental issues may have had the subtle but significant effect of stimulating children's perceptions of the causes and solutions to ecological problems in a way which counteracts serious challenges and is functional for maintenance of the status quo. The issues have not been disregarded or buried, but rather have received a treatment which has bent the flow of critique into a hegemonically neutral zone, where fault is found in individual rather than organised social behaviour. It is interesting to note that this bears striking similarities with the treatment of television violence, where the focus of both media coverage and effects research itself draws attention away from sociological explanations of crime and violence (which criminologists generally agree are the consequence of life circumstances, such as poverty and unemployment, which can be affected by social policy), and towards individualistic explanations regarding media use and behaviour. Here again, a serious social issue is given considerable treatment, but in a form which hegemonically bends attention towards accounts which carry little substance, but which are more congruent with a stable status quo.

Whilst the notion of hegemonic bending could be said to be little more than a broader version of Chomsky's view that 'there is a system of shaping, control, and so on, which gives a certain perception of the world'<sup>120</sup>, it draws more upon critical theory than Chomsky's news-politics arguments – taking in, for example, Adorno's ideas about the media's role in generating political apathy – and is based on the findings of qualitative research on both the media *and* the audience. In addition, rather than being concerned with big, structural stories being told with a bias favouring the interests of one country rather than another, my notion of hegemonic bending tends to concern stories being reduced to an individualistic or psychological level at the expense of structural, sociological or political accounts. Therefore it is not so much that one 'big picture' is swapped for another, but rather that the viewer's attention is pressed so close that they can only see bits of the canvas<sup>121</sup>.

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<sup>120</sup> From *Manufacturing Consent* film (1992), quoted in Achbar, ed. (1994, p. 134).

<sup>121</sup> Whilst considering the differences between my own theoretical approach and that of others, it is perhaps obvious to note that my application of the notion of hegemony differs from that used by those associated with the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies since the 1970s (Stuart Hall, Tony Bennett *et al*) for similar reasons. Their approach to the mass media generally, to be reductive, was also about one account of the 'big picture' supplanting another – albeit in more complex and sensitive accounts than Chomsky's, making careful use of the concept of hegemony. For example, in *Policing the Crisis* (Hall *et*

This thesis has sought to demonstrate, then, that children are not merely passive or reactive in relation to the mass media. The content of television programmes goes through complex processes of critical interpretation and integration with existing knowledge and understandings, and so is not at all likely to have direct or predictable 'effects' on attitudes or behaviour. Indeed, to seek to account for the origin of social problems by turning first to the mass media is to make a leap of judgment with no sociological basis. Children are generally sharp and cynical readers of the mass media – as they are able to demonstrate when given the opportunity to be *writers* of such media.

The mass media inevitably has some influence upon the perceptions of those who come into regular contact with it, however. In modern industrial societies, media content, whilst not necessarily *excluding* contentious issues, may deliver accounts of them which bend in favour of hegemonic stability by focusing on people, as autonomous individuals, rather than on institutions and the social-structural foundations underlying individual behaviour. Whilst a certain proportion of adults might see through such accounts, younger children cannot be expected to have the political awareness and knowledge required to realise that such explanations may be partial (although they would not be *incapable* of doing so). They therefore acquire a conception of environmental issues which can be seen as overemphasising the role of 'ordinary' people both in having created the problems, and in being able to solve them at a local level. Causes such as individual wastefulness, and solutions such as recycling and energy conservation, are prioritised at the expense of a focus on the much more damaging activities of industries, the failure of governments to control them, and the place of both of these in a wider social system.

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*al*, 1978), the British press, following leads from the police, are seen to have generated a moral panic about 'mugging' which exaggerated the threat of violent crime and thus enabled the authoritarian solutions articulated by the political right to gain authenticity and support. In another case, Hall has argued that British television's current affairs coverage is (largely unwittingly) biased in favour of parliamentary democracy, recognising only problems and solutions that are acknowledged by the established parliamentary parties (Hall, Connell, & Curti, 1981; Hall, 1982). By setting the terms within which questions can be 'reasonably' asked, which establishes the implicitly consensual terms of an argument, the mass media in this way is seen to be *manufacturing consent* (see Hall, 1982, p. 87). To take another example, in Hall's account of the success of Thatcherism (1988), new right discourses are seen to prevail over left-wing and other arguments, and connect with the working class in a unique manner: in an ideological battle where people felt themselves to be aware of the alternatives, Thatcherism won. In such accounts, one vision of the world is articulated in such a way by a dominant group that it is able to gain popular, 'common sense' support. Here I am arguing only that these are *different* uses of the notion of hegemony, not *wrong* applications of the term or necessarily wrong arguments in general. Indeed, these examples almost certainly use hegemony more in the way that Gramsci intended than I have done.

If children acquire the individualistic interpretation of ecological problems from the media aimed at them (or mass media more generally), however, this does not mean that they would treat any information about the environment uncritically, nor that they will be affected by specific bits of media content. If the individualistic approach is inherited, it is as a product of the whole *flow* of environmentally-related material. The traditional effects research methodologies are incapable of detecting such subtleties. Media audiences are not uncritical or indiscriminate consumers, and research must allow people to demonstrate their *capacities*, rather than the reductive notion of specific responses. Only then will we be able to appreciate the character, extent and limitations of audience autonomy, in its ongoing struggle with social and structural pressures.

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