TEENAGE GIRLS AND TELEVISION TEXTS: THE MAKING OF MEANINGS AROUND FEMININITY.

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This dissertation involves a qualitative study in which a male researcher investigates the way teenage girls' femininity is constituted through their television viewing. The researcher claims that the feminist critique of men interviewing women is essentialist. He seeks a shared understanding with the nineteen subjects in the study, yet at the same time 'sees through' their taken for granted assumptions as regards their own femininity.

Through undertaking single interviews with individuals and groups, the researcher reveals that academically able girls have an ambiguity towards television soap opera. Their viewing is both resistant and compliant. The narrative, in particular, is regarded as unrealistic and over dramatised, and yet it provides a sense of escapism from the rigours of the academic day. Whilst no female characters are inscribed as role models, girls do engage with such characters by evaluating them across a range of oppositions, most notably in terms of relevance to their own lived experience. Girls' ambivalence towards soap opera is interpreted as being underpinned by a number of conflicting discourses.

The audience of teenage girls in the reception of television brings along competencies associated with femininity. Feminine discourse is a central plank in the construction of femininity, and through collaboration in 'gossip groups', girls retain cultural capital by keeping up with important narratives. Femininity is also constructed in a complex way through production and reproduction, in which meanings, derived from the everyday, are inserted into the text and then fed back into real life.

A number of features of conventional femininity are seen to constrain teenage girls from seeking empowerment, and the discourse of romance in particular inhibits moves towards gender equality. And yet representations of diversity in desire, sexual expression and relational skills speak to girls' situation in an age of autonomy.

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Part 1

Introduction: shared subjectivities

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How to analyse the making of meanings in television texts.

In seeking a shared understanding of how teenage girls construct their own meanings around femininity, the current researcher will draw upon qualitative methods of research. Qualitative research lends itself to an analysis of the complexity and contradictions inherent in the interpretations made by a television audience. The contrasting social positioning of the researcher, however, serves to underline the difficulty in developing a mutual understanding with the subjects in this study. Single interviews of individual subjects will thus aim to explore how girls make sense of messages in television texts. Interpretive activity by an audience group is not conducted in isolation however. Group interviews will enable an examination of how meanings are mediated in 'girl talk' and through the dynamics of the audience group. It is hoped that group interviews will serve as a simulation of 'gossip networks' (Hobson 1982; Brown 1990).

A culture of femininity involves specific patterns of consumption (Smith 1987). Television viewing is just part of the process by which femininity is constituted. The focus on academic teenage girls as an audience group works from the premise that the television text interrelates to, and is interwoven with, everyday life in television reception (Silverstone 1994). Subjects will be asked to focus on narratives and leading female characters within the restrictions of the chosen method. First of all, a review of the literature on television audience studies will be required in order to place the current undertaking in context.

> "The category of the text (however) and explanation of the production
> of textual readings have become increasingly problematic. The difficulty
> is that, from one point of view, texts are held to contain meanings
> immanent in them.. so that one cannot read simply what one wants of them.
> (Turner G. 1990: 123)

The history of cultural studies involves a debate around whether research should emphasise the text itself or the reception of the text. Unravelling the meanings which

teenage girls derive from television texts is increasingly approached from the position of reception. It is now recognised that understanding how such a complex phenomenon plays a part in the construction of femininity requires more than textual analysis. Audience-orientation perspectives in research give rise to, for example, 'producerly texts' involving gaps through which the viewer can insert her own meanings. Essentially viewers are socially positioned and do not produce their own meanings in isolation; subjective experience in viewings is compared with friends, mothers, even teachers. It is incumbent on methodology to examine such 'oral culture', a medium in which messages can be fed back to life as it is lived, only to be re-appropriated by further 'self-suturing' in girls' production of a multiplicity of meanings from interpretations of the text. This process of reading will now be examined, at once providing an opportunity to explain 'self-suturing' in reading of television texts.

The forming of gender identity can be seen to involve a dialectic between the text and the receiver. Both texts and reception require a contextual analysis, being embedded within social situations. An understanding of the text continues to be required, even if it is embraced contextually in symboisis with the viewer (Moores 1993). Thus a research method which is largely audience-orientated, should incorporate aspects of the text such as narrative structure. Morley's (1986) account of advances from 'decoding' to 'viewing context' provides such an opportunity and must now be considered. Research, Morley argues, should not so much focus on the responses which viewers make to the presentation of meanings in the visual image but instead examine the kinds of material which they might see as relevant in the first place, using the relevance/irrelevance and comprehension/miscomprehension dichotomies as reference points. This represents an advance on the encoding/decoding model which is seen as being too closely aligned to ideological themes and propositions (Morley 1986: 136). Quoting work by Lindof and Traudt (1983: 267), Morley points to an intermediary stage which acts as an interpretative process through which critical judgement reworks representation into different forms, before reconstituting these into experience. Such a process is deemed to be a collective activity. Morley's ethnography centres television viewing within the family setting, suggesting that full understanding can only be achieved through observation of the domestic sphere and even then with

kept secret'. In eschewing the 'thin' description of the 'people meters' method of quantitative research, Morley advocates the 'thick' description of anthropological methods, arguing thus:

> *"The problem is, as Silverstone (1990) has argued, that television watching is in fact, a very complex activity, which is inevitably enmeshed within a range of other domestic practices and can only be properly understood in this context".*   (Morley 1992: 174)

The method which Morley employs, which he terms ethnography, is derived from the ethnographies of urban subcultures in the 1950's and 1960's, requiring an insider understanding of symbolic meanings yet seeking objectivity. However, Morley's methodology is more appropriately recognised as in-depth interviews (Turner 1990: 137). It signifies a shift away from textual strategies of preference or closure and a move towards gaps and spaces that open up television to audiences. Such 'producerly texts' enable the message to be changed or 'worked on' by the audience as they make their own interpretation of a programme. Dorothy Hobson's (1982) study 'Crossroads: the drama of a soap opera' took a pioneering role in this tradition of cultural studies. The notable feature of such texts was their capacity to place or position the viewer, inserting or 'suturing' him or her into a particular relationship with the narrative. Ang's (1985) concept of 'emotional realism' showed how a 'single realist' format helps viewers identify with their own relationship problems and thus promulgate problem-solving strategies through inserting these into the text. Morley presents such a model in which our subjectivities are made up of a number of competing discourses (Fiske 1987a: 66). Television viewing is seen in this light as intervening in, and interrelating to, daily life. The focus is on the audience as socially embedded. As Silverstone (1989: 77) argues:

> *"Television is everyday life. To study one is at the same time to study the other".*

Nevertheless, ethnography as employed by Morley in focused interviews, is not without its problems. The process of 'readings of readings' (Morley 1986: 180) in which two stages of interpretation are involved, the reader's interpretation of the text and the researcher's interpretation of the reader, causes as Morley argues, investigators to 'reflexively' become over concerned with data as 'twice removed' in effect from the

world 'out there'. Researchers must avoid concentrating too much on reflexivity. If too introspective about their place in the research process, interviewers can find themselves ultimately in an 'infinite regress' which involves being so reflexive that actually getting on with the research becomes impossible. For all its weaknesses, in-depth interviews remain the best means of understanding this complex phenomenon (Morley 1986:180).

Notwithstanding such methodological concerns mentioned above, it is evident that much research into reception has pointed significantly to the viewer as socially positioned. In the making of meaning in relation to television viewing, it is assumed that the context will be a collective one. The domestic setting is cited as the exemplar of the way in which television is viewed in the company of others, primarily within the family. Morley (1986) demonstrates how differential patterns of viewing can occur within the same family; such differences are referenced by gender relations. Power and control, for example, is patriarchal:

> "The control's always next to Dad's chair. It doesn't come away when Dad's here. It stays right there". (Morley 1986: 147)

In addition, Morley's concept of gendered reception is derived from data showing how women view television in some contrast to men. Women tend to talk during television programmes, constantly being told to 'shut up' by their partners. Or they 'do something else', like knitting and sewing. And yet women despite their apparent lack of attention, are invariably very familiar with the narratives, as evidenced by their gossip networks, which they negotiate within their work settings with other women.

Such an analysis as the above is helpful in understanding better how female subjective experience of television reflects and perpetuates gender divisions in overlap with social experience; clearly television and social structure as a whole cannot be separated - the social and the cultural are interwoven. Moreover, women's readiness to concede to their husbands' dictates in choice of viewing along with solitary and guilt-ridden patterns of viewing when offered the rare opportunity, at once affirms the traditional location of women in passivity and subordination. Nevertheless, as Morley (1986: 147) argues, females' viewing practices are not discrete entities, polarised from male patterns of viewing. These practices are interrelated, hardly suprising given the

focus of Morley's research: family viewing. Such emphasis on the audience disregards the television text and with it, the powerful meanings contained in the text. Hall's (1980c) encoding/decoding model demonstrates this in terms of the dominant meanings involved. However, to borrow Paul Willis's term 'symbolic creativity' from his study of consumption (Willis 1990), serves as a reminder that just because a (textual) meaning is encoded, doesn't mean it is received or decoded in the same form. Arguably, too greater emphasis on the audience undervalues any recognition of the signification of the text in which meanings are mediated and incorporated into social experience; such signs are ignored in the clamour to examine the audience.

More fundamentally, however, Morley's work does little to enhance understanding of how girls read gender representations and thus produce meanings around femininity. Moreover, the ownership of multiple television sets within individual domestic settings (Tomlinson 1991) bears witness to this, facilitating a private space for girls away from the family setting.

Lewis' (1990) study of teenage girls' consumption of T.V. texts moves far beyond a mere analysis of family consumption and succeeds in providing a more substantive account of how girls who watch videos can appropriate new symbol systems and construct new meanings in gender identity. Lewis cites videos by Madonna and Cyndi Lauper, identifying two forms of signification - access signs in which girls transgress boundaries, entering the male domain of activity, and discovery signs which "set a tone that deliberates female resourcefulness and cultural distinctiveness" (Lewis 1990: 91) Notably 'star texts' are emphasised, girls adopting the exaggerated codes of feminine appearance as represented by Madonna and Cyndi Lauper. Such mimicry extends to entering lookalike contests. Lewis argues that mediation is evident here:

> "... In the case of Lauper and Madonna fans, their spectacular response arise directly out of members' interaction with mass media texts. There is a correspondence between the video address and its reception as manifested by its use." (Lewis 1990: 98)

But Lewis is far from convincing, illustrating as she does the very apparent difficulties in this particular field of study. Her account, rather than demonstrating the mediation of the video message, is far too deterministic, and unitary, failing to recognise

differences amongst teenage girls. Whilst incorporating explanations of cultural exchange through the peer group collectivity, there is no data provided on discourses, which are embedded in, and interrelate with, everyday life. Of course, 'oral culture' has tended to be examined rather through the ethnography of British critical cultural studies. It is to this phenomenon, therefore, that we return next in our bid to gain greater understanding of the correspondence between text and audience.

The recognition of 'gossip networks' mentioned earlier adds credence to the link between television texts and lived social experience. The criticism of Lewis' study above should recognise the fine distinction between television culture and other media forms, such as video, in the production of pleasure and feminine identity. Television penetrates social relations in a more extensive form, permeating the micro-structure of everyday existence. Failing to keep abreast of social soap operas, for example, can result in marginalisation from popular discourse. Moreover, as Hobson (1982) argues, television viewing can be empowering for females. Herein lies the significance of oral culture. Textual meanings have to be vindicated through talking with other females. This is what Lewis implies in her concept of collective identity. The friendship network of teenage girls, located as it is within the school playground or in the consumption arena of the shopping mall, provides a medium through which the making of meanings progresses or is modified according to peer response.

Fiske (1987a: 75) argues that women (and by implication, girls) create their own cultural space through oral exchange, enabling a self-generated sense of femininity to be established. Gossip about television programmes provides an emotional release. The construction of audience-driven meanings is achieved, and 'audience communities' can be created. Such collectivities help validate the adequacy of female identity. The representations of social experience are found to make the experience itself meaningful and pleasurable. Meanings and pleasures in order to be validated, must be articulated with the social interest of the reader (Fiske 1987a: 83). Oral culture provides just such a vehicle. It is an active participatory process enabling the intermediary interpretative stage of meaning production in the link between text and audience. 'Talking about television' acts as a catalyst for the television viewer as a social being:

"Meanings are determined socially, that is, they are constructed out of the conjunctive of the text with the socially situated reader."   (Fiske 1987a: 80) .

The peer group should be seen as a fertile site in which the cultural reproduction of femininity takes place in teenage girl culture, positioning the socially situated reader in an intermediary position between the text and the synthesis of other texts and social agencies. This is where meanings from messages around femininity can be generated. Femininity is traditionally associated with nurturance and empathy in the context of social relations. Empathy is closely linked with intimacy between females, to do with women's more developed capacity to talk about emotions. The development of femininity doesn't involve separation as is the case in the development of masculinity (Chodorow 1978). Modes of representation of women often involve close ups. Modelski (1982: 99-100) sees this as women's capacity to 'read people'; part of femininity, it is argued, involves a capacity to intuitively distinguish between what is said and what is meant.

Pleasure is portrayed as ongoing and cyclical. There is no closure of narrative in serial soap operas and Fiske (1987a: 183) sees this as constitutive of a feminine subjectivity in its opposition to masculine pressures and rewards. The climactic and final ending is seen conversely as representing masculine pleasures. Women are defined as opposing and undermining such masculinist pleasure. And yet as a contradiction, women's subversion is also controlled within masculine hegemony.

"... soap opera narratives consistently validate these feminine principles as a source of legitimate pleasure within and against patriarchy". (Fiske 1987a: 83)

In an episode of 'Eastenders', Sharon chided her husband Grant with the words: "you're going soft!". One reading may rejoice in the ambiguity (what **did** she mean?). Sharon seeks the protection of patriarchy whilst 'wilfully' seeking, by means of Grant's perceived vulnerability, greater control and power in the marital relationship. Sue Lees shows how this indicates a shift from a former passivity in girls' consumption of romance stories to a more active positioning:

"A strong image of femininity can be seen on television soaps such as Neighbours, Eastenders and Brookside which present women as less romantic and as strong if not stronger and more independent than the men."

(Lees 1993: 111)

Such independence is often portrayed in soap operas as active sexuality. Soap operas, argues Fiske (1987a), are very sexual. Moreover, Brown (1987a) contends that soap operas are positive in the way sexuality and sexual pleasures feature in representations of women:

"*Women characters, then, use their bodies to achieve their own ends.*"

(Brown 1987a: 19-20)

'Conquest' is constantly being deferred, a woman never quite wins the man as compared to the masculine possession of the female in the moment of climax. Nevertheless, polysemy is apparent in 'Charlie's Angels'; mastery AND masochism can be read by the viewer as an admixture of masculine and feminine positions of subjectivity.

The question of subjectivity draws this first chapter to a close with all the difficulties of reaching a conclusion. To map the link between reader, text and context is riven with complexities, not least of which is the formulating of a feminine subjectivity as socially positioned. The popularity, audience activity and multiplicity of messages are mutually entailed and interdependent, suggesting not a unified text but a number of competing texts, offering as these do different readings. Nothing in cultural studies sufficiently explains how media representations are appropriated, as distinct from being consumed. But audience studies come closest through ethnographic research methods. However, too much emphasis is placed on viewing behaviour. The question remains: how does mediation occur? Morley (1986) identifies an intermediary stage of interpretation which partly succeeds. This may be contextualised in a family setting, in which female and male patterns of viewing are interrelated, and as such constitutive of femininity. Or it may be located in the way females talk avidly about television texts to the extent of forming collectivities for this purpose. Such networks are found to loom large in the world of the female television viewer, socially situated as she is, as is the text. Thus text, context and indeed, intertextuality are all important. The latter phenomenon interplays with other media organs and with aspects of everyday life. Yet is questionable that teenage girls' everyday life is situated solely in the private space of domesticity or in the public space of school/college interacting with a best friend or group of friends. Tomlinson's (1991) data suggests some girls watch television alone.

Brown (1990) points to feminist culturalist critical theory in order to present an account of femininity reproduction through media texts, identifying the relationship of meanings to particular audiences, in which power is invoked over women and girls in their pursuit of pleasure. Brown defines a discourse as a way of speaking or being spoken to. Nevertheless, Lewis (1990) in the same volume, seems to take the reproduction of texts as 'given', offering as evidence only the concepts in girls' imitation of their stars such as 'style' and 'demeanour' (Brake1985).

2

Reflexivity And The
'Researcher - As - Instrument'

In an article by Maurice Punch, entitled 'Politics and Ethics in Qualitative Research' the feminist movement is credited with introducing the notion of collaboration into field research. Punch (1994) argues that the emphasis on detachment and objectivity, as exemplified most notably in anthropology by Malinowski's classical studies, must be challenged and rejected for what it is; exploitation of the researched, by the researcher. In tandem with such an 'ethical' methodology lies the need to recognise the 'researcher-as-instrument', first advocated by Oakley (1974) and now cited by Punch as a requisite shift in qualitative research. Rather than adopting a facade of alleged neutrality, it is increasingly believed that the social positioning of the investigator must be openly declared and acknowledged. In effect, the **'process'** (method) of the research enterprise takes on as high a profile as the **'product'** itself (i.e the phenomenon under study).

The appeal for reflexivity is set against the current credibility of 'scientific' validity, a concern often taken up within qualitative field research, facing as it does criticism by the positivist lobby. Personal accounts of researchers are deemed to be trivial, anecdotal and scarcely worthy of space (Punch 1989: 203). Punch (1994: 85) advises that a biographical approach IS valid, and yet as he notes, in the predominantly male-dominated field of academic research, such personal accounts have been largely assigned to 'anodyne appendices'.

Such concerns are germane to the current study. Analysis of the chosen methodology has engendered a reflective analysis involving a particular configuration: feminist theory/feminist politics/the male researcher. Initially, the present study of femininity will be criticised in terms of its capacity to enhance feminist theory, with particular emphasis on the prevailing mode of reciprocity in such research. Feminism in the classroom and youth centre has been a feature of previous research in teenage femininity. Can girls be empowered, given that their subordinate subject positions are

driven by the dominant discourse of femininity? Above all, what of the novel gendering in this research project? This section will include a critical analysis of the male interviewing females, in light of claims that men researchers can only represent and objectify (Stanley and Wise 1983: 169). If such a view is justified, then a middle-aged man's access to teenage femininity meaning-systems is fundamentally flawed. This analysis will argue that far from being futile, the current study will hopefully enhance the debate around this contentious methodological issue.

Feminist discourse, in its critique of the male bias in social science research, has as its main tenet the principle of collaboration. This is deemed necessary in overcoming the exploitative relationship involved in 'men's' research, associated as it is with distance and scientific discipline. This unitary definition of reality, is, it is argued, but one definition of reality, and the claims of objectivity are subjective in themselves (Stanley and Wise 1983: 133). Feminist researchers need not fear subjectivity; rather, they are to acknowledge subjectivity, indeed, rejoice in the shared experience with research subjects:

> *... among the canons of the qualitative approaches in the social sciences are the unity of the knower and the known, and the dependence of the findings on the procedures used in discovering. But it is only very recently that the significance of gender and other aspects of reflexivity in the field has entered the mainstream of academic discourse. And it is even more recently that fieldwork reflexivity has itself become the object of analysis.*
>
> (Warren 1988:51)

Such a shift is underwritten by a search for equality in the research relationship. The research method was aimed at facilitating both consent for, and equality in, the chosen means of data collection. Parental consent was obtained (Appendix 4). Subjects were accessed through gatekeepers, by telephone, at each site. The twenty four subjects that had been planned, were reduced to nineteen, due to problems with accessing girls at 'Fairview' Youth Centre. In the event only one girl was interviewed at that site. The subjects ranged in age from fifteen to seventeen. If the conventional research dyad is to become collaborative, it is argued that reflexivity of the researcher must involve openness: to lay open, to make vulnerable the **researcher** instead of the **researched** as was usual (Stanley and Wise 1993: 170). It notable that in academic research, long

dominated by white middle-class males, there has been a built-in device to side-step such vulnerability: namely, by emphasis on 'real' data. Feminist methodology is far removed from this position, as we shall now see.

As argued in the methods section (see Appendix 1) the body of knowledge known as feminist theory is brought to the present study in the form of pre-existing categories. Such abstraction provides something of the framework in analysing the data, but it is not enough in itself. Further categories are derived from analysis of the raw data. Bulmer (1984: 247) points to an independent method of data analysis synthesising the theoretical and 'experience'. He argues against the purely inductive method, and claims the usage of pre-existing categories AND categories derived from the new data is both ideal and inevitable. The present study utilises both methods; categories from existing feminist cultural studies are utilised in the questionnaire, whilst analysis of interview data has led to new categories being formulated. The fulcrum of this discussion rotates around yet another component of the research equation; the research dynamic as data. A critical analysis of the 'researcher-as-instrument' in relation to the current research project will now follow, subsequently moving on to an examination of feminist politics in previous research, along with its implications for the current discussion.

The 'researcher-as-instrument' position is underpinned by the dissolving of power differentials inherent in the masculinist mode of rationality and objectivity. Stanley and Wise (1983) argue that if this is to be achieved, a shared subjectivity is required. It is thus deemed necessary to experience being female in order to understand femininity. It follows that a feminist epistemology can best be derived from the experience of sharing and collaborating. Taken to its logical conclusion, such a position would hinge upon subjects being women, too. It is argued, however, that collaboration must reach beyond moral disapproval, placing 'us' in the research as well as 'them', a category which includes sexist men. The rationale is thus:

> *"If they are vulnerable, then we must be prepared to show ourselves as vulnerable too".* (Stanley and Wise 1983:181)

It is fair to assume that such prescriptions apply to intensive research methods such as participant observation. Such a focus is confirmed by Punch (1994) and his

view is endorsed strongly by Reinharz (1992) who suggests 'total immersion' and an 'epistemology of insiderness'. Such exhortations do not sit comfortably with the current project under discussion, which is subject to restriction in resources, is conducted on a part time basis and has a confined focus. Such a set of circumstances does not lend itself to the intensive ethnographic methods where the anthropological phenomenon of 'going native' is a distinct possibility. Moreover, the chosen strategy of one-off interviews are not conducive to immersion and can be charged with a certain level of exploitation. Feminist researchers can be, and are exploitative, however, as will be indicated below.

Reference to a few studies of teenage girls' construction of femininity adds weight to the argument that a political agenda of feminism may yet exploit those very subjects which it seeks to empower. Nava's (1992) study of lesbian issues in a girls' project was much criticised on the grounds that only a lesbian should conduct research in lesbianism. Sexual preference was brought into the equation, with the view that collaboration and shared subjectivity was not possible between a heterosexual 'researcher' and lesbian 'researched'. Sharing womanhood is not sufficient. All females go through unique, specific, and contextually grounded experience (Stanley & Wise 1983: 132). Moreover, Valerie Walkerdine (1984) assumes a reflexivity in her subjects, investing them with a 'resistance' in her interpretation of their interpretations, when in fact such girls may well be engaged simply in the discourse of romance from the phenomenon of femininity, with no political consciousness whatsoever. Sandra Taylor (1993) also researches teenage girls' ideology of romantic love in conducting a feminist political activism in the classroom. She cites love of men and children as a denial of self. Such 'emphasised femininity' is seen to serve the interests of 'hegemonic masculinity' in heterosexual relations. All three feminist researchers could be charged with exploitation: Walkerdine's subjects appropriated to enable her theoretical categorisation and Taylor's cohort acting as a conduit for her feminist activism for girls, without their explicit consent. Nava (1992) at least exhibits some reflexivity in her biographical accounts, but reflexivity is not the same as collaboration. As Stanley and Wise (1983) acknowledge, moves towards undoing the power imbalance, such as reflexivity, cannot obviously remove it.

What is at stake here is the task of reconciling equality with difference in studying feminine experience. Differences in age, class, professional status, indeed, sexuality inevitably act in impeding collaboration in the research enterprise, as indicated above. Moreover, any attempt to install a feminist consciousness into teenage girls' discourse of femininity is impaired by observed difference. An example from the study under discussion involved the researcher asking a 17 year old girl about a scene from 'Home and Away' in which Angel embraces Shane as a means of 'getting him back'. Her response to the question "should a girl make a pass at a boy?" was underwritten by the researcher's feminist discourse in which a girl attains active control of her sexuality, but the respondent's reading was referenced by passivity and premised on the fear of rejection, by definition the 'worst that could happen' in the reflexivity of teenage femininity (McRobbie 1978). This brings us to the vexed question: can a male researcher study females? Is researching 'the other' a case of 'mission impossible'?

The main problem with the male researcher studying females is this; he is male and cannot share the subjective experience of being female. Nor can he readily interpret the construction of femininity by a television audience who, in John Fiske's (1994: 196) words, are 'active agents in the circulation of meanings'. The current researcher has no chance of undertaking the full-scale ethnography which Fiske enjoys, so has reduced access to shared subjectivity. Just as awareness of social context is necessary in the above research into television viewing, then so too does the current researcher need to be mindful of his social positioning, viz., a white, middle-aged, middle class, professional, heterosexual male. Such difference may well impact on the chosen method of single interviews and data analysis in important ways.

Reflexivity goes some way to transcending such inequalities although assumed commonalties such as shared sexual orientation may serve to redress the balance, anyway. Nevertheless, it would be difficult, for example, to share the experience of a mother-daughter relationship. In one instance, in consulting a mother as regards a clip from 'Coronation Street' in which Tracey seeks to undermine her mother, this was 'read' as Tracey no longer living at home, and thus by implication, no longer under her mother's control. This interpretation had not occurred to the current male researcher. Moreover, by dipping in to his own biography, the current researcher can draw upon

empathic skills developed over a long career in mental health nursing and teaching. Such experience supports Punch's (1994) argument that recounting personal involvement as data in itself challenges the feminist orthodoxy, in which only women can interview women in arenas formerly largely inaccessible to males. In addition, from an autobiographical point of view a sense of self is contingent upon the existence of the 'other'. Fine (1994) argues that to conduct research collaboratively one must seek to dissolve this polarity, having constructed it, and yet at the same time necessarily including the hyphen in the 'self'- 'other' dichotomy in our writing up, in order to enhance reflexivity and make strides towards 'recovering the personal' (Stanley & Wise 1983: 134) in a way the writer has tried to do above in the 'Coronation Street' example.

In conclusion, far from being fundamentally flawed, the form of ethnographic research currently undertaken is far from unique in its exploitative nature. With reference to a sample of feminist scholarship it becomes apparent that the entire realm of feminist activism in the classroom, far from empowering and collaborating with subjects, is redolent of power differentials. Moreover, it will not have been lost on the reader that just as feminist research exposes shared subjectivity, it at once struggles to 'break out of the circle' of rationality which it depends upon to present argument in the academy. Arguments purporting that only women can interview women are to be criticised as 'essentialist', failing to recognise the enhanced social skills of certain male researchers. The reflexivity that is advocated is suggestive of a move towards personal accounts in qualitative research, from the notion that the researcher-researched dynamic is data itself. The contemporary legacy of feminism in which researchers have sought to eschew inequality is now recognised as being shot through with differences within womankind, so much so that the current undertaking is absolved of some of the charges which had deterred most males in the past. Yet the irony is that the first person has been avoided in this account, in favour of 'the current researcher' terminology, indicating that there is clearly some way to go towards autobiography. At least greater awareness of the inherent difference of the social positioning in the research relationship promises progress as the researcher becomes ever more visible in the data.

Having resolved to speak in the first person narrative from now on, I will start by saying something about the subjects in terms of their positioning within the social

structure, before presenting the detailed analysis of the findings emanating from my study. I must at once emphasise the centrality of gender in the study. Very little attention is paid to social class, such is the focus on femininity as **constitutive** of a gendered discourse, and **constituted** by 'difference' in an albeit complementary construction of femininity/masculinity in a largely heterosexual cultural formation.

So as to place on record the subjects' social positioning, I should point out that all nineteen girls were from lower middle class or upper working class families. I will try to substantiate my claim in the following analysis by initially indicating each girl's father's occupation as per the Registrar General's classification, and in the case of an absent father, or in addition, (where possible) her mother's occupation. I shall indicate this only once so as to avoid repetition. Pseudonyms have been used for the subjects and research sites in order to protect their anonymity. All girls' siting in top streams, or equivalent, in terms of their aspirational focus, should be viewed in the context of their social class positioning. By pointing out that all subjects are white, will confirm, I hope, that no attempt is made to analyse the impact of race in the cultural construction of femininity. This is not, I hasten to add, indicative of any bias on my part but is a product of the necessity for a limited focus within the parameters of the study. This now leaves me to begin reporting my analysis of the data collected in the study.

Part 11

Paradoxes and producerly texts

in readings of soap opera

3
Social realism and soap opera

Girls' viewing of television involves a contradiction. Just as they watch and enjoy fictional television, notably soap operas, they make disparaging remarks about the very same programmes. Their interpretation appears to be modified by personal values around education: girls undertaking 'A' levels in particular, talked of their regular viewing in a perjorative manner, as if they have adopted a commonly held view amongst their teachers towards television as at best, superficial and irrelevant or at worst, damaging. Elaine (17), for example, when asked if she could identify at all with events in the lives of leading female characters in soap operas stated:

> *Oh dear no! If I was going to handle situations like they do I think I'd be in rather a mess!*

This is notable, if only for the fact that soap opera is regarded by John Fiske (1987a) and others as such a feminine genre: it appeals to a predominantly female audience, it is inhabited largely by female characters and involves a narrative relevant to a particular female audience. Aspirational teenage girls, as an audience, are addressed by the text specifically in terms of the plotlines and are temporally situated. That is, the Australian soaps such as 'Neighbours' and 'Home and Away' are programmed precisely when such girls get home from school and college, and maybe have a meal (the 'television dinner' phenomenon) before going to homework and/or study. Elaine's quote above is a reminder that young females exhibit much resistance in their reception of soap opera, with significantly rather less compliance. Such resistance involves girls' judgement as regards the plausibility of soap opera narratives, unlike previous work in cultural studies which has tended to emphasise girls' understanding of such cultural texts as a feature of femininity. Yet for all their dissociation, there is an engagement with leading characters in the text. This is not to say that there is a direct or conscious identification with specific characters. But in evaluating the form of femininity as portrayed by Annalise in 'Neighbours', in contrast to Beth in the same programme, teenage viewers were time and time again involved in an active interpretation, talking as if such girls and young women were real.

Some qualification is required on this point, however. Social realism as a term, has in this instance, been applied to the issue-laden narrative prevalent in contemporary soap opera. In the current study I found subjects distinguished characters from the narrative. As regards the latter, it was often reported that the storylines were too fantastic with little relevance to everyday life. Primarily a scepticism about so much happening in one locality was evident.

As Shaun Moores (1993: 49) has argued, viewers are both resistant and compliant. This is indeed the case with teenage girls, whose ambiguity must be contextualised within the parameters of an academic value system, in itself produced and reproduced through their subcultural context in tandem with an 'institutional' ideology. Overall, in this instance girls are more resistant than compliant. The context of where research has taken place is certainly an important factor to be considered. On the other hand, if girls academic-achievement-orientation was of such influence then intuitively one would expect girls not to watch soap operas at all. That they do is not in doubt - they are ready to admit to such viewing practices. At times viewing IS reduced or largely eliminated. When revision is undertaken, for example, the ambiguity in everyday life around the pursuit of pleasure in femininity versus the aspirational ethos shows a tendency for academic values to override pleasure. Yet even then a feminine discourse based on television viewing is maintained. (See Part 11, Chapter 5).

Thus the social phenomenon of television viewing in its broadest sense clearly is part of lived reality. Notably I didn't find any teenage girls who reported watching NO television. A meaningful issue is, I suggest, the degree to which teenage girls regard soap opera as engaging with real life. In order to examine this issue I intend to analyse three major oppositions inherent in teenage girls television viewing practice: the narrative as realistic/unrealistic; the representation of leading female characters as relevant/irrelevant to girls' everyday lives and finally interpretation of the programme as critical reader/referential reader (Livingstone 1994). At the same time I wish to interweave an analysis of my capacity to share meanings with subjects as a way of accurately understanding their interpretations.

a) "It's just escapism".

Teenage girls are faced with a range of contradictions regarding their television viewing in general and soap opera in particular. Of all the television genres soap opera has been regarded as 'feminized' not least because its audience is comprised mainly of females (Morley 1986; Hobson 1982; Modleski 1982; Ang 1985). It has, furthermore, been cited as a vehicle for feminist politics in its representation of strong women (Brunsdon 1988). 'Coronation Street' notably has a history of strong female characters. Such a feature is increasingly seen as part of the style of drama called 'social realism'. This term was first introduced by Richard Hoggart (1957) in 'The Uses of Literacy' and is meant to indicate a populist literacy style which emphasises a traditional way of life still associated with close-knit working class communities. The resultant myth is fed by, and perpetuated in, nostalgia and conservatism. As regards the convention of soap opera, Dyer et al (1981) point to an articulation between what is portrayed by the text and the world viewers actually live in. A fine line is drawn between authenticity and the comic representation of women. Often a gendered opposition is evident in which women are powerful. Such a narrative form sets out to be both entertaining in a comic way and serious in the exploration of social issues (Livingstone 1990: 38). The problem with Livingstone's social psychological approach is that it fails to explain the vast audience which such soap operas enjoy, clearly only a proportion of the huge audience shares the social positioning of the characters as a way of interweaving the narrative with lived experience, past or present. Despite this, 'Coronation Street' perpetually maintains its appeal regardless of dynamic patterns in viewing preferences. Yet if we examine teenage girls as a specific audience of soap opera then the contradictions inherent in viewing emerge, notably in relation to the text: it is not realistic and yet it entertains. The appeal of teenage soap operas as 'just escapism' must therefore be explored.

First and foremost girls point to the capacity which soap opera provides in winding down from the 'heavy duty' classroom:

Bonnie: *It's different really, you like to get away from reality.*

R.B: *O.K., Bonnie, you like to escape.*

Bonnie: *Yeh, sometimes. Sometimes you like to do things that are a good laugh. Sometimes people say it's too unrealistic but who really cares? It's nice just to get away from the realistic world.*

> **Pippa:** *If you want something in real life, it's not like that, is it? Real life is things like 'Casualty'. All these kind of things like 'Eastenders'. 'Saved by the Bell', none of it's real is it?*
>
> **Bonnie:** *It's silly because they claim that it's supposed to be like real life. It's not, but I don't care.*

The same group of 15-year old girls at Parklands School differentiate soap opera narratives from similar narratives in 'Casualty' or 'The Bill'. Technically these two programmes comprise a series rather than a continuous serial in that episodes are more distinct entities with less of an ongoing storyline than those found in 'soaps'. Whereas soap opera narratives are designated unrealistic, 'Casualty' and 'The Bill' are valued as a distinct viewing preference for action:

> **R.B:** *O.K. so you watch 'London's Burning'. Why do you watch the soaps?*
>
> **Sally:** *For the home life, **because that's what you are supposed to think**.*
>
> **R.B:** *Yes.*
>
> **Sally:** *You watch the soaps for a certain thing, that's why you watch the soaps. But you watch 'London's Burning' because you are always waiting for something to happen.*
>
> **Bonnie:** *I don't know why they actually bother calling it 'London's Burning' why not just call it 'Fireman's Home Life'! (Laughter)*
>
> **Pippa:** *And 'The Bill' is very good because that is just about police work and I really like 'The Bill', that is one of my favourite programmes, there's a lot of, you know, **I do like action** and you know there is at times.*
>
> **Bonnie:** *It's O.K. to bring a bit of home life like, for example, 'Casualty' does bring a little bit in, and that's O.K., just a little bit but 'London's Burning' just goes really over the top and that's not what it is really about that's why.....*

In what is a complex phenomenon, soap operas **do** provide a degree of escapism, despite being centred in the domestic setting so as to be more meaningful for a female audience, which continues to be socially constructed as inhabiting the 'private' sphere:

> **Amelia (16):** *A lot of it, I think, is to just get away from everyday problems just to ... just to relax.*
>
> **R.B:** *Ah, now, there's another question! Does it get you away from everyday problems though?*

> Amelia: *It depends what you ... soaps might do, yeh. But not anything like 'Panorama'. (laughs) But ... I don't know, that's more about facts, isn't it?*

Amelia can be cited once more as exemplary of teenage girls' capacity to be both compliant and resistant towards the same soap opera narrative. Such ambivalence is illustrated in two statements from her interview which illustrate such conflict:

i) Amelia: *You do get carried away, anyway. 'Eastenders...' we always do. If Grant say...*

    R.B: *You forget for a time, you forget it's a programme do you?*

    Amelia: *Yeh, I think so. So the story's good isn't it? With the story **you get lost in the ... the story**, the adventure of it.*

ii) Amelia: *... it's not like real life with the soaps. I don't ever get upset about them or affected by them. Do you see what I mean? But I just get entertained from the story of it, **it all seems a bit fantastic**.*

It is notable that such ambivalent comments are made about an 'adult' soap opera like 'Eastenders' which girls watch. 'Eastenders' and 'Coronation Street' are quintessential issue-laden 'soaps' and this alone may explain a teenage girl audience given that such 'soaps' are deemed to be educational in terms of social relevance. Recognising adult soap opera as providing escapism, melodrama AND education justifies a further reference to social realism in relation to the highly popular Australian soap operas 'Neighbours' and 'Home and Away'. Hoggart's social realist positions, to recap, involve mundane events in everyday life, emphasis on women (predominantly strong characters), a notable absence of work along with a celebration of nostalgia. I wish to argue that contrary to what one might expect, the nineteen girls in this study saw the Australian soap narratives as unrealistic at the very same time that they watched and indeed, enjoyed such storylines. Narratives relay relatively explicit moral messages, (in contrast to say, 'Heartbreak High' a soap opera which is much less sanitized, and addresses more 'nitty gritty' issues) yet at the same time offer representations in young 'soaps' covering a range of femininities in diverse young-women characters. Such diversity in characters reflects greater gender fluidity in the audience around contemporary forms of femininity.

Nevertheless, girl viewers cannot look to strong female characters as role models a la 'Coronation Street'. Yet this is no loss, as girls are active viewers and in a way 'demand' the matrix of femininities evident in real life In this sense it is no accident that girls engage with female characters much more, as will become clear later. Narratives, in contrast, are but forms of entertainment, a means of escape. Rebecca (17) helped me in my quest to better understand how girls watch the Australian 'soaps', at a specific time of day immediately after school or college:

R.B: *... you still find time for some of these so-called lighter*
                programmes the ...
Rebecca: *Yeh, because you need to relax so... you just watch all these*
                television (inaudible)...
R.B: *O.K. What's your routine, then? You get home from college ...*
Rebecca: *have a bit of a rest and watch something like, something that's a*
                bit er ...
R.B: *... I can guess what you're talking about.*
Rebecca: *... and forget about college. All of it.*

Finding that teenage girls interpret soap operas as depicting unrealistic narratives refers back to the social realist perspective. Social realism is relevant in the context here whereby girls are active viewers of soap operas, which Livingstone (1990: 114) argues, are concerned with moral and social issues. Notably such social realism exceeds the emotional realism seen by Ang (1985) as germane to 'Dallas', by which women viewers, in relating to the female characters are engaged in a 'tragic structure of feeling'. However, teenage girl viewers of soap operas are not necessarily any more 'active' in their viewing practice than adult women. Whilst girl-boy relationships loom large in 'Neighbours' and 'Home and Away' particularly, this is not to suggest that girls' knowledges are any more sophisticated. Indeed, from the social psychology strand of cultural studies which she inhabits, Sonia Livingstone (1990: 37) warns of the risk that the 'active' viewer becomes too 'cognitive' at the expense of her emotional life (in television viewing and the rest of lived existence). Whether girls' resistance is a product of their ability to reflect on their viewing is not so important. The crucial issue is, rather, to do with whether an overly cognitive interpretation is compounded by the academically-orientated milieu in which teenage girls are increasingly visible. In this analysis, the 'feminization' of the public space at once drives a self-consciousness

central to such resistance. This is but a partial explanation, however. Yet it does provide the opportunity to develop the analysis of the active viewer. I will therefore now attempt to unravel some of the cultural and political positions as a way of highlighting the contradictions in the current controversy surrounding young people and television.

What I want to suggest here is that the male critique of female viewing practice is underwritten by a polarised gender construction in which men are active and women are passive. Foucault (1979) in his genealogy of power/knowledge shows how such an opposition serves as a mechanism of social control at a particular time in history. Locating girl viewers in active viewing therefore runs counter to a dominant construction of femininity. It is ironic in this context that the New Right condemns girls' soap opera viewing as trivial if not damaging, at the very moment it traditionally endorses the female as 'passive'. In this way, active girl viewers transgress the mainstream and 'moral majority' notion of themselves as 'cultural dopes', in that they have the agency to both reject and appropriate messages at will. This issue is ever more complicated, however. Girls certainly do not perpetuate the definition of themselves as 'passive' but neither do they, in general, openly and reflexively oppose dominant gender discourse. They are helped in the process of negotiating meanings by contemporary feminism which challenges the distinction between biology and social construction so redolent of 1970's feminism (Barrett and Phillips 1992: 4). Moreover, oppression can no longer simply be explained by sexual difference. In their struggle to resolve such tensions in cultural practice, however, they are at once observed to pay heed to a conservative ideology while simultaneously identifying and addressing cogent meanings in their appropriation of soap opera narratives, as part of the infinite construction of their femininity.

b) Leading female characters

Unlike their resistance to soap opera narratives, which are seen as unrealistic and not relevant to their lived existence, teenage girls do engage with certain female characters. Thus an element in the construction of femininity is the meanings which girls produce by insertion into the text, a text which is characterised by gaps through

which girls insert their own interpretation. In order to form representations of soap opera characters, teenage girl viewers incorporate dual determinants in their interpretations: the structure of the text and the reader's social knowledge (Livingstone 1990: 111). Interpretation tends to follow a range of oppositions, the central one of which is relevant/irrelevant. Others include a more evaluative dichotomy such as admirable/contemptible, and the career-conscious/'man mad' division. Another opposition which feeds into Christian-Smith's (1993) classification of conventional femininity/competent femininity is the passive/active division. Thus whilst it is evident that teenage girls viewing of soap opera is reported by them as escapist in terms of the narrative, there is an interesting willingness, indeed competency on their part to interpret and evaluate female characters. That they do this is not so much to do with some 'natural' ability to read characters; such competency has to be developed over a long term, involving a familiarity with the characters, to the extent that soap opera viewing becomes embedded in real life. A spin-off from this sense of familiarity is 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu 1984) acting as a competency which has important currency in talking about television texts (see Chapter 5). In such a way watching and talking about soap operas as a feminine genre is a culturally-specific pleasure (Ang 1991: 12).

A note of caution is necessary, however. Although the subjects in this study showed skill in representing soap opera characters they were keen to emphasise that such characters are NOT role models. Annalise in 'Neighbours' most notably fits into this category; as we shall see she is repeatedly represented as portraying the kind of femininity that high-achievement girls do not aspire to: she is constructed by turns as irrelevant, contemptible and passive and even in the most generous reading she is not considered a role model:

Pippa (15): *I like Annalise. I like the way she looks and the way she acts. I **wouldn't do it myself** but in that programme I think she's different compared to everyone else, really. She makes it fun.*

Kirstie (15): *Annalise, **I wouldn't like to be like her**. I like the clothes she wears, the way she looks.*

Annalise is a young woman who indeed, I see as very conscious of the way she looks, she portrays a skilful use of make up and is seen by girl viewers as adopting a 'man mad' approach to life. They see her need for affirmation of her female identity as

contingent upon approval from men, so much so that her self esteem is represented as being concomitant with men noticing her. In short, Annalise demonstrates an exaggerated femininity which has no credence for the teenage girl aiming for (academic) success. Moreover, Annalise represents for viewers something of a stereotypical 'blonde bimbo', an anachronistic figure for girls embedded in an aspirant subculture. In Part III I will examine more closely Annalise and what she signifies in relation to key concepts of contemporary teenage femininity, such as autonomy and empowerment.

For now it will suffice to suggest that a character like Beth represents an antithesis of Annalise and is evaluated by girls as admirable in contrast to Annalise's contemptible image. This moral dimension is a feature of viewers representations of 'Eastenders' characters (Livingstone 1990: 124). In being evaluated in a generally more favourable light a character occupies a different position on the two-dimensional map as pioneered by Livingstone. This is an important point, if only for the fact that such research is not cultural studies in the strictest sense but is more akin to media effects research. Ang (1991) in her overview of effects research (also known as mass communications research) argues that such research involves an empiricist and possibly positivist model of audience studies. Such a discipline is seen to be dominated by what Ang (1991: 9) calls the institutional point of view. The end result of this approach is, Ang argues, the television audience presented as an unlocated generic whole (Ang 1991: 11). Cultural studies, in its qualitative approach, presents a marked contrast to mass communications research and is much better equipped to study a tremendous diversity and heterogeneity of **the** audience specifically located in a temporal and social context. At this point I want to criticise Ang's argument in that it points to a sharp distinction between media effects research and critical theory/cultural studies, roughly parallel to a quantitative/qualitative dichotomy. The presentation of such a polarity in research methodology does not chime with the specific audience being studied: academically able teenage girls of diverse ages all attending some educational institution in one town, whose everyday lives have an undercurrent concerned with the moral panic around the effects of video and by implication, television, on young people. On the other hand, my emphasis on a specific local audience at a given moment in time does bring me to agree with Ang's differentation of media effects research and cultural studies

or put another way, the generalised 'television audience' as compared to a particularistic audience, in which subjects, like those in my study, are socially and culturally situated. Despite my concern about media effects research I **have** drawn upon Sonia Livingstone's social psychology/cultural studies model in this section as I consider it an apposite way to analyse audience-centred characterisation. This issue does conversely serve as a reminder of the shortcomings of what I take to be the 'television audience' approach as defined by Ang, in research conducted by the Broadcasting Standards Council, as reported by Brooks (1994). What I take to be a survey method generated unproblematic role models for teenage girl viewers, not incidentally, role models that had been predicted: unexpected representations of femininity such as Joanna Lumley, Ruby Wax and Helen Mirren. In the current study such media personalities were not cited by subjects. Rather, it was young female characters who gave meaning to girls through being interpreted as relevant or irrelevant.

Veronica (17) for example, reports that she doesn't really relate to any one of the female characters. Moreover, she wouldn't want to be like any of them.

> Veronica: *I think um, they always appear just too far from reality to relate to.*
>
> R.B: *O.K. you say that, but is there any time that you feel yourself there?*
>
> Veronica: *Umm... there have... It think sometimes they're me ... but I can't think who. I remember thinking sometimes. I've thought yeh, I agree with that but I think it's more over the way decisions are made.*

A marked disbelief in the plausibility of the soap opera plot may well thus impact upon the meaningfulness of female characters for teenage girls. However, inserting their own meanings into the gaps within the soap opera narrative, as I suggest Veronica does above, is a far cry from citing specific role models. Similarly, Katrina (17) shows some prevarication in talking about Beth in 'Neighbours':

> R.B: *O.K. So do you ever look at her and think: "I could be assertive like that"?*
>
> Katrina: *Yeh, yeh, I suppose so, because I'm not really very assertive but ... yes, yes, she is.*

Valerie (17) too reports that she "doesn't really relate to them" (leading female characters). Bonnie (15) states:

I don't feel myself as any of them, because they're all a bit stupid.

The masculine/feminine and moral/immoral dimensions so redolent of 'adult' soap opera characterisation does not at first hand appear relevant to the Australian soap characterisations. On the other hand, traditional/progressive dimension of 'Coronation Street' (Livingstone 1990: 123/124) characters does perhaps correspond with the conventional/competent formations of femininity found in teenage girls' reading of romance (Christian-Smith 1993). This is not to conflate the progressive dimension with the immoral dimension (Livingstone 1990) as underlined by subjects' adamant response when asked by Bianca in 'Eastenders':

R.B: *Let's think then about, what about 'Eastenders'? Bianca and her mother, yeh?*

Elizabeth: *Oh, Bianca's ... I would never behave like that.*

R.B: *Is Bianca right there?*

Elizabeth: *No, she's not. Bianca's awful. She just doesn't, she doesn't care about people at all, she just takes, takes and doesn't give anything.*

The general disapproval of Bianca, a girl who is viewed as materially dependent on her mother, father and stepfather and yet behaves in an independent manner problematises the construction of her autonomous femininity. Autonomy will be explored more fully in Part lll as part of the constellation of pleasure and power around femininity. Suffice it to say, for now, that the current subjects, girls who are keen to succeed academically and are aspirant, refuse in particular those female characters who portray a conventional femininity ridden with passivity and dependency. Yet they face the contradiction of incorporating a caringness so long associated with traditional femininity. Clearly no single, female character on television can represent the kind of femininity which they prescribe for themselves. Moreover, they haven't subscribed to their viewing practice as having cultural capital, notwithstanding its part in the discourse of talking about television texts. Such resistance in their readings hints at a genuine concern regarding my capacity to gain understanding through a shared subjectivity with those involved in the study. It is to this issue that I will now turn.

In the absence of academic achievement prefiguring career-consciousnes what can a girl do but to look to her attractivenes as a vehicle for advancement? Annalise in

'Neighbours' is a case in point. This character is defined by 'girls in the fast lane' as a 'blonde bimbo'. Whereas they give themselves licence to flaunt their beauty as complementary to their channel of advancement, Annalise, in contrast is typified as using her beauty in a manipulative way, by exploiting her exaggerated femininity. This may well be a construction that is relative to other female characters portrayed in 'Neighbours' who are seen as career-minded young women who don't need to use their bodies to get on and to gain power. It is something of a paradox that the very kind of character like Annalise who **needs** to seek alternative channels of advancement is proscribed from flaunting her beauty, whereas the audience group at Pinewood School who can access more mainstream success-orientated routes give themselves permission to do just that:

R.B.	*... if you're not clever as a young woman like Annalise, well say she isn't clever, we're all agreed on that ... that she's not very clever. So surely she's only got ... she has to use her sexuality to get round men. Is that in order Sherrie?*
Sherrie (15)	*Em.*
R.B.	*.... to use her prettiness, to use her...*
Sherrie:	*Oh yeh, it's O.K. to use that. It's like if they're stupid enough to take it in.*
R.B.	*But they are, aren't they?*
Estelle (15)	*) Yeh*
Sherrie:	*) Yeh*
Estelle:	*Some really are. Sorry.*
Sherrie:	*You've got them under a barrel.*

Flaunting one's beauty is thus constructed as confined to the less able girls, which in turn compounds the subordination of an already disadvantaged group who occupy a lower rung of the hierarchy of female achievment. This is confirmed by Claire's (15) remarks on Annalise, whom she sees as using her sexuality:

"I suppose it's a way of getting there. Annalise doing it another way would be possible, but not probable. She kind of gets her own way in a wormy kind of way".

'If you've got it flaunt it' is not a motif favoured by the current subjects as a means to empowerment. It is in a sense, a last resort. Nevertheless, it intersects with heterosexual desire, in that it can be the very commodity that has cultural capital. Young males are seen having very much cultural capital in terms of their looks, but are

designated as powerless in their limited resistance to the beautiful girl. This phenomenon is informed by a naturalistic definition of male sexual drive. In such a context 'Annalise' is constructed as being competent and confident:

R.B.   *Does she (Annalise) use her attractiveness to get round men?*

Mandy (15)   *Erm, yeh. I think she does.*

R.B: *She does. Is that right to do that as a female. Is that fair?*

Mandy: *I dunno really.* **Men go for looks, anyway, when they're about our age. All the boys go for looks, rather than their personality, so ...**

R.B.   *So what you're saying is: "if you've got it flaunt it". Yeh?*

Mandy: *Yeh.*

Annalise's empowerment through beauty must be seen contextually in light of her subordinate status, working as a waitress at Lassiter's. This is a new development and a significant one at that. In the culture of femininity, however, her active expression of sexuality poses a challenge to the patriarchal construction of beautiful females as ornamental. In capturing the spotlight Annalise is seen to move away from the former position of marginalisation, in which women were represented as mere accessories in their relations with men. Furthermore, it further defies the way teenage girls have policed themselves with categories like 'flirt' and 'tart', underwritten as these terms are by male misogyny. Certain prohibitions still exist of course, as witnessed by the mention of Bianca Jackson's emblematic leopardskin leggings. But a libertarian ethos seems to have evolved around open expression of desire, grounded in a production of pleasure, that defies an orthodox feminism's critique of objectification. Nevertheless, such a progressive discourse feeds into feminism by seeking a more active positioning. Yet as we shall see moves to an assertive expression of desire are restrained by the heterosexual discourse of romance. For all that, a 'pocket' of resistance of heterosexuality persists and is fed by the 'heroine' of Beth Jordache of 'Brookside'. As Beth participated in one of the three 'main events' of 1995 television she must be considered later , if only as something of an exception.

c)   A partial reading?

This section seeks to address the emergent trend towards researcher autobiography in contemporary sociological research. To an extent this account will recap on Part I Chapter 2 but will also seek to complement the earlier analysis by grounding it in the current data. This use of the first person in writing up is but part of my intention throughout the study to move towards a reflexive and collaborative position, as far as possible. This position represents a shift away from the distanced, impersonal (and masculinist) style of the classic, sociological research paradigm in which claims of objectivity and validity are paramount. Rather, I lean towards what has come to be regarded as feminist interviewing, premised as that is on interaction rather than interviewing, notably in oral history (Minster 1991). This method foregrounds shared subjectivity; in other words, an attempt is made to transcend social difference by talking together on a shared interest. And yet, at the same time, the social positioning of the researcher with all of her/his biases, must be considered, if only on reflection in the interpretation of data and its subsequent presentation. It is worth considering the epistemological implications of such a method. This will now be attempted.

Ethnography in general, has, as mentioned above, sought recently to highlight or, at least, acknowledge the subjectivity of the researcher in order to deconstruct the field research, the interpretation of data and the exposition of the substantive. Such method acts as a criticism of monolithic knowledges that traditionally have made unitary claims to truth. In appealing for openness in reporting interview techniques and in particular, data analysis, van Zoonen (1993: 140) notes the conspicuous absence of such accounts in the publication of qualitative projects. Nevertheless, whilst mindful of the need to study the dynamics and context of qualitative interviewing in the present study (which does, arguably, represent something of a departure from the conventional sociological canon) I am aware of the marked tension between reflexivity, on the one hand, and the pressure to construct universalistic patterns of femininity on the other, as suggested by the title of this dissertation. In trying to reconcile the two, certain key themes have emerged, which I will now turn to explicitly in this section, and hopefully, within the body of work as a whole.

Firstly, as part of reflexivity, there is a need to examine the degree to which shared subjectivity is possible, or indeed, desirable. The question of shared discourse

forms the keynote of this discussion, as to the fact that the investigation of a cultural phenomenon rests upon the centrality of language in the understanding of the values beliefs and norms of that phenomenon. Secondly, ethics of research emerge in raising the questions germane to a notion of shared subjectivity, to do with who owns the research: how far can the subject speak for herself, and be involved in the interpretation of her own data? Empowering the subject by enabling her voice to be heard is not so much emphasing the difference between the subject and myself as to questioning how much I am entitled to speak for her. In turn, such a question leads into a third theme, that of understanding. Such an issue is underpinned by the recognition of the audience to which the dissertation is directed, in this case an academic one. Nevertheless, moves towards a mutuality of understanding must be encouraged in interviewing, without diverting from the academic demand for concepts and categories. I am all too aware that no matter how much I share the viewing interests of my subjects and quote them in their own words, I can at best achieve 'a partial truth' (Clifford 1986). Not least of my difficulties in attempting to derive generalisations from the data is the recognition of a need to cite the historical moments and cultural contexts in which the research is located.

Aside from the problematic involving (the researcher's) interpretation of (the subject's) interpretation in qualitative cultural studies, there is a need on the other hand, to identify the value of my capacity to 'make things strange' as man/researcher in contrast to girls/subjects who may well be too immersed in their assumptions as actors, to have a clear comprehension of their own everyday experience of femininity. From this opposing standpoint, it follows that despite all the barriers to shared subjectivity, I might yet lay claim to understanding subjects better than they understand themselves!

In Minster's (1991) critique of male interviewing, she argues that males interview as they speak, to assert dominance and to maintain an audience (Maltz and Barker 1982). Girls' use of speech is seen as distinct and this is reflected in females' interviewing, which is better described as interaction:

> '... when you rewind the tape you note a general concern for maintaining
> politeness and showing empathy'.   (Minster 1991: 33)

Such excerpts add weight to Minster's argument that a feminist frame of interview rests on a self-reflexivity within the interview that aims for politeness and collaboration.

I contend that Minster's analysis of the oral history interview is essentialist. It points to fixed codes of speech which are attributed to the female/male dichotomy. Yet another binary which she cites is the empathic/topic-laden styles associated with female and male interviewing styles respectively. It **is** true that the topic-laden character of the present study is brought about the constraints of the single interview method. It is less convincing to attribute my style solely to my sex as a male. Moreover, differences exist **within** women. Some women may follow a topic-laden mode. It is also worth remembering that a woman interviewer is by no means necessarily a feminist. At this point, I will now go on to offer evidence of sharing subjectivity in an attempt to undo the distancing so redolent of male interviewing (at least as Minster argues) and promote collaboration. I do this self-consciously from time to time, offering my own views on television characters:

i)   *Sherrie (15):*   *I can relate to the way Cody was trying to get on with her work. At the same time she was being torn a different way by her boyfriend.*

            R.B: *He irritates me really.*

            Sherrie: *Mm.*

            R.B: *..... I must say for some reason, Rick.*

ii)   *R.B:*   *But anyway, she... said she didn't want him to go training (Lara and Curtis in 'Home and Away'). "You should have spent your time with me". He obeyed her, and I thought: "he's got that wrong!"*

            Sherrie: *Oh, my God.*

However, this is a far cry from creating a shared subjectivity. It simply represents **one** way of facilitating greater mutual understanding. Ideally subjects should be given free rein to speak for themselves so that they can, in a sense, own the research. But the need for **some** structure in the interviews inveighs against such a position; a number of areas of interest need to be covered, if only to enable the mapping of concepts and patterns in subsequent data analysis. In tension with such an aim, however, as stated earlier, is the encouragement of subjects to speak for themselves, as an emancipatory gesture. In the event, the subjects at site 4, Pinewood School, for example, showed no inclination to hear their voices on audio-tape or, moreover, to be shown transcripts of their interviews. That they declined is a reminder that researchers'

best ethical intentions are not necessarily affirmed by the wishes of the subjects involved. On the other hand, previous exhortations in supervision to "ask the same questions to all the subjects" was undone somewhat by my trying to give a relative amount of freedom to each subject, following the course of the interview along the lines of a conversation. At a price, however. Replicability across interviews was not achieved, perhaps to a sufficient extent. In taking such a position I am reminded of Judd et al's (1991) argument that the test of believability is replicability. I'm not sure whether that applies to this study. Furthermore, I contend that personal transcripts act as a measure of validity as they are a true account of **what** was said by subjects. Certainly, my reading of their reading, if anything, challenges such validity, in the requisite search for patterns. This is not to say, however that shared subjectivity is necessarily lost in such a venture. I will now proceed to examine the means by which understanding can be maintained through a shared discourse.

In order to achieve what Aldridge (1993) refers to as intersubjectivity it is necessary to undo the separation between the subject and object. Ethnographic research, which Judith Stacey (1991: 112) understands to be participant observation, is cited by her as suitable for feminist researchers, because it encourages `connection' that she sees as parallel to the context of most women's everyday lives. At the same time, an attack is made on conventional research. In my case, `seeing through' the power inequality was made that much more difficult, and it is no accident that I offer my experience as data in itself. My task was not made easier by the contradictions which arose, one at least of which I will examine shortly. For now, the nagging question is: how did I seek connection through shared discourse? Primarily, I watched the same programmes as the subjects with the intention of achieving at least **some** credibility, if not expertise, in their eyes. This represents the notion of `doing preparation' , it is thought advisable to be informed on the phenomenon one is studying. In this instance, much of the interview focuses on leading female characters and their place in the narrative. It is difficult to talk together about such aspects if the researcher has no privileged access to the argot of Australian soap operas for example - words like `dork', `jerk', `cool' as well as words current in teenage girl culture such as `bof' and `sassy', which I learned as I went along (checking that these were not offensive of course!).

Nevertheless, my move to designate both the `researcher' and `researched' as subjects is rendered problematic when as Macdonnel (1986: 22) reminds us, individuals are constructed as subjects through many diverse ways, so much so that the task of speaking for others, which is the task that I presently encounter, would be preferably overlooked. Clifford's idea of a `partial reading' increasingly has more impact when it is considered that a discourse, as a particular area of language, takes its effect, ultimately in relation to opposing discourse (Macdonnel 1986: 30). By this argument, connection is rendered all the more difficult. Moreover, in terms of account writing, explications of subjects' meaning are too situated and contexted in their application (Macdonnel 1986: 10). Fiske also points to such conflicts as jeopardising attempts at analysing intersubjectivity and intrasubjectivity:

> *"Because our social experience has varied and does vary, so much, our subjectivities are likely to be composed of a number of different, possibly contradictory discourses..."*   (Fiske 1987a : 66).

Something in the way of autobiography will now serve to illustrate the diverse subject positions which I bring along to the role of researcher, reflected in my viewpoints and value system. As an undergraduate I studied `Gender Divisions in Contemporary Societies'. In the course of this study I sought to introduce a `politics of the personal' into interviews. I recall focusing particularly, on whether a girl should `move in' on boys, in an active expression of her sexuality, just as boys are said to do. I talked about Angel and Shane in `Home and Away':

R.B: *....she sat down with him and she put her arm around him, kissed him, and ...*

Cindi (17):   *Oh yes, oh yes!*

R.B: *I'm interested to know if you think it's right for a girl of her age to, to make a pass at a boy, she, she wants to go out with.*

Cindi: *Erm...*

R.B: *I mean, boys do that*

Cindi: *Yes.*

R.B: *He could do that to her, and it would be normal.*

Cindi: *I'd say it's right, but well, some girls wouldn't do that, though some would.*

R.B: *But you're not too sure, are you?*

Cindi: *No. I... I'd say it's acceptable for a girl to go up to a boy and kiss him.*

> *R.B:*   *Okay. Why don't more girls do it then, to the boys that they fancy, that they want to go out with?*
>
> *Cindi:*   *Well, they're they're like, more conscious. They think that they might not like them, or laugh at them, or something.*

My first reaction in reflecting on this part of the interview was that I was imposing my own political position, endorsing women's expression of their sexuality, on to the subject. Notably I had written an essay entitled 'Can feminism legislate desire?' as an undergraduate, and I maintained an interest in this particular area of gender politics. I charged myself with having overlooked Cindi's 'commonsense' reading embedded within her femininity, to do with fears of rejection. On further reflection however, I came to construct another reading: that rather than viewing me as sympathetic to feminism, a position, which I argue was confusing to her, Cindi perceived me as a male authority figure and, coupled with the seniority of my age, took the subordinate stand in relation to my hegemonic position. As a figure of control, I presented something of a parallel to the lecturer role she encountered at Clearwater College. I have tried to illustrate where disparate discourses come from, as in the above example of the respective and mutually enhancing positions in masculinity and femininity, and how such social positioning serves as an elision of intersubjectivity. I will now reverse my position as regards interviewing and argue that such experience can enhance the activity of account writing rather than undermine it. In this context I must yet again, note that the task of reporting falls on me, in the absence of subjects 'clamouring to be heard'.

In the way of a summary I draw upon the work of Judith Aldridge (1993) once more in the appeal for a textual embodiment in research account writing. In particular, I have tried to respond to her advice to attend to 'the producer' and 'production' and not just 'the product' in such writing. Yet I am mindful of Macdonnel's (1986: 18) argument that the field worker, in trying to ask natives to account for their practices, can never get exactly what is wanted: the unremarkable, everyday and taken-for-granted as appearing to natives in the course of their practices.

In the quest for what C Wright Mills (1963) called 'The Sociological Imagination' I would contend that whilst a partial reading is, indeed, feasible and

achievable, it would be even less of a reading if research account writing did not provide an opportunity for the researcher to insert herself/himself into the account, the social scientist at once becoming embodied in the text. It is the acts of data analysis and account writing that I see as providing an opportunity to stand back, in reflection on-practice (Schon 1983), that is, a reflection after-the-event. Lofland and Lofland (1984) argue for such a 'transcendent' view in qualitative research which cannot be achieved within the research site alone but within subsequent analysis. Their main tenet is thus:

> *.... alliances, accommodation, ruses and other necessary avoidances of ordinary life lead people to miss seeing many aspects of their situations."*
>
> (Lofland and Lofland 1984: 120)

A flawed quest for shared subjectivity, brought about by disparate subject positions and contrasting discourses, can thus take consolation that the **total** immersion of the researcher in the culture under study would threaten the completion of the enterprise. My analysis, through the necessary writing of this account, sees through the collective self-deceptions, the taken-for-granted ideas and assumptions held by girls as regards their femininity. My politics demand that I seek collaborative interviews, which in my way of thinking are a far cry from 'going native'. Yet analysis and writing serve as a safeguard against too much immersion, in which access to meanings might be similarly submerged.

d) "It's only a story": the critical reader.

Throughout Part II I have sought to better understand the way in which academically able teenage girls incorporate television viewing into the construction of a femininity of their own making. And yet at once, as I have contemplated the problematic of a shared subjectivity the advantage of my being 'outside' such subjectivity has been evident: the opportunity to transcend the commonsense assumptions around femininity of those on the 'inside'. This tension, inherent in cultural studies, intent as it is on exploring the way viewers make sense of a multiplicity of meanings, runs in parallel with other conflicts which require an analysis aimed at unravelling configurations interwoven into the everyday lives of high-achievement teenage girls. Indeed, in the construction of femininity itself, upwardly mobile female

adolescents confront the task of reconciling a traditionalist discourse which shapes them as passive and subordinate on the one hand, with a post feminist turn that codifies a more autonomous femininity. Within this formation girls accommodate dimensions such as concentrating on schoolwork, career planning and having control of one's own sexuality. Such dimensions are inscribed in girls' subscription towards more equal gender relations.

It is my aim in this section to point to a paradox in teenage girls' viewing practice. 'Namely, that teenage girls' active positioning is constrained by a mainstream formation, a traditional femininity in which women are controlled within, and sometimes subjugate themselves to their own subordination. I contend that the soap opera convention is an articulation of such tension in its most profound form. Witness the way a feminist agenda is threaded into a populist text almost by subterfuge; this 'sneaking in' of feminism acts as a metaphor which in itself is illustrative of the contradictions within femininity. So, this is not to argue for a univocal expression of empowerment in the soap opera text. Nevertheless, by their immersion of television into their everyday existence, girls can fill in gaps in the soap opera narrative and through this practice have room to confront a hegemonic meaning structure, or as it is commonly known, a received wisdom around femininity.

"It's only a story" serves as the watchword by which teenage girls negotiate a path between resistant viewer positions whilst still leaving room for their compliant enjoyment of soap opera. In such a way girls make sense of what they watch at the same time as locating the soap opera as a source of pleasure. As Allen (1992: 113) argues, a soap opera audience becomes familiar with the characters over time, and through becoming more familiar the viewer is more likely to watch every episode. This specific audience, however, is something of an exception, subjected as it is to an academic pressure (which I can relate to, as the act of writing restricts my appreciation of soap opera), acting in concert with a 'dominant' coding (Hall 1980c) or 'institutional' point of view (Ang 1991). Such a constraint serves to circumvent much of the uncritical pleasure of viewing of 'escapism', and underpins the ambivalence which 'top stream' girls experience.

It is in this direction that I intend to proceed; I argue that girls are active viewers focusing primarily on the notion of the 'critical reader' (Liebes and Katz 1990). As critical readers, girl viewers show a sophisticated awareness of the soap opera as a constructed text. Nevertheless, such a notion as critical reader in it's form of disengagement, cannot lay claim to a monolithic effect. That girls continue to watch soap operas at the very moment they dismiss it as 'just a story' points to a recognition of an overlap between such 'stories' and their own lives. To reiterate: whilst not 'identifying' with narrative/characters girls can, and do insert their own readings. Yet again, the continuity between television and everyday life serves to illustrate the diversity of shifting positions by which teenage girls make sense of constructing and reconstituting themselves.

High-achievers amongst teenage girls point to the constructed nature of the soap opera and even when they engage with a particular female character there is still an awareness that the soap opera is a production, and by implication, is irrelevant to everyday life. Programmes such as 'Neighbours' are seen as unlikely to raise any issues and can therefore be watched distractedly: Geraldine (17) whose mother is a single parent, is talking of how Gabby has been attracted to a gay man:

R.B.   ....*she took ages to find out. I think it was Gabby.*
Geraldine: *Yeh.*
R.B: ....*yeh, that's it. O.K. so you talked about that?*
Geraldine: *Mm.*
R.B.   *Did it change your mind at all?*
Geraldine: *Not really, because I don't have any strong views on '*
              Neighbours' anyway, **they're all just stories.**

Claire (15) a daughter of a school inspector, also takes a critical position:

Claire: *It's only acting and the way they say things like a sham, and the*
              way they say some things you can see that's it's acted so much
              that you don't trust it.

Melodrama in the text is aimed at entertaining an audience and can succeed in doing that, yet such insertion of oneself into the text is overridden by an awareness of the produced nature of the programme, as Claire once again illustrates:

Claire: *'Home and Away' I think is the most exaggerated programme.*
              Sometimes I can get quite tense in my seat. Like when that man

*was in Alf's shop. I was getting quite worried. And then I
realised it's only a story. I do feel like I'm actually there.*

An overriding need to entertain and attract a mass audience often precludes representations of assertive or autonomous females. This is not to say that a feminist agenda is deemed irrelevant, it is just that it has to be teased out. Edwina (17) identifies a need for scripts to be interesting or to arouse ironic pleasure rather than to heighten political awareness:

R.B:	*How do you think they come over; as independent, assertive or ...? (referring to the young female characters in Baywatch).*
Edwina:	*Yeh, probably. Definitely the more assertive rather than .....*
R.B:	*Is that how females should be represented then?*
Edwina:	*Not all the time. I mean it depends on what you're doing. I mean, if you're trying to do a film of a certain thing and the female character falls over and needs help or something I mean, that's part of the script. You can't suddenly stop it and say: "oh, she's got to be equal", I mean, you can't do that. (Laughs) It just depends on what you're doing.... I mean, you can't just say women have got to be equal on television at all times.*

The critical reader dimension extends to viewers' awareness of the appeal of such narratives. Girls in this study, for example, in linking their meanings with textual coding, can be deemed active in that soap opera texts characterised by much openness encourages this process, by incorporating gaps through which girls can produce their own (diverse) meanings. And yet whilst Roger Silverstone (1994: 144) is right in his analysis of the study of the audience as pointing to a tension between the individual and the social, his acknowledgement of the social positioning of subjects is reflected in the current evidence that there are commonalities of social positioning in the nineteen subjects in the present study extending far beyond the individual. One such key example is that the current subjects, for whom soap opera is a space for pleasure are all mindful of the soap opera as a production. Furthermore, they show a fundamental sophistication as regards how television addresses, appeals to, and seduces the viewer (Allen 1992: 102):

R.B:	*Two-dimensional, that's an interesting term of yours, what do you mean?*
Elizabeth (15)	*They, I'm sure what they do is, they, they put down stereotypes, and they write it into the hat, they put, they put 'pretty bimbo',*

and shove it in. And then they put, 'caring mother', and shove it in.

Elizabeth talks also of 'Brookside' bringing in real-life celebrities like Lily Savage or Michael Parkinson.

Elizabeth:	*Oh, that was just stupid that episode. There were just so many celebrities in it, so people would watch it. It was just ...it wouldn't' happen, would it? It was just a little restaurant and Lily Savage and who was the other one? It was ...*
R.B:	*So it has clicked now, you remember that one?*
Elizabeth:	*Yeh. Yeh, they wouldn't come and open a poxy little restaurant, it's just really silly. They were just putting celebrities on the television, so people would watch it.*

The subjects in the current study have all shown a tendency to distance themselves from the soap opera narrative, and yet engage, even identify with some of the female characters. The term 'critical reader' is derived from the work of Liebes and Katz (1990) and is largely to do with the viewer's awareness of the soap opera as a production, a constructed text, 'just a story'. Thus when aspirational girls struggle to justify their viewing of soap opera, maligning narrative structures as 'too far-fetched' and 'not like real life' they are intending to demonstrate detachment as a form of critical response. Such a response is often constructed by viewers as an elite privilege. However, such detachment is not the same as 'critical reading' which is a concept that involves, according to Liebes and Katz, a conscious creative oppositional encoding. While it is reasonable to hesitate from interpreting teenage girls' decodings as oppositional, there is evidence of their consciousness regarding the production basis of soap operas, a production which addresses the viewer and invites her creativity.

The 'coolness' which Liebes and Katz incorporate into their category 'critical reader' is problematic in terms of the ironic pleasure (Ang 1985) which subjects report, just as they refer to the way the soap opera text is made interesting through the insertion of high drama:

Claire (15):	*Yeh, I do think it's stupid, but I just keep watching it 'cos....so, yeh, it's really silly but well, it's really funny and I just enjoy it*
Sally (15):	*.... if it was like real life it wouldn't be very interesting would it? Things like that never happen in real life. There's so much drama in 'Neighbours' you know something happens every single day,*

> *in real life does it? So it's just like different that's why people watch it*
>
> Amelia (16):   *I think ... erm, it's making more out of something than what....you   know it's not something, that happens often. Is it? That it's....it's not something that actually happens but they make the things interesting don't they, so you like watching it.*

In contrast to a critical reading Liebes and Katz point to a referential reading which is intended to indicate an involvement by the viewer defined more as 'hot', suggesting an ideological identification with the ideas expressed. Teenage girl subjects show little indication of such involvement, if only for the fact that real life is described by them as something apart, with little or no connection with the soap opera text. In short, real life is too boring:

i)   Estelle (15):   *It doesn't happen in the everyday, or sort of place that they're (the other girls) thinking of...*

   Mandy (15):   *Everything ....*

   R.B: *Mandy.*

   Mandy: *Everything there just seems to happen like, in a week of each other, like ...*

   Kim (15):   *I think what it is right, is that everything has to happen at once 'cos if it didn't there'd be no storyline.*

   Elizabeth (15): *Yeh, there'd just be people sitting around going: "oh well, what have you been doing, then?" "Oh, I've been doing the ironing" or "I've been making dresses". Yeh, it would just be that.*

ii)   Edwina (17):   *Sometimes they give a bit of entertainment for you if you've got a boring life.*

iii)   Mandy: *... if like .. if like someone was sitting there, watching us on telly they wouldn't, I don't think they'd find it very (laughs) eventful, 'cos nothin' really happens.*

Given that an ironic reading and a text which need 'to be made interesting' doesn't sit comfortably with the concept of 'critical reader' or indeed, the 'referential reader' category, it is opportune to air Livingstone's (1994) criticism of Liebes and Katz' analysis. As she points out Liebes and Katz fail to distinguish between the evaluative and interpretive aspects of the 'critical' dimension. Furthermore Livingstone (1994: 90) argues convincingly that a critical reading may incorporate a marked involvement in issues (rather than distancing, normally associated with the critical reader) and conversely, those viewers making referential readings may have little inclination to

explore the ideas expressed and may be far removed from acceptance, which Liebes and Katz assume to be the case with the referential reader.

On the other hand, there is some evidence in the data of a referential reading, in that exceptionally subjects report a degree of involvement with female characters. This departure from an overall distancing from soap opera texts is worthy of mention if only for the fact that it feeds into a media effects research model. In other words, alongside characteristic distancing readings, girls **do** show that they assume a direct influence of soap opera texts rather than a 'producerly' reader insertion of meaning. In concluding Chapter 3 it is pertinent to mention such interpretation as a means of bringing the 'harmful effects' lobby back into the equation, a powerful force in public opinion, notably when placed in connection with the academic ethos in which the subjects of this study are situated. Georgina (17) is talking to me about a scene in 'Neighbours' in which Danni is caught in bed with her boyfriend:

R.B.: *They **were** caught. Now that's quite new for the Australian soaps to show something like that.*

Georgina: *Umm.*

R.B.: *Is that right or wrong?*

Georgina: *Erm...it's hard to say really. It depends really on how seriously people are going to take it. 'Cos you can say "well it's not like it's shown at half-past five and you're going to get children watching it". So you could take that sort of issue...*

Edwina's comment is interesting in that it sums up a number of tensions inherent within cultural studies' analysis of audiences.

Edwina: *I mean, I would never base my life on what happens on television. Definitely no way. But I can relate to it to a certain extent, I can see, I can see parts of what I do. I can see parts of what they do. But I would never sit down and say "Beth does that and Gabby does that, so I'd better do that". Do what they do, no way! (Laughs.)*

It seems to me that both quotes resonate with opposing positions in previous audience studies. To an extent both Geraldine's comments and Edwina's insistence suggests an assumption about a direct influence of soap opera texts, drawn from the deletrious impact position of media effects research, as opposed to the autonomous and

active viewing positions of a sophisticated audience so much associated with cultural studies. Such an explanation echoes Silverstone's words:

> *What Morley comes to argue is that viewers must be understood as being situated at the site of a number of overlapping and plausibly contradictory discourses, some having their origins in the media, but all needing to be accounted for if the specific nature of the relationship between text and reader is to be understood.* (Silverstone 1994: 150)

The high-achieving teenage girl audience of Australian soap opera also serves as a reminder, finally, of other tensions which are central to studies of the television audience. Again Silverstone (1994) points to tensions firstly between the 'critical' and the 'referential'; and most significantly, as illustrated in Edwina's quote, between the individual and the social (Silverstone 1994: 152). If this chapter has tended to involve too much of a psychological analysis, at least in terms of **identification** (or absence of) with female soap opera characters, then I will seek to redress the balance in Chapter 4. By so doing, I hope to illustrate how the analysis of a particular audience can foreground the social positioning of its subjects. In such a way, I intend to show how subjects can be aware of representations of 'clever girls' in soap opera, more importantly by the absence of such representations and thus be politically positioned so as to subscribe to qualitatively more positive images of academically aspirational girls. This strategy will seek to underline how soap opera viewing is part of a cultural process that is constitutive of contemporary teenage femininity.

4
Clever girls

In the last chapter much emphasis was placed on academic girls' reception of soap opera texts. In contrast to the former reliance of media effects research on unproblematic mediation, cultural studies increasingly offers a greater understanding of how fragmented and complex meaning is produced in watching television texts. A recognition of the social in reception research hinges on the way that meaning production intersects with lived existence. Femininities are thus inscribed in the text, the most notable form of which is the soap opera (in itself socially positioned), illustrating a marked diversity in girls' identities, to the extent that the reproduction of textual meanings in everyday life is riven with diversity and 'undecidability'. The position I take here reflects a turn in feminist theory which has led Sylvia Walby (1992: 32) to argue that the analysis of difference or rather the refusal to theorise on women's oppression has gone too far; she appeals for a return to a feminism in which commonalities between different groups of females can be highlighted without returning to a determinist monolithic theory. It is this tension which I intend to address in this study of the construction of femininity.

I will argue that teenage girl achievers are not solely driven to watch television passively but in an active mode of reception, suturing their own interpretations of narrative into the text. As many recent analyses of audience studies remind us, the way in which the text addresses the reader crucially rests upon the social positioning of the reader, with the result that the text, far from being seen as deterministic, articulates with the specificity of the social group. Nevertheless, as has been observed already, an ethnography of the context of the television viewing by teenage girls is required, along with an analysis of a gendered discourse, in order to do justice to such a complex phenomenon. As restrictions imposed by the interviewing method prohibit any study of viewing context at the present time, and because I intend to examine 'girl talk' in the next chapter, it is my aim in this chapter to explore the representation of 'clever girls' in the text. I do this in order to point to the centrality of social positioning of viewers in general, and the relevant/irrelevant opposition in particular. Thus if sociological

analyses of audiences is to 'make sense' it has to, above all, demonstrate a connection between 'clever' female television characters and 'clever' girls' everyday existence. As mentioned previously, such connection is problematic. It doesn't extend to identification (no role models are implicated) but on the other hand, a **completely** resistant reading is not evident either. Indeed, I will show how the subjects of the study do engage with the textual portrayal of characters constructed as 'clever' if not directly identifying with them. The meanings that they make show a marked tension between the constraints of femininity within the narrative, to do with compliance in relation to, and desire for, boyfriends, set against their prescription for more positive representations of femininity. Or rather, their criticisms of the comparitive absence of such images are highlighted. In their move towards a constitution of greater autonomy in femininity, subjects lament the relative absence of positive, independent teenage girls in television texts and their associated activities deemed as relevant by the particularistic audience: concentrating on schoolwork, doing homework, planning a career. It is interesting, for example, that the pursuit of pleasure in viewing soap opera at once incorporates a feminist consciousness prescribing more portrayal of relevant characters, and locks into a plea for relevance to everyday life.

That such views have been derived from my questioning and not volunteered, serves only to demonstrate that teenage girls tend **not** to be conscious regarding issues of power and autonomy, and to a great extent any such findings are but a response to my questions. This fact alone explains the emphasis in feminist film theory of 1970s feminism on the text specifically, and around cultural representations of female oppression generally. This position diverted from feminist cultural critical theory (Brown 1990) which argues that empowerment results from the articulation of text and viewer and feeds into femininity, albeit from the specific position of the soap opera **audience**. This alternative feminist position will be explored in Part III. For the time being I will show how high-achieving teenage girls do interrelate their lived reality with television texts, as a way of supporting evidence of such girls' appeal for more positive and relevant representations of femininity within the academic environment.

It is paradoxical that top stream girls distance themselves from soap opera narratives and yet engage to an extent with female characters in soap operas, at least to

the extent of evaluation, if not identifying with them, in a psychological analysis of the production and reproduction of femininity. Such engagement goes something like this: meaningfulness (or relevance) of the soap opera text to teenage girl viewers rests upon their social positionings and indeed, the context of the research interview. Gender positioning has been seen to crosscut the current subjects' location in an educational ethos that should be placed in this historical moment of enhanced academic achievement for girls. Moreover, by being interviewed by me they construct me **and** the interview setting in academe. Within such a frame, it could be postulated that the Australian soap operas, rotating as these do around girl-boy relationships and a 'tragic structure of feeling' (Ang 1985) would seem to offer relevance to girls so specifically located. Indeed, as already observed academic-achiever girls **do** dismiss such narratives as unreal and 'just escapism'. Yet at the very same time the Australian 'teenage' soap operas succeed, to an extent, in offering relevance to real life:

i)   *Claire (15):*   *I think it's all a bit like real life.*

       R.B: *Ah, can you ... give me an example of where you are there, where it's something you can relate to?*

       Claire: *Oh, I think 'Heartbreak High' was very easy to relate to. I think it was aimed very much at the younger children, whereas some 'soaps', most 'soaps' are aimed at all ages so they like older people and younger people are mixed but 'Heartbreak High' is aimed, like, for my age and younger people. I don't know what it is about 'Heartbreak High'. I think maybe it's showing a sort of group of, don't know... teenagers lives. I don't know some of them, I think that couldn't happen in real life. It could, but it's not likely to, **but sometimes they really do.** It's not like real life, **but it could happen to me.***

ii)   *Elizabeth (15):It sometimes tries to put too many issues in, and you think "oh come on, all that wouldn't be going on in one little place". **But then you don't really know what goes on in people's houses, behind closed doors, anyway. So maybe it would.***

Elizabeth's comment constructs femininity traditionally, within the private sphere. In a feminist political economy, however, greater autonomy of young females is manifest within the public location. In such a cultural shift women and girls become more visible. Television representations of 'clever girls' forms part of a new cultural

politics, most notably for 'A' level students. Shortly I will argue that such emancipatory narratives are not forthcoming in what are classless and conservative Australian soap opera texts. Nevertheless, such narratives still offer relevance to the lives of 17-year old 'A' level students. Edwina, for example, comments that she can relate to such texts at a certain level by seeing parts of what she does in what 'they' (the young female characters) do in the narrative structure. Georgina (17) also offers yet more evidence of 'producerly texts' (Fiske 1989: 103):

R.B: *Do you ever see any of those things, are there any of those things*
            at all, in any of those programmes that relate to ... your real life?
Georgina: *Erm... erm. Yeh, ...yeh.* **I do see things that happen.** *In*
            soap   operas you might ... get an argument with a friend or
            argument with parents er... general frustration with life really.

How to explain such a contradiction as this, in which resistance and distancing from soap opera narratives by teenage girls is yet accompanied by some engagement (if not total identification), in a sociological sense of shared social positioning? Firstly I challenge my own notion of social realism in relation to soap opera narratives. Something of the plot **is** like real life. But how is 'real life' depicted in **social** realist texts? Clearly the nostalgia and the discourse of class so redolent of 'Coronation Street' has little connection with teenage audiences. Their readings suggest another realism:

There must be different realisms not a 'single classic realist text'.

(Morley 1992: 67)

The current subjects' interpretations feed into an 'emotional realism', after Ang's (1985) analysis of the 'Dallas' audience. The Australian soap opera narrative is driven by a discourse of teenage romance, interspersed with narrative gaps, and 'sneaked in' mini-agendas around feminism. All this is 'decentred', it is contingent upon the individual viewer's decoding, which in itself is shaped by social positioning. I contend in **my** reading of a text such as 'Neighbours' that it **does** both reflect and produce an ambiguity between the discourse of desire and the achievement ethos, an antagonism central to the constitution of contemporary top-stream teenage girl femininity.

Furthermore, yet another reminder is provided of the task facing researchers in cultural studies in furthering the understanding of media messages in general. I include myself in this category, in my struggle to unravel the complexity of interwoven cultural

phenomena that go together to make up the femininities of the current subjects. An authoritative voice offers a reminder of this challenge:

Media use can... be seen to be both limited and motivated by complex and interacting forces in society and in the personal biography of the individual. This is a sobering thought for those who hope to explain as well as describe patterns of audience behaviour. (McQuail 1987: 236)

That I am focusing on girls' reception in the text-reader articulation and am constrained by examining their everyday gender relations and everyday lives in general, by way of the limitations of this study, still presents considerable difficulty for myself, in particular, and cultural studies, as a whole. Such a division between 'the particular' and 'the general' provides a convenient way of moving on the analysis at this point. I now focus on the tension between analysis of 'trivial' and 'ordinary' elements of the everyday and analysis of the social structures involved in such existence, at once representing the distinction between cultural studies and sociology. Silverstone (1993) identifies this as a difference between political analysis and an analysis of power. Whereas sociological analysis seeks to understand the ordinary from the outside in, cultural studies attempts to understand the ordinary (and by this Silverstone refers to the taken-for-granted assumptions of everyday life) from the inside out:

Such a politics is grounded, quite literally, in the power of the ordinary: in the capacity of subjects, consumers and readers as members of sub-cultures, or participants in collectivities with shared ethnic, gendered or sexual identities, both individually and collectively, to appropriate and make their own meanings out of the stuff of an imperfectly hegemonic system, and in such appropriation and with varying degrees of consciousness to oppose it.
(Silverstone 1993: 997)

My analysis, it must be said, whilst avoiding a neo-Gramscian perspective of 'dominant' and 'oppositional' decodings is not confined to, nor does it exclude, a study of the political positioning of teenage girls in the everyday. Rather, it attempts to focus on the pleasure of television viewing for girls through their capacity to dovetail narratives and characters with their 'common-sensical' femininity in a matrix of meaningfulness. Such a theme will be developed further in Part III, 'Messages in the Pleasure and Politics of Femininity'. What I hope to have highlighted here is a justification for examining what is often considered in popular consciousness to be

trivial. Examining viewers' readings of images of 'clever girls' in Australian soap operas provides one such example. Yet it does perhaps address the tension between emergent trends in cultural studies and sociology, that is to do with the particular/general dichotomy. Morley (1992: 161/2) argues that without generalisations, analyses risk 'floating in an endless realm of contextual specificity'. If taken to the extreme an avoidance of generalisation, through fear of analytical crudity, results in a miasma of infinite difference. Walby (1992) provides a way through this opposition when she concedes that patriarchy cannot solely be explained through theories of structural difference; cultural representations too are at play, in constituting female oppression, producing and reproducing one-dimensional stereotypes. In adopting such a position which analyses wider issues of power and constraints, I will now proceed to document something of the current subjects' reading of 'clever girl' representations that pivot around the character/viewer axis, in potential politicisation of meaning formations, on the basis of shared subjectivities.

'Clever girls' are underrepresented in soap opera texts. If Hobson (1990) and Brown (1990) are correct in pointing to soap opera as a source of pleasure and empowerment for adult women then it is the Australian soaps in particular that I look to as a platform for autonomous teenage femininity. I do this in an attempt to analyse the demands by sociologists that audience studies focus on subjects who are (by definition) socially positioned. It seems to me to be a precondition of any study of text-reader relations within an audience to explore the process by which sociological identification with female characters occurs, if engagement generally, and referential readings (Liebes and Katz 1990) particularly, are found to be part of the audience's practice. By 'sociological identification' I mean to suggest that clever girls in lived reality construct meanings around their counterparts **as a social group**, a 'community of characters' (Allen 1992: 111) in the soap operas. In contrast, psychological identification (Livingstone 1990) emphasises the individual viewer/character articulation, that as has been already observed, does not extend to a role modelling process. This doesn't mean that subjects necessarily reject the 'hypodermic model' of direct influence, indeed Claire (15) at Parklands School cites its political potential:

R.B: *Soap operas should show more of girls doing schoolwork?*

Claire: *Yeh, because it influences people.*

However, in reception of soap opera texts such influence doesn't occur unproblematically or automatically. As Robert C. Allen (1992: 112) suggests, the viewer's positioning with a soap opera text rotates around membership of an audience community. Involved as an audience community is in talking about texts (see Chapter 5) members require considerable cultural competency. The formulaic structure of soap opera narrative helps the viewer in this process. Nevertheless, an awareness of what Allen calls the pardigmatic structure of the narrative is necessary, involving a knowledge of how the characters are connected. (This in contrast to the syntagmatic structure of the narrative which focuses on the sequential, the 'what happens next?' associations). For example, when the six girls at Pinewood School talk of Angel and her boyfriend Shane's relationship in 'Home and Away' they know that Angel and Shane are now married adults, but they were still at school in the 'real time' of late 1994. Moreover, they would be aware that Angel is inscribed in the text as 'bright', which raises the question of her positioning vis-a-vis Shane as he is constructed as a low-achiever. The discussion concerns whether Angel's femininity involves denial, constraining her in sharing her high marks with Shane so as to spare him humiliation. The support for more autonomous practice reflects the tension which persists in teenage femininity:

i)   *R.B:*   *Erm ... why, why is it that she's trying to hide it from Shane*
                  when   she gets good marks... Mandy?

     Mandy: *'Cos Shane gets poor marks and he feels bad 'cos he feels*
                  ...like, I don't know (laughs). He feels like she dominates him.

     R.B: *O.K? Does a girl have to think all the time about being on her*
                  um,   p's and q's... and not threaten her boyfriend...? Estelle,
                  what do you think?

     Estelle: *I think she doesn't want to tell him a lot 'cos she erm... doesn't*
                  want to make fun of him. She doesn't want him to think she's
                  doing really well because that'll make it bad for him.

     R.B: *Sherrie?*

     Sherrie: *... yeh, they're trying to say yeh, they have feelings too so*
                  *Angel's trying to spare him **but I don't see why she***
                  should if he   can't keep up with his schoolwork.

This is an exemplification of the way a particular audience interweaves the narrative with real life, again exposing the contradictions inherent in the production and reproduction of a femininity marked by diversity:

Mandy: ... like over here because if your boyfriend was like that he'd be like open about yer marks to make you feel bad.

Elizabeth: I wouldn't.

R.B: Elizabeth wouldn't.

Elizabeth: Erm, I know I'd probably really want someone to say "oh never mind, that's really well done", but if I thought, **if I thought my boyfriend would get upset by it, I'd tell him if he asked me what I got** but if he didn't then I'd go to somebody else to show off about it, you know, someone who wouldn't be upset about it and would say "oh, well done, a round of applause".

Sherrie: Yeh, I think I'd do that as well actually. I wouldn't ...ever go up to him "I got this, I got this" and gloat because... if you do love them ... if you do love him then you're like "oh, I don't want to hurt him" and stuff like that, but I don't think he should be all 'wimpy' about it: "don't, oh please don't tell", you know.

R.B: What should she have done then, Angel, should she have ... boasted about it or should she have hidden it?

Sherrie: **If she like, well if he asks tell him, but don't go and gloat to him.**

R.B: If he asks, tell him.

Sherrie: Yeh, unless he's been horrible to her and then she can gloat, 'cos that's cool (laughter).

Such a commodity as television provides a vehicle by which new knowledge can be developed. Partington (1991: 50) talks of the investment of an audience's knowledges in the production of pleasure. In particular melodrama offers viewers the construction as an ideological subject. Later in this account I will argue for Australian soap operas as fertile ground for the construction of more active, autonomous femininity. For now I want instead to oppose Partington's position, which identifies popular culture as an emancipatory medium. I suggest, and here I resort to narrative theory, teenage girls' television texts serve to constrain resistance and subversion through restricting representations of 'clever girls' in which any emancipatory readings are very much 'against the grain'. I wish to locate narrative theory as central to a

feminist critical theory, not because it can suggest the relevance of representations and images in directly connecting the text to an academic teenage girl audience but rather, because such images are contingent upon an openness of text and thus inherently fluid. So whilst I do not intend to fix my focus on ideology, this **is** an opportunity to affirm the relevant absence of resistant and subversive representations in teenage texts and consider this as problematic. If Walters'(1995: 159) plea for a feminist political praxis is to be possible then popular culture, particularly television, must be exposed as forcing values of the institutional position. The absence or near invisibility of an academic femininity in Australian 'soaps' boils down to mechanisms which are conservative, acting to conceal such representations. The girls I interviewed were not conscious of such dominant meaning systems lying hidden in the text, which isn't surprising. Just as Kuhn (1982: 77/95) argues, part of the work of ideology is to conceal it's own operation, and popular culture is a site for the independent effects of such an operation. I suggest that the absence of positive images of young women is underpinned by a patriarchal form of social control. Given that representations are seen as part of the process of recognition and identification (Lury 1991: 101), I point to narrative theory in this instance, for it's concern with absences - as an analysis of the academic female as invisible:

> *R.B:*   *I'm trying to think of where, for example, where actually*
> *illustrates, where ... when's Angel ever seen doing her*
> *homework, for example?*
>
> *Katrina (17)* *Mmm.*
> *No, you don't really do you? Sometimes you hear Sarah,*
> *because she's quite bright as well, saying she's going to be*
> *doing her homework, or she'll be studying in the diner. But you*
> *don't really .. don't really see them actually doing their*
> *homework.*

As Liesbet van Zoonen (1993: 93) indicates, narrative theory has fallen back largely on psychoanalytic frameworks. Indeed work on images in feminist film studies has relied heavily on a discourse which constructs sexual difference in a fixed gender dichotomy; the female as 'other', has an essentialist identity in its reliance on the Oedipal metaphor. Thus psychoanalytic thinking provides an analysis for **'woman'** but not **'women'**. The fixity of the former category excludes possibility of progress and

can be charged with universalism (Bergstrom and Doane 1989) overlooking historicity and cultural positioning of the audience. Similarly, the key formation in narrative study, semiotics, causes Walters (1995: 146) to express concern that feminist cultural studies are too much immersed in 'a sea of floating signifiers' and need to be rooted in the cultural practices of the audience.

I cite below just such an example of what **can** be understood as a narrative study grounded in everyday existence. Soap opera narratives are said to run in parallel time to real life, as if the characters continue to live outside the production (Press 1990). On this occasion, there is a simultaneous character/viewer link in which the narrative of 'Neighbours' includes Angel and Sarah revising for their examinations at the very same time as 'A' level students themselves are involved in revision. The presence of such a representation is no guarantee, however, that 'A' level girls identify with it:

> Rebecca(17): *You see her (Angel) lately revising for HNC and things like that.*
> R.B: *Ah.*
> Rebecca: *Yeh, she was doing it the other day with Sarah, and we have all been revising 'A' level things.*
> R.B: *O.K. So does that relate to your own life at all?*
> Rebecca: *No, not really.*
> R.B: *Revision?*
> Rebecca: *Well, it does, but my revision takes... I do it on my own and do it at college and I just go home and I don't spend that much time on it.*

Soap opera representations of revision are something of an exception, such is the lure of melodrama in the construction of 'escape' for academic girls, as mentioned earlier. However, narrative theory has a contribution to make if only to offer analysis as to how film plots make women invisible. In terms of soap opera narrative, it is to the 'reading against the grain' approach (Walters' 1995: 71) to which I now refer, owing to its focus on reading 'absences', germane as this is to the relative invisibility of 'clever girls' in the Australian soap operas. Moreover, as Mayne (1988: 24) argues, this approach appropriately suggests a system riven with contradictions, gaps and slips of the tongue. Yet narrative theory as a whole can be charged with sexual essentialism and textual determination. Feminism must begin to look at the audience, at the very people

engaged in viewing. Walters argues that the Birmingham Centre for Critical Cultural Studies (CCCS) have learned this lesson very well, whilst adding a note of caution:

> *Indeed, we must be careful not to 'find' resistance and ideological slippage under every apparently hegemonic rock of popular culture, simply because we want it to be there.* (Walters 1995: 78)

Such valid comment echoes Geertz's (1973: 5) argument that what we call our data are really our own constructions of other peoples' constructions of their everyday existences. I therefore find it surprising that in a 1995 publication, Suzanna Walters, a professor of sociology, should look to a Western Marxist perspective in which researchers 'find' 'hegemony', 'resistances' and 'contradictions' everywhere. Cultural studies has recently shifted from ideology to a politics of pleasure. The current study aims to position itself in such a shift, in which 'top stream' teenage girls, a 'text' in themselves, **and** a section of the mass audience, are appealed to by soap opera narratives which emphasise relationships:

> *R.B:*   *Right so, O.K. Bonnie, why can't Angel just be content with being clever and good at school?*
>
> *Bonnie (15):*   *It is because of Shane.*
>
> *R.B:*   *Right, the fact that she fancies him and she loves him, is it as simple as that? Yes?*
>
> *Lesley (15):*   *She's fallen in love.*

Due to the constraints of my research, I have been unable to explore how narrative theory can be embedded within social relations, how the underrepresentation of 'clever girls' in soap opera may be read into the everyday existence of academic teenage girls. Nevertheless, in underwriting my analysis with Foucauldian theory, I hope to show in the next chapter how discourse in itself inscribes power in soap opera and how 'girl talk' rotates around the text/audience axis in the making of meanings in femininity.

5

Girl talk: the feminine discourse.

In parallel with the social realism perspective, in which girls identify more coherently with characters rather than the narrative, girl talk is one way by which femininity is constructed. In the cultural sense, girls are said to exchange interpretations of television programmes through 'swapping stories'. Or so it is argued (Fiske 1987a; Hobson 1982; Hobson 1990; Silverstone 1994). Much previous work on oral culture in television viewing rotates around the mediation of meanings. In tandem with such work on audience groupings is discourse theory. Much of the Gramscian study of youth culture for example, has interpreted resistances as constituted largely through the symbolic work of the subculture, of which language is part. Though now of less significance in cultural analysis, resistance remains a component of the current emphasis on pleasure. At the same time 'a reflexivity of resistance' invested in subjects of previous studies is not evident here. Rather, this chapter will examine the way high-achievement girls in particular, as part of their ambivalence towards soap opera texts, express a sense of delight in the unlikeliness of many narratives they watch. Within a limited space amidst the aspirational climate of the 'A' level academic forum they indulge in irony without spontaneously expressing pleasure, a pleasure in tension with, and constrained by, an academic value system.

This is not to undermine the claims of discourse theory. Indeed the centrality of discourse in the making of meanings will be cited. Most notably, talking with friends enables girls to catch up with narratives, viewing having been suspended through schoolwork or maintaining a girl-boy relationship. Girls are not apparently reflexive; they don't **report** interweaving soap opera with real life, for example, contrary to the received wisdom within cultural studies, by which meanings are said to be produced AND reproduced in the television text/lived reality articulation. Nevertheless, failure to keep up with discourses, runs the risk for girls of being left behind, if not rejected, by the grand sweep of peer pressure. Like previous work on femininity in the classroom (Marks 1979; McRobbie 1978) the school ethos and television viewing are socially constructed as being in opposition. Rather than inferring resistance as such writers did,

I intend to present girls' gossip as a negotiation with the school culture, and at most, a discourse limited by, and in deference to, a powerful historical formation around girl-achievers, a moment ever more emergent in mid-1990s Britain. I will thus attempt to place girl talk in the context of a seamless web of subjectivity in which teenage girls juggle with meanings in order to make sense of self and society.

The role oral culture plays in the construction of femininity is related to the evidence of social realism in the soap opera narrative. Interpretation of narrative rests upon the plausibility of depicted events. Conversation between girls often leans toward the sceptical position. In a group interview involving 15-year olds at Parklands School, Bonnie (whose father is unemployed), Pippa (daughter of a businessman) and Sally (whose parents are both teachers) engage in such discourse:

Pippa: 'Neighbours and 'Home and Away' we say that they're not realistic but if you've got something like 'Saved by the Bell' you do see there is a realistic side to things like 'Neighbours'. 'Saved by the Bell' there's nothing realistic about it really.

Bonnie: They don't even live at home.

R.B: Bonnie disagrees with you (to Pippa)

Bonnie: There's nothing realistic about 'Neighbours', I mean people shouldn't act the way that they do. I just don't think you can claim   it to be realistic.

Pippa: I think that 'Saved by the Bell' is too colourful, there's too much going on.

Sally: 'Saved by the Bell' is so unrealistic because it's supposed to be a comedy, that's why it's funny.

Bonnie: No one lives in families, they all live with each other, and it's weird.

Scepticism is not satire, however. When 17 year-old girls talk together about television viewing it is in some contrast to 15 year-old girls, who tend to take television viewing more seriously. It must be said that the older girls at Clearwater College are in the 'fast-stream' of 'A' level courses, having examinations very much on their minds. However, in their need to relax amidst such ongoing pressure, they joke together about their viewing:

R.B: When you do talk to them (other girls) and where, as regards your television viewing?

Edwina: *(a mortgage broker's daughter, 17): Ah right. Often at the start of lessons. If you're seeing friends that you haven't seen during that day, if you're going into a lesson and you start discussing it. Or maybe at the end of a lesson. And at lunchtimes and stuff.... We like to have a good laugh at 'Baywatch'... that's not a favourite at all. It's good to have a laugh at sometimes.*

R.B: *...... in 'Baywatch', you'll have a laugh about erm... at women in it?*

Edwina: *(Emphatically)* **At everything. The fact that they're all lying there in their bikinis and it looks as if it's about to rain! (Laughs).**

Talk about television is clearly marginalised in such a context. Notably the girls at Clearwater College were in the first year of 2-year 'A' level courses when they were interviewed in February and March 1995, and even then examinations were high on the agenda. Revision was beginning to be a high priority in their time management so television becomes a low priority in such a climate. The interviewing method which I chose serves to compound such marginalisation of television and when I take into consideration the context of the setting, that is, a highly acclaimed college, I am reminded to take heed of that repeated advice to study not only the viewing context, but indeed, **where** girls **talk** about their viewing practices. Therein lies the problem: all nineteen subjects, bar one, were interviewed in a semi-public setting and on two sites involved showing taped vignettes from soap opera narratives. At the time there had been a number of publicised allegations, published in the national press, made by pupils or students towards teachers. Mindful of the topicality and sensitivity of the issue, I had arranged with the gatekeeper at site 2, and indeed, two other sites, to interview girls in 'ethically sound' settings, avoiding the privacy of an office. In retrospect, subjects may have felt under scrutiny from passers-by. 17 year-old college girls, in particular, could have been embarrassed, and inhibited upon being seen to 'study' 'Neighbours' and 'Home and Away' which would correlate with their perjorative reading of such television viewing. Notably, nobody interviewed expressed any such sentiments. Aside from these considerations, it is now necessary to 'make sense' of some of the findings.

From previous discussion, soap opera narratives have minimal relevance for aspirational 17 year old girls in particular, and high-achiever teenage girls in general. Aside from their concerns with characters, the 'irrational' nature of watching implausible scripts seems to result in a defensive reaction, often to do with mockery of apparent absurdities. By 'irrational' I do not mean to suggest, or to refer to, girls' 'essential' natures. I point instead to girls' difficulty in justifying their viewing in an academic-achievement-orientated culture, **at the very same time that they engage in such practice**. Girls in the college setting talk about their viewing as, ostensibly, the way to have a laugh. I contend that 'making a mockery' out of narratives such as 'Baywatch' provides a means of resolving the many contradicitions that gather around the television viewing/lived existence axis. For example, at Clearwater College subjects are reminiscent of one group of viewers in Ang's (1985) exemplary research 'Watching Dallas' who took up an ironic position. One such respondent in Ang's study, a feminist, admitted that 'Dallas' constituted a site of pleasure for her through her ironic reading of the characters, who amused her tremendously, at the very moment when she was alert to the political incorrectness of the script.

Ang (1985: 131) points to Michele Barrett's (1982: 56) argument that a feminist agenda must somehow engage in women's viewing practices, and look afresh at such activity, defined normatively as illicit, not just in the male hegemonic frame of reference but, I would suggest in relation to feminist orthodoxy itself. I am analysing the school/college setting from an Althusserian position, which posits the 'ideological state apparatuses' (Althusser 1971) as forming the ethos of the educational institution that girls encounter. Watching soap operas is defined as illicit in this context and the playfulness that they practice is only now being incorporated into feminist theory (Schwichtenberg 1993), as a shift from the 'serious' concerns associated with materialist feminism at its historical peak. Rather than being defiled in the school setting in particular, as anti-educational, and within the furore of moral indignation currently directed at television and video, in general (Graef 1994), the so-called 'subversiveness' of viewing and mocking of television narratives could be incorporated into a feminist classroom practice (Taylor 1993) which appropriates these frameworks into the agenda

instead of demeaning such strategies. I will now argue briefly in support of such a standpoint.

On the surface teenage girls watch television as an escape from the demands of the school, college or workplace. Television narratives, and soap operas in particular, provides academically-able girls with a means to unwind from the rigorous demands of the classroom. Such a setting serves as a training ground for middle-class mileux, notably universities and the professions. Yet, I wish to suggest, 'mere idle talk' viewed so often as trivial, ironic or as a medium for parody provides a discourse through which girls can resolve the marked contradictions that are a feature of teenage girls' task in interpreting television. In this argument, soaps have a major part to play:

> *".... soaps have been understood as constant masticators of social realities, provoking and reassuring within a complex narrative and through the medium of strong and identifiable reality claims".*   (Silverstone 1994: 16)

My claim is that girl talk provides a channel for collective identity that is not so absolute as to ameliorate claims to personal identity and even to allow structures for solipsism and a surge of willpower, as I will indicate shortly. For present purposes, it will be sufficient to indicate that soap opera provides the springboard by which girls can create their own culture of femininity. As Brown (1990) argues, much of the sense of enjoying membership in such a closed group is the exchange of common interests and values. This is not to suggest, from my research at least, that mediation of meanings is inevitable in soap operas. Indeed, the suggestiion of interpretations being modified, mixed or 'mangled up' through the cypher of the group is conspicuous in its absence in my data. Nevertheless, discourse presents girls with a sense of being special, with some time and the scope to explore, so that something of an esoteric interest or language code can be fostered with the result that in-group identity, so important at 15, can be developed. Such a view is premised on Foucauldian discourse analysis which is seen to account for *"the positions and viewpoints"* from which people speak and *"the institutions which prompt people to speak ... and which store and distribute the things that are said".* (Foucault 1979: 11)

In examining discourses of power/knowledge, Foucault argues that power has no immanent essence. It can only be defined in relation to its opposite, resistance. Yet,

according to Foucault, power is everywhere as it is constituted in discourse and not social structure. Discourse is thus concerned with ideological practices directed against "subjection, against forms of subjectivity and submission" (Foucault 1982: 212) that are historically in flux. As Macdonnel (1986: 22) states, discourse concerns the ways in which individuals are constructed as subjects. The feminine discourse provides the frame for teenage girls to foster a sense of solidarity (if not sisterhood) that in itself propels the individual as a social being and is constitutive of female subjectivity in the focus of the present study. Discourse is productive, as Foucault suggests, not just descriptive (Weeks 1981: 7). It harmonises the contradicitions and complexity ever present in the cultural matrix of meanings through its subcultural setting. I will now go on to document how the actual audience being examined negotiates these conflicting forces in the construction of femininity, through finding 'spaces' around which their consumption of television is articulated.

Mandy (15), a plumber's daughter, comments on how feminine discourse around viewing may invade 'class' time and yet is disrupted in its dialectic relationship with teachers' control strategies:

Like when we start talking, we like end up with the whole row
talking about it and then, like, "shut up!" So we'll all be quiet
and then it's all forgotten about".

In order to find a way through the conflict between school values and popular pleasure girls in higher streams seek means to legitimate their diverse femininities. Soap operas provides the groundswell of a discourse through which girls secure a space in which an overarching femininity can find purchase, acting as some unification of identity that is always in tension with the long and arduous search for self in adolescence. This challenge is part of, and is represented by, the dictates of fashion. As Elizabeth Wilson (1985) argues, fashion is an expression of the urge for women to be the same along with the allure of being different, to belong but be unique. In parallel, talking about texts enables girls, in part, to construct a diversity within unity. As Rebecca (17) reports, entree to a discourse of the feminine can rotate around 'soaps'. The value of such talk is that it enables each girl to learn the appropriate vocabulary. The social sanctions applied to anybody who fails to fit in to this form of femininity is severe:

deprived of membership of a consumer girl culture, a girl stands at risk of developing low self-esteem and poor self-identity and is likely to be rendered 'out of touch' with the cultural pulse, the worst nightmare writ large. The need to catch up with soap opera narratives is thus vital to the sheer essence of femininity at this age. This procress will now be explored; subsequently I will examine a theory of discourse which goes some way to explaining how group dynamics are a central component in this phenomenon.

'Catching up' with soap opera narratives forms a key feature in girl talk about television (this despite a recap at the beginning of each episode):

R.B: *Do you, don't you ever talk to catch up? If you've missed an episode or two?*

Mandy: *Yeh, I do, I talk to ... what was it someone was talking to me this morning about what happened in East Enders' last night about Debbie getting killed. I wanted to know what happened.*

R.B: *Debbie getting killed?*

Mandy: *Debbie was killed in 'East Enders' last night.*

Lesley: (15) whose father is a lathe operator and mother a cook, often finds herself missing some episodes. She resolves this by catching up with a big group of friends who talk about television more in school than outside of it. School here represents a prime site for feminine discourse. At the same time a means of maintaining in-group identity is provided:

Lesley: *I watch it (Neighbours) because like it's something to watch. A lot of people talk about it at school, so it's something to talk about.*

This is not to assume that 'catching up' through the group is not without its problems, as illustrated when my video film presents Lesley with a favourable alternative:

R.B: *Let's look at the video, it helps you catch up.*

Lesley: *It's more gossip for later.*

R.B: *If you don't know what's going on, do you get 'stumped?'*

Lesley: *Yes it's what groups talk about. You're thinking: "what are they going on about?" you know. Yea, I try to ask them what happened and they sorta like ... "wait a minute, I'm just talking to someone else: did you see this programme?"*

Not all discourse is articulated through the group however. The best friend also acts as an informer:

Pippa: (15)   *If I really want to know what's happened I've got a best friend at*
school and can ask this friend at school about what happened.
They watch it. I'm not really that bothered. I can ask my mum.
She watches it while she's cooking dinner".

Lesley and Pippa at Parklands School were interviewed in November 1994. They share with other academically-orientated girls the pressure of work inveighing against a possibility of watching every episode. As has been indicated a productive discourse is maintained between girls by them simply being required to keep up with key 'soap' narratives. Nevertheless, epiphanic moments in issue-laden soap operas are not necessarily something that girls engage with. One such example is the Mandy Jordache trial on 'Brookside'. On 16 May 1995 the Independent declared in a perfect interweaving of soap and real life: "The verdict is expected tonight". Yet strangely the girls of Pinewood School, interviewed at that time, did not report very much discourse around this issue that was otherwise almost of national interest. Domestic violence was observed to have ramifications for femininity per se, but connecting more with the adult form. Or, conversely, perhaps the issue was **too** 'close to home'. What Mandy does illustrate, once again, is the constraints of short interludes in which girl talk is maintained, conversation that is grounded more in the storyline than the overriding issue:

Mandy: *I think it was er...just before you come in the room over there*
last week, we were talking about the 'lesi' and things, 'East
Enders' And 'Home and Away' no not 'Home and
Away', 'Brookside'.
R.B: *'Brookside?'*
Mandy: *...yeh, we were having a discussion, arguing about what was*
real life and what looked fake and ...
R.B: *Yeh.*

Girl talk **does** flourish beyond the group; indeed, mothers and best friends are cited as key players. Kim (14) has a mother who is a buyer for a furniture company and a father who is a director. In an inividual interview she reports that she doesn't so much catch up as exchange views, mostly with her sister.

R.B: *Are you unusual in that sense then? You seem to be talking to*
you sister, rather than you do your friends. Or...is that so?

Kim: *Well, when we watch it we kind of, I don't know, give an opinion and on what's happened sort of thing, it's very sort of "oh, I don't believe that could happen", or whatever. There's quite a lot of things.*

This segment of the transcript serves as a reminder of Morley's (1986) powerful argument that audiences can only be effectively understood by an ethnographer who is placed in the context where interpretations are made: the domestic setting. Within the constraints of my study it was necessary to rely on the subject's 'reading' of television text and one that had often been viewed in the past at that, whereupon I am charged with seeking to interpret the subject's interpretation. The use of video clips, helped to the extent that the subject could interpret her reception of the text in the 'here and now' of speaking with me. Again, though, such a method is not without its flaws, as it is conducted in the school setting, a marked departure from the 'home comfort' of the sitting room or bedroom. Equally, I contend that Morley's ethnography of the audience is itself open to criticism, as he himself acknowledges, in that family members are very likely to modify their conduct in the company of an ethnographer. At this point it is timely to take stock of the data. I do this by citing teenage girls' gossip networks as contained within the phenomenon of femininty in all its diversity across the realms of friendship and kinship. My intention is to next point to an exception, a girl who deviates from such a pattern in her efforts to catch up with soap opera narratives.

Taylor and Bogdan (1984: 139) advise qualitative researchers of the value in analysing negative cases, in order to better understand the people being studied. Amelia (16), whose parents are in management (mother) and publishing (father), deviates from the predominant pattern of 'talking texts', in this instance on the topic of realism in narratives:

R.B: *Um... yeh ... so one ... one way to find out more about how you see that is erm, if I ask you whether you talk to your friends about er ... programmes like 'Heatbreak High'?*

Amelia: *Um.*

R.B: *You do?*

Amelia: *Yeh, erm. Yeh sometimes it comes up in conversation but not all the time. At the moment everyone's busy doing their exams and stuff to talk about things like that ... but if you just ... but yeh, I think I could do. Things like, we enjoy films more, we talk*

> about and erm ... with my boyfriend we always talk about the 'soaps'.
>
> R.B: With your boyfriend, rather than with your friends?
>
> Amelia: Yeh, only because he likes watching all the time and he'd say: "did you watch 'Neighbours'?" And I never get to watch it because I'm working.
>
> R.B: That's quite interesting, actually. Because I don't particularly .... are boys usually associated with 'soaps'?
>
> Amelia: No, they're not are they? You'd think they're more thriller films and ....
>
> R.B: Um..mm. So that's not why you chose him, was it?
>
> Amelia: No (laughs). No, he just seems the type. He just likes watching it.

Similarly, Edwina (17) departs from a largely collaborative style in which females are said to talk together about texts (Hobson 1990). Edwina takes up an individualist position, thus defying the cultural logic of femininity:

> R.B: ...Are you saying that even with a little chat with your friends, you'd stick to your views. You wouldn't change those views?
>
> Edwina: Oh, yeh, definitely.
>
> R.B: Umm. You're quite adamant about that aren't you?
>
> Edwina: Yep.
>
> R.B: O.K. So you're saying that if you had a group of five others opposing you and they're saying: "you're being very snobbish about it", or something, you wouldn't budge?
>
> Edwina: **No not at all. That's as maybe, that's what I think.**

Unfortunately a group interview, which would have afforded the opportunity to test Edwina's substantive position, wasn't possible at her college. Indeed, the group interview emerged as only partially successful. In the proposal, the group interview promises to be analogous to the oral culture of teenage girls and texts. The degree to which this is possible in a structured, controlled setting with a somewhat linear narrative set by the resarcher, is open to debate. Even less successfully, the two group interviews gave minimal clues to any mediation of meanings around femininity, a theme so redolent of previous authoritative work in cultural studies (Buckingham 1991). Yet others, as exemplarised in what Mary Ellen Brown (1990) calls feminist culturalist critical **theory,** is just that, with little recourse to supporting data. On the other hand, group interviews

did affirm the plausibility of Eckert's (1991) notion of 'competitive co-operation' in girl talk, as we shall now see.

Groups of girls show a distinctive form of interaction when talking about television. Talk aims at informing each other in a collaborative way, as has already been reported. Nevertheless, there is room for competition between girls, of the "I saw that" variety. Utterances are generally kept brief so that when several girls are speaking in rotation, a 'turn-taking' style is apparent. Such dynamics in the group seem to point to a democratisation and yet the will to build consensus, as distinct from boys' form of group talk in which members strive to be dominant, allows some disagreement to be tolerated. This position is a far cry from encouraging dissension; much is made of minimising conflict. Indeed, disagreement that did occur within Parklands School group was largely an artifact of my style - involving my spotting any differences of opinion. Unusually, two of the six girls were twin sisters and I intervened in the discussion primarily to ask "you don't agree with her then?" On reflectiion Pippa and Kirstie might well be embedded in their own discursive formation, for public view, so as not to be seen as too 'close'. There wasn't the opportunity to examine if they **were** self-conscious regarding their relationship; this would I suggest, make an interesting research project in itself.

Part of the harm-minimisation thesis in girl talk is the rallying to support an individual girl. In talking about Annalise's manipulation of men in 'Neighbours' for example, the girls at Pinewood School reassured Elizabeth:

R.B: *...she (Annalise) has to use her sexuality to get round men. Is that in order Sherrie?*

Sherrie: *Em.*

R.B: *... to use her prettiness, to use her ...*

Sherrie: *Oh. yeh, it's O.K. to use that. It's like if they're stupid enough to take it in.*

R.B: *But they are, aren't they?*

Sherrie:) *Yeh.*

Estelle:) *Yeh.*

Estelle: *Some really are. Sorry.*

Sherrie: *You've got them over a barrel.*

Elizabeth: *I don't think all blokes are like that 'cos I'm really quite ugly and I always seem to have boyfriends, so ...*

All: ***No you're not.   No you're not.***

As Eckert (1991) indicates, conflict resolution in girl groups often takes the form of teasing. This manoevure tends to reduce tension whilst acknowledging some degree of competition. In the following excerpt Estelle and Sherrie compete to get their view over but Estelle diffuses the tension as is characteristic in competitive collaboration. They are talking about Patsy in 'Absolutely Fabulous' played by Joanna Lumley, a comedy that, interestingly, we sought to analyse as if it were a soap opera:

R.B: *Estelle you said erm... you said er... she's trying to act young or something like that.*

Estelle: *Yeh.*

R.B   *Is ...*

Estelle: *Well I don't...*

R.B: *Is that a problem for you Estelle?*

Estelle: *No, I don't think she shouldn't do it because she's not like twenny four or younger or whatever (laughs) but I just don't think... I would... basically. I just don't think I would just be like that.*

R.B: *Mm. What about you Sherrie?*

Sherrie: *.. If you can stop yourself from looking old and stuff then why not do it, because nobody wants to get old, nobody wants to die.*

Estelle: *I think she looks awful.*

Sherrie: *And I think she's great. I think she's great.*

Estelle: *She is great. I just wouldn't like to be like that...*

Sherrie: *And I think if you're going out like this character is every night, and you're having fun and you're doing whatever drugs and you're drinking (Estelle laughs nervously) and having whatever you like as in ....sex!! (Loud laughter).*

Estelle: ***You had to point that one out.***

When Sherrie finds herelf in competition with her peers' views she tries to retract. In the next example when resolution **isn't** resolved by the key players, Sherrie and Ember, the group as a whole intervenes instead. (1) They are discussing the rights

(1) In the pilot study one subject commented on Michelle Fowler's relationship with Geoff the lecturer, in 'Eastenders' thus:

"When he came late .... she didn't even say where have you been? She just kissed him. He gave her a hard time. But he's got some money so it's worth seeing him".

The girl who is speaking is from a lower income group so it is difficult to generalise from this quite limited investigation.

and wrongs of Michelle (in Eastenders) being involved with an older man, of higher status and of a higher income, a phenomenon referred to by David Evans (1993) as the materialist basis of sexuality. This excerpt also illustrates vividly Silverstone's (1994) contention that television viewing and everyday life are of a seamless web:

Sherrie: *I think everybody here thinks I'm being a bitch now, because I said the stuff about the money, but I don't actually do it myself.*

R.B: *I'm interested in why.*

Sherrie: *I don't actully do it myself but I think it's very cool when people do it. I don't do it myself. Over to Ember.*

Ember: *Sherrie I don't think you'd be trustworthy with my friend.*

All: *(in chorus): Ah!*

Kim in contrast, employs a 'conflict resolution' strategy of her own accord as a way of promoting her position in the homogeneity of the group.

R.B: *Now ... something Kim said: and I, yeh you said: "I don't think soaps are real BUT these things could happen to me"..*

Kim: *I might have contradicted myself over the matter.*

Estelle supports Kim. This strategy is aligned to evidence in previous studies which cite females capacity to endorse each others statements through empathic skills, in contrast to the ridiculing strategy of 'malestream' talk.

Kim: *... you see this person with all the right measurements and everything, you know: "And I don't have a brain".*

Estelle. ***Yeh, it's a good way of putting it really.***

Elizabeth: *That's true, it is a bit funny 'cos she's kind of making good of herself as well.*

For all such competitive co-operation, seeking of consensus and mutual support, it is doubtful whether a mediation of meanings around femininity has been observed, in the sense of meanings beng modified manifestly in the girl talk of groups., In the absence of any such confirmation, I will now attempt to conclude on what **has been** discovered.

A feminine discourse involving the television audience of teenage girls rests largely upon the need to catch up with ongoing narratives of soap opera. This need to be au fait with 'stories' parallels a need for belongingness and dovetails with a certain ambiguity evident in the culture of femininity revolving around an 'acceptable but

different' construction. 'Catching up' from one's friends far exceeds the comparing notes - type discourse formulated in "did you see so-and-so last night?" interaction. It is customary to compare notes about television with other girls but additional audience groups involving other females are also recruited, with the aggregate effect that a 'gossip network' is constituted. An individualistic discursive formation is very much the exception rather than the rule, and, moreover, as a further complication in the absence of validation, the way is left open for the appearance/reality distinction in research to run riot. This dichotomy is mirrored in the problematic of interviews as a generation of valid data, at once brought into question as summarised in the maxim: "what she says is not necessarily what she means". Neverthless, a 'real' ethnography of viewing practice, in the family context, is equally not without methodological flaws.

An overriding theme is collaboration in girl talk. Despite disappointments with group interviews, it is possible to point to the confederacy endemic to girl groups. Such conversation is, it is reported, 'grabbed' within the structured temporality of the school environment, but even within the constraints of such interstitial spaces it appears that 'talking of television texts' has a place in the construction of femininity. In such a standpoint, difference is not so much shaped by social structure than by the language of girls' gossip.

Part 111

Messages in the pleasure and politics of femininity

6

Pleasure and power

In Part II I explored in depth the positioning of soap opera in academic teenage girls' construction of femininity. Within this analysis, it was evident that the subjects' distancing from and compliance with soap opera is formulated as much by their defining this television text as entertainment, escapism and 'just a story' as it is by a whole spectrum of phenomena premised largely on girls' refusal to suspend disbelief in narratives. The resultant outcome of this process is such that identification with leading female characters is not in evidence. If anything, this substantiates the need to differentiate cultural studies, which focuses on the infinite contradictions and complexity in production of meaning, and media effects research which concentrates on how the individual's viewing impacts upon his or her behaviour. The former discipline examines the reception of television in all its complexity whereas media effects research refers to behavioural responses, without regard to the historicity and cultural context of viewing. The position which I take argues for an incorporation of the text in audience reception research and locates feminine discourse as part of the text-audience articulation.

'Girl talk' seems to serve as a collaborative strategy, that is, a form of conflict-resolution central to the formation of femininity. In my view 'girl talk' as a social phenomenon has been overlooked in analyses which promote the notion of 'multiple meanings' at the individual level (Fiske 1987a), giving insufficient consideration to the social basis of discourse. Indeed, the way meaning is produced from television viewing reproduced in everyday life and then fed back into subsequent viewing rotates largely around girls' gossip networks. Such a forum is but one discourse, completing with other discourses in meaning-making. It is from this position that I pursue the remaining analysis. By their active viewing position I want to show how the particular audience group which I have studied are emblematic of a more autonomous femininity which is, crucially, formulated upon a platform of educational achievement. Nevertheless, a

number of constraints operate and mindfulness of such tensions will enable me to present something of a reworking of Mary Ellen Brown's (1990) and others' claims concerning television as a key strand in adult women's creation of their own distinctive culture. My earlier arguments involving the emancipatory potential of soap opera viewing will thus present a kind of catalyst from which to examine the current specific audience group and their consumption of television texts.

In Part III I want to point the way to an assertive femininity that is intersected with females appearing on television portraying a career-conscious subjectivity. I contrast such exemplary textual figures, who demonstrate capacity for independence with a traditional exaggerated femininity. I will forego a Gramscian analysis in favour of a feminist analysis, which rather than foreground patriarchy, locks into this cultural moment as a promise of progress offering unprecedented opportunities for young women,. This is not to suggest the absence of constraints, however. Top-stream teenage girl viewers bring with them to viewing practice something of the traditional construction of the feminine as caring, which must necessarily be set against any reading of contemporary femininity as an absolute drive towards independence. Resistance to parental authority, as a feature of this struggle for autonomy is tempered by the current subjects' sympathy with mothers in the mother-daughter relationship. Bianca Jackson in 'Eastenders' is condemned as financially dependent on her mother and thus unjustified in her struggle for power vis-a-vis her mother. Moreover resistance to parental authority is tempered by sympathy with mothers in the dynamic, symbolic mother-daughter relationship; witness subjects' condemnatory interpretations of Bianca Jackson and Tracey Barlow, read as a materialist formation which undercuts their potential for power. If there is a motif of power and pleasure in teenage girls' reading of television it is that they are comfortable with an active sexuality, in which beauty is exploited, yet, as I hope to illustrate, a struggle ensues involving caringness which impacts on empowerment within a sexual relationship. In this context I intend to challenge the prevailing authoritative argument that romance has now disappeared from the equation. For one thing, teenage girls demonstrate a weakness for good-looking boys, which will be explored on a gender politics basis. Lesbianism is NOT invisible in teenage femininity, as evidenced by a specific teenage girl audience who subscribe to the

Beth Jordache character in `Brookside'. Thus a conventional predominantly heterosexual construction of teenage femininity is undermined. Beth's portrayal of desire and openness serves to challenge television images of the heterosexual female which, along with the reflexivity of teenage femininity, has little purchase for ambitious, career-conscious teenage girls.

a)   Caring v. autonomy

> *Ember (15)   ....I don't think you should have to go round being ladylike all*
> *the time because with the length of my skirt at the moment I*
> *don't really give a damn because I think I like wearing it*
> *like that.*

This `manifesto' seems to declare a juncture within femininity that possibly borrows from classic liberalism in which the inalieable rights of the individual are inscribed; this is a political philosophy currently finding favour in popular consciousness. It is equally likely to be reactionary. For so long girls and women have been traditionally typified as 'naturally' nurturant, indeed as responsible for the welfare of others, expressed as this is within the family. Marxist analysis sees the family as an agent serving the interests of capital. Girls currently strive to dissolve difference, to be **more** like men, (rather than to be more like **men**) constructing themselves as `separated' (Chodorow 1978).  In order to do this, they must `see through' their nurturance and indeed, the tendency to **represent** themselves as placing others' needs before their own. They must learn to focus on self in such a project. Yet such a feminist politics is problematic for teenage girls, due to a whole host of reasons, some of which are: i) their suspicion of feminists as `man-hating' and the fear of a male `backlash', such is the power of their heterosexual desire; ii) their commonsense assumptions around femininity which renders them blind to the `prison house of gender' and iii) the relative absence of cultural representations of an autonomous femininity, still made visible largely by the exceptions in simplistic, hyperbolic gender inversions like in the film 'Thelma and Louise'.

Having said that, I now want to tease out a limited selection of readings from teenage girls' consumption of television, in an attempt to anchor a `blurring of gender' discourse within the articulation of audience and text.  A more autonomous femininity rotates around career consciousness.  Ember (15) decodes the narrative in `Heartbreak High' in which Jody faces the classic dilemma, having to choose between her career

opportunity as a budding rock star and her boyfriend Nick. A classic narrative construction would have Jody giving into Nick, but she doesn't, and Ember supports her position:

> *If that was me. Anybody trying to drag me down and stop me doing what I wanted, well I really don't need that kind of person, so I would continue to do what I wanted to do, which is really more important with somebody like that who's going to keep saying, who's going to keep dictating what you can and can't do all the time.*

Equally, Beth and Gabby, two female characters prominent is 'Neighbours' at different times in 1994 and 1995 are inscribed as career-minded:

Edwina (17): *Within the programme there are definite sorts of parallels. Gabby is equivalent to Beth.*

R.B: *Why do you say Gabby's very similar to her?*

Edwina: *Well, she's um .... very work-centred and career-minded, she knows exactly what she wants, from there she's taken over the ... she's taken over the business position. Erm... I can't remember what it's name is ...umm, well she's taken over Lassiters or whatever, hasn't she?*

Any manifestation of autonomy can easily be read from the discourse of 1990s feminism (2). Naomi Wolf has gained much prominence as the leading light in the third wave of feminism. In 'Fire With Fire' (1993) she posits a competitive and assertive feminism which is proposed as an antidote to victim feminism. Wolf, with her privileged Ivy League background, is hardly qualified to speak for all women. Nevertheless, her position in a pre-motherhood feminism **does** feed into the lives of top-stream teenage girls who engage with career-conscious female characters such as Gabby and Beth. However, a marked ambiguity is evident. Girls' prescription for an autonomous femininity is constrained to a certain extent by a need to care for loved ones. Their construction of Angel in 'Home and Away' for example, involves the capacity and intuition to reconcile independence with a caring subjectivity:

Kirstie (15) *I ... she is quite comfortable with herself, in things she'll do. I mean, like that netball and stuff that's just been going on, about how they're going to form a netball team. Umm, at first I think she seems a bit nervous and shy about doing that but then she just goes ahead and does it, so she's quite confident and independent but yeh, she still cares about people a lot. It's a case of having to.*

(2) On the other hand, Taylor (1993) in differentiating an individual feminism from relational femininsm, cites the latter, the main tenet of which is collective action.

> *Pippa (15)*   *Yeh, she is very independent and caring. Because with Shane, she's really nice to him, she likes him and everything. They go out a lot, whatever, but then on the other hand, she's very independent; she does a lot of things on her own. **So I think it's best to be like that really. She's not too tied down.***

One interesting feature of female independence is the capacity to be comical. This, I think, is to do with women entering the public space and at the same time being located in a more active guise. I argue for this position, rather than attributing such change to patriarchy per se. I contend that men's view of women as 'funny' relates to women's sexuality, and an historically situated male control of that sexuality. I do not limit the masculinist position on women's sexuality as solely to do with overprotection or chivalry simply because of men's marked ambivalence towards women as sexual beings, typified by the 'double standard' so redolent of Victorian sex role ideology (Weeks 1981: 22) and still around today. I **am** suggesting that a populist view of comediennes speaks to this same ambiguity around female sexuality. Moreover, teenage girls incorporate such a dichotomous social construction into their viewing practice just as they challenge a one-dimensional representation of comediennes. Yes, personalities like Jo Brand and Donna McPhail **are** subversive, but I think what is important to the young viewers in this study, in their more historically-conscious moments is that these women are 'up there' on stage or screen with the men. A parallel symbolic space is incorporated into teenage female identity.   It **is** that historically, comediennes have been rendered invisible, just like, as Janet Woolf (1990) shows, female artists (and writers) have been rendered invisible on the margins of art and literature. Ember (15) points to such a marked shift in social structure involving a current breakdown of gender divisions in comedy:

> *R.B:*   *Can a female be funny nowadays?*
>
> *Ember:*   *Oh yeh, I definitely think women can be funny (....) women can do just as much stuff as men, and they've got just as much potential, so I think that women can be funny in programmes. I*

> *think, sometimes they can be more funny than the men. I mean, some of the men's joke can be really crude and stuff like that, whereas women don't tend to do that as much.*

This formation clearly intersects with everyday life which is, however, a little more problematic:

Ember: *.... the boys in this school, they think that they're the only ones that can be funny, and they think that just because you're female, you can't be funny. So, you sort of try and make a joke and they go, "oh, ha ha, that was really funny", and stuff like that. So I mean, I think there is still a slight trace of sexism today in schools, about women being comical, amongst other things.*

As Walters (1995) argues, much of an audience's meaning making involves intertextuality. One of the features of this process is a blurring of soap opera with related documentary in for example, the special feature. Simultaneously this textual analysis points to an interchangeability of character and actress, as we shall see later in relation to 'Brookside' circa March/April 1995.

Ember refers to a special feature in which Joanna Lumley who plays Patsy in 'Absolutely Fabulous' plays herself in being left alone on a desert island. This challenge to a traditional construction of femininity as 'passive' and located in the private sphere, nevertheless met with an ambiguous reading, as evidenced by Ember's comment, "rather her than me, sleeping on the beach!" This elision of the character/actress division thus connects the text with a reception embedded in lived existence, and moreover, demonstrates a marked ambiguity. This ambiguity is also apparent in readings of the mother/daughter relationship, as we shall now see.

It would be tempting to posit Bianca Jackson in 'Eastenders' and Tracey Barlow in 'Coronation Street' as exemplars of a girl's autonomy in the mother/daughter relationship. Such depictions might well be cited by **mothers** as indicating that moment when a daughter will be a woman soon and is expected to break away. Orbach and Eichenbaum (1984) point to a mother's self-consciousness of her daughter's need to break from her bond, only for the daughter to feel bereft of love. A mother's further ambiguity involves a nostalgic "I want my little girl back" formation, a wish to return to the symbiosis of mother and say, her eleven-year-old daughter. According to Chodorow (1978) the mother/daughter relationship is characterised by ongoing

attachment, even in the midst of conflict, because of a joint identification between daughter and mother. Central to this process, Chodorow argues, is the way the daughter is absolved of the need to separate, unlike the son, who is compelled to break from his mother. This psychic (and social) endorsement to nurture and care in this way is thus perpetuated over generations.

Chodorow's theory is rightly criticised by such as Walters (1991) as 'universalistic' and 'acultural'. It fails to address mothering in a social context particularly overlooking the specific positioning of the audience group under scrutiny in this study. It is these girls, who portend a future for themselves as 'career women', who are beginning to address the dilemma of femininity as located in the mother/daughter relationship, which as Chodorow rightly argues, is not historicized but is ongoing. This is the 'deal of domestic dependence' always presented as an opposition to the independence of 'career women'. Walters (1991) chides feminism for maintaining this polarity which assumes career-consciousness to promise nothing more than being unloved and unloving. She cites Benjamin's (1988) psychoanalytic account of mothering as too trapped within the dependent/independent dichotomy:

> "Thus, once again, woman's mothering (albeit constructed not entirely by her) is seen as the great thief that steals away (...) female independence".

> (Walters 1991: 152)

I think Walters is wrong to cite such a duality and see feminism as attributable. Feminism has had to confront much more publicly located young women, even though this trend has been shaped by socio-economic forces rather than driven by feminism itself. If anything, it is Chodorow's theory that offers more coherence in relation to the current subjects, whose prescription for greater autonomy, encased as that is within ambiguity, does have the advantage of running **with** the cultural tide; and yet such autonomy is constrained by attachment. Interestingly, they refuse identification with Bianca and Tracey as independent, and point instead to a respect for the characters' respective mothers that is informed by their own teenage lives. This is the moment when they confront the contradiction of femininity at it's most profound, at once incorporating autonomy **and** caring into their particular subjectivities. Representations

of teenage girls or young women are read as failing to document such ambivalence in the relational context of their mothers:

> R.B: What do you think of Tracey?
>
> Bonnie (15) A horrible little cow. I hate her so much.
>
> RB: ...somebody said earlier that Deirdre (Tracey's mother) is strong.
>
> Sally (15) Not with her daughter. I don't think she is.

Walters (1991: 155) cites the historicity involved if a daughter is to surpass her mother by being situated in a more enlightened and emancipatory age for women than her mother inhabited. A daughter may even identify with her father, albeit a commanding and contemptuous father, in order to discredit her mother. I have to cite psychoanalytic theory at this point in an attempt to explain the subjects' interpretation of Tracey. Additionally, such an explanation serves to cite the inherent contradiction around the mother/daughter relationship as read by the current audience group. I suggest it is the complementarity to which top-stream teenage girls subscribe, indicating as this does the coherency of Chodorow's theory, for all it's weaknesses. Thus Walters (1991: 156/157) is correct in criticising the feminist opposition of oppressed, unfulfilled mother and liberated daughter as 'glib'.

When I showed 15-year-old girls the excerpt from 'Coronation Street' in which Tracey severely criticised her mother's choice of boyfriend ("he's a 'beach bum' that you picked up on holiday!") they made derogatory remarks about Tracey, regarding her as nasty and belligerent. This view not only indicates that the subjects subscribe to a complementarity in the mother/daughter relationship but also locates the symbiosis as a central feature of femininity. The girls' value system inscribed Tracey as transgressing a convention that is deemed by them to be sacrosanct. What might appear a wild claim on my part is endorsed by the fact that the girls widely identified with the mother in television representation of the mother/daughter relationship. This might appear contrary to what would have been predicted, given the academically-orientated girls' progressive value system involving autonomy, assertiveness and empowerment. Their view was endorsed frequently by an insistence that they couldn't or wouldn't talk to their mothers in such a manner. Often mothers are seen as accommodating and fair, even tolerant. Yet part of the close bond incorporates an unspoken rule: "thou shalt not defy thy mother!" Such a pattern requires consideration, given my attempt to locate

pleasure and power in the making of meaning in television viewing. It **does** indicate another constraint that is woven in to a 'real-life' emancipatory 'text'.

Bianca's relationship with her mother in 'Eastenders' suggests another example of how a quest for power may be curtailed. Bianca Jackson is a teenage girl character who shows no evidence of self denial or caring about anyone but herself. Indeed, she is portrayed as defying the traditional construction of femininity. The girls in the study condemned the way she talks to her mother, sometimes shutting her mother up in their interactions. Moreover, Bianca is, interestingly, defined by them in a materialist construction. She is interpreted as being more dependent than independent. Certainly, her reliance on her mother, father **and** stepfather for money render her materially subordinate rather than autonomous in any way. Girls' comments about Bianca 'scrounging' money is a reminder of the structural analyses of power, analyses which impose parameters on a theory of resistance solely attributable to discourse. The capacity to support oneself financially is recognised as a constraint upon teenage girls' empowerment. Nevertheless, material positioning is one thing; 'practice' within discourse theory is another matter. An appreciation of the discourse around power and resistance in teenage femininity is essential for a more comprehensive understanding of the contradictions associated with such a phenomenon. As Foucault (1979) argues, power cannot exist independently of resistance. Power and resistance are interdependent. Equally, power is transient and can shift over time. The current definition of teenage girls' resistance must therefore be contextualised in the present moment when teenage girls are beginning to outstrip boys in academic achievement, notwithstanding the relative absence of television representations of such 'clever girls'.

In such a framework of subjectivity competing discourses are involved: femininity and adolescence. Hudson (1984: 51) argues that much as teenage girls aspire to the status of femininity, such self-definition is jeopardised by judgements of their behaviour as adolescent. Hudson regards adolescence as a time of changed allegiance as compared to femininity which culturally prescribes the forming of deep attachment to a limited number of people. Moreover, adolescence is something the teenager is moving out of, whereas femininity is a status that a girl is supposed to be acquiring (Hudson 1984: 44). Such is the potency of expectations about girls' aspiration to femininity that

their experiential knowledge is overridden through being constructed as adolescent. Kim (15) provides an example of this in referring to the configuration of girls and drug taking. She constructs Patsy in 'Absolutely Fabulous' as a metaphor of the teenage girl as a rebel and thus unfeminine:

> *You get, you get certain people um.. like druggies, junkies and stuff, they always seem to be males, and I probably would as well. And if you think about it Patsy's a bit of a junkie really. And Saffy's really sensible. You'd think it would be the other way round.*

The rebel is defined by an adolescent discourse and it involves behaviour regarded by professionals as thoughtless and anti-social. It stands apart from femininity which is culturally constructed as thoughtful and deeply social. Nevertheless, caution is necessary if not to construct a binary division in the pleasure and power of teenage femininity between rebellion and struggle. The latter will subsequently be placed in the context of 'beauty as empowerment' (see section b). Suffice it to say that teenage femininity is diffuse; girls' discourses (to repeat) are complex and marked by ambiguity.

I will conclude this section by attempting to locate such an ambiguity, or what is more appropriately termed a division, within the specific audience itself. Such a division borrows from Christine Geraghty's (1991) work on women's pleasure in viewing soap operas. Geraghty's study is cited by van Zoonen (1994: 119) as showing how:

> *... the contradictory aesthetics of light entertainment, melodrama and realism construct a spectator position which is characterised by the ambiguity of distance and involvement.*

In the current study there is differentation within a specific audience, based on age and exact location that addresses such ambiguity. Fifteen-year old girls' spectator position tends towards melodrama, whilst seventeen-year old girls' production of pleasure revolves around an ironic reading which mocks any realist pretentions. As observed in Part II, 'A' level girls make reference to texts such as 'Baywatch' which they enjoy ridiculing in their talks about television. Younger girls mention enjoying 'London's Burning' for its action-laden narrative. Nevertheless, the latter audience's choice of such a programme speaks more for the producers' targeting of a male audience than a

'masculinizing' and thus, by implication, a 'distancing' of the spectator. As Moores (1993: 45) argues, Geraghty is correct in identifying a 'defeminization' in prime time soap operas, but she is also ready to locate spaces for female resistance in the most patriarchal of texts. Moreover, it must be acknowledged that melodrama includes relational aspects that dominate the television narratives which teenage girls penetrate. The interlocking of reception of such narratives with talking about them in audience groups is what Brown (1990: 205) regards as one important element in the constitution of competent femininity. Through sharing meanings from television, women construct their own subculture which thus acts, according to Brown, as a platform for empowerment. Language is crucial in this practice, legitimising and fuelling the resistance of, and interrelationship with, male discourse. It is to this specific language of teenage girls that I now turn. In such a formation the linchpin, everyday desire, operates reciprocally with television texts. I want to show how academic teenage girls' reference their femininity upon a liberal view of female sexuality, an active sexual expression and construction of romance through the appropriation of, and pleasure in, specific particularistic progressive texts.

b) "If you've got it flaunt it": beauty as empowerment

The cusp of the 1980s/1990s sees Madonna at her most influential. Singlehandedly she propels a feminist turn from the critique of objectification in second wave feminism to a politics of power, the power of sex:

> *The only way to control people is to control their sex lives. As for me I don't*
> *like the idea of being controlled.*   (Madonna)

It is through a counter-revolution of sex that Madonna turn it all around. Rather than being trapped as object of the male gaze, victim of her biology, or an agent of reproduction, 'woman' can now decide for herself. But how does Madonna and her representation of active sexuality appeal to an audience group of top-stream teenage girls? Suzanna Walters puts it succinctly:

> *"... understanding Madonna as a stereotype of the sexually objectified woman*
> *gives us little insight into the complex reactions of the young girls who idolize*
> *her as a signifier of their own nascent sexuality".* (Walters: 1995: 41)

This discourse foregrounds control in sexuality. Not oppressed but empowered by desire. Not to render pleasure for others, but for oneself. And, moreover, to adopt a playfulness that is premised on power:

> *Even though she plays with the representations of the vamp and the masochist,*
> *she also stays in constant control of the gaze. Instead of a montage of*
> *monstrous and agitated male eyes gazing at a naked woman, the video*
> *returns to the scene of the dreaming man. Overlooking him,*
> *superimposed over the top half of the frame, Madonna's eyes gaze*
> *down on him. Supplementing rather than replacing the male gaze, she*
> *disengages the exclusive dominance of the male gaze.*

(Morton 1993: 230)

This is but a text however. In alluding to Madonna's video 'Express Yourself' in it's referencing of 'Metropolis,' Fritz Lang's 1926 screenplay, Morton's textual analysis cannot be taken unproblematically as a representation of reality. The lived reality of teenage femininity is apart from, and within, the text of 'Express Yourself', as I now wish to argue. First and foremost I am reminded once more that an analysis of the text offers only a partial account. The role of the spectator is increasingly taken into consideration (Walters 1995). I endorse Moore's (1993) exhortation for an admixture of text and audience in order to avoid the charge of textual determination. On the other hand, Geraghty (1991) is right in arguing that current overemphasis on the audience runs the risk of retreat to the level of 'fragmented selves' and 'decentred subjects' in which textual anaylsis is rejected. In such a polysemic structure of multiple meanings, the individual emerges as prominent. Indeed, Silverstone (1994) argues that television studies should have regard for the individual as much as the collectivity. Although my anaylsis rests upon the voices of individuals, my overall aim is to tease out patterns and generalities which I see a meaningful to the **group** of subjects which make up the 'particular' under study. The 'perspective of the collective' is perhaps, an apposite expression of what I mean. Particularism can apply to a social group as well as to an individual. I think the embargo on an active sexuality, referenced by traditional notions around femininity, is a case in point. I now want to point to a constraint persisting in teenage femininity which curtails the audience from wholehearted appropriation of the Madonna text. This restraint circumscribes unrestrained assertive female sexuality running rampant into real life. Within the whole spectrum of contradictions refracted

through popular culture, here is yet another one by which a 'pleasure and power' identity is limited and made less possible. Female modesty curtails a complete appropriation of the 'phallic swagger' (Morton 1993: 232).

This position serves as a reminder of Hudson's (1984) study in which the discourse of femininity is contrasted with the discourse of adolescence. When intervening in 'problem' behaviour or mildy criminal conduct teachers are seen to follow an adolescent discourse in contrast to social workers who, as Hudson shows, tend to subscribe to a feminine discourse in which an emergent female sexuality is seen as central. Before going to the evidence of girls' subscribing to a belief that beauty can be empowering, I want to point very briefly to another constraint facing female sexuality, this time located in the text itself. 'Basic Instinct' is one film portraying men as victims of women. Suzanna Walters (1995: 123) points to another film, 'Fatal Attraction' (1987), a huge commercial success, which she cites as "the misogynist emblem of 1980s antifeminism". We can only speculate on this film's impact. Meaning-making is not an absolute process; it is riven with duplicity, and multiplicity. We do not know and cannot 'know' the impact of one single text. What I do want to do instead is to offer a substantive of the 'if you've got it flaunt it' formulation in the context of this particular audience group.

c)   'Making the first move': active female sexuality and desire.
       I think, I think Beth's a real person because she's just like everything I'm not.
       She's been through so much but she's really beautiful and really together, and
       really strong.

Beth Jordache is the character cited by Elizabeth (15). Her comments are positioned in the context of a moment which foregrounds the active expression of female desire. Beth Jordache's achievement lies in introducing a lesbian discourse into the highly heterosexist subculture of teenage femininity. The achievement of 'Brookside' in 1995 has been to insert lesbianism into popular consciousness, coinciding perfectly with a prevailing turn towards lesbian chic as a style of femininity. In this section I primarily want to focus on a small audience of postfeminist girls, whose libertarian practices within femininity incorporate choices in sexual orientation. The six girls at Pinewood

School, unusual in representing Beth Jordache as an icon, underwrite the success of 'Brookside' in locking alternative forms of sexuality on to prime time television. However, the six girls' defiance of compulsory heterosexuality (Rubin 1981) in teenagegirl culture loops back into the limitations of the current study. Reliance on interviewing precludes a thorough investigation of the school environment in which such values have been fermented. Additionally, this local example involves the audience's endorsement of young women's desire of other young women. Such a position previews subsequent messages regarding females' active agency in sexuality. Unorthodox as this is, in light of the closure of heterosexual text, it provides a precursor to the girls' reading of their textual contemporaries and the inherent tension within femininity, a phenomenon both censorious and celebratory. I then want to indicate how television representation of Beth the lesbian as active agent frees up in turn an active heterosexuality involving an expression of desire that at once is constrained by a fear of disempowerment.

For teenage girls to accept alternative sexual orientations into the realm of femininity is to violate the entrenchment of heterosexuality, in which the girl-boy relationship is central, and lesbianism is rendered invisible (Nava 1992). The fact that the local group of subjects which I am citing are 15-year-olds makes this all the more remarkable. I should point out at this stage that the school under consideration is very concerned with pupils' rights and fosters equality of opportunity for all. Gender issues seem to make up part of the current subjects' consciousness, and it is fair to say access to education is fostered for pupils from lower income groups, who make up a significant proportion of the Pinewood School population. In that sense the current six subjects being cited are atypical. And yet they **are** remarkable in their liberal views around lesbianism. It is worth citing the self-consciousness of their particularistic positioning:

R.B: *I'm not sure if I picked on any 15-year-old girls, just anywhere, they'd talk like this.*

Sherrie: *No, I agree.*

R.B: *Sherrie.*

Sherrie: *Oh, thank you. Erm... I think us lot here are actually the most open in our year towards things like this. 'Cos if you turn around, like some people who I know, who I used to hang about with, but I don't any more... er, yeh. And like I wouldn't say*

it, but 'what's his name', if I phone up he'll sit and say you like, and like, "they weren't gay were they? Oh God, that's so disgusting". Making like (the sound of vomiting) making these stupid comments and if you stay up there and start to talk about them then they'll say, "look, I'm not talking about it" and I think we here are probably the most open people to think like this, because we all do speak our mind and we are all open-minded and do what we want and say what we want.

All:	*Yeh! Yeh! (cheering).*
Elizabeth:	*Ah, she's brilliant.*
R.B:	*A lot of... this other lot of people are in lower streams? Or it doesn't work like that?*
Kim:	*What do you mean?*
Sherrie:	*Yeh, they are.*
Estelle:	*I think that's true actually. I wouldn't like it to be true.*
Ember:	*They haven't got a brain.*

This in turn raises the issue as to where such girls' meaning comes from. As already acknowledged seeking any causal link is hugely problematic, given the multiplicity of influences involved. Nevertheless, identifying a correlation is a different matter. Scholarly girls do tend to be more liberal, as demonstrated in the last excerpt from a group interview. This finding endorses Weinberg's (1981) argument that the more knowledgeable a person is about sexuality, the more liberal his or her sexual values are likely to be. Fast-stream girls, educated and holding a broad view of popular culture and sexuality, are positioned so as to transcend and critique the homophobia which is traditionally endemic within teenage femininity. I am mindful of Mica Nava's 'A Girls Project' (Nava 1992) which was widely criticised by feminists on the grounds that as a heterosexual woman, Nava was not suitably positioned to promote more positive views towards lesbianism in her teenage girl subjects. But as I have indicated in Part II **not** sharing my subjects' situation can be advantageous as a way of seeing through their commonsense assumptions. I do not think that my identity as a heterosexual precludes understanding any more than it did in Mica Nava's study. This is not to suggest that my questioning cannot be heterosexist as the following transcript demonstrates. Nevertheless, what the excerpt also shows is that the **collectivity** of postfeminist girls, as an axis in itself, constitutes a wider definition of femininity and,

by implication, a wider meaning system around the expression of desire, regardless of sexual preference:

R.B: ...what do you think the character of Beth Jordache has achieved, do you reckon, for, for women?

Elizabeth: I don't know, I think that question sort of suggests that, don't know, she's representative of all lesbians or something, but I don't think so, I think she's just one of them. I don't think one character can really achieve anything much.

R.B: Well, there has been moments, like when she was caught, caught? I mean she was **seen** kissing her girlfriend in the car, wasn't she, on that occasion?

Elizabeth: Yes, by her little sister.

R.B: Her little sister. Rachel, yeh? That was it. So that was pretty powerful, wasn't it?

Elizabeth: Yeh I suppose so. But I know... I know everybody was talking about that at school. All my friends were going, we're talking about lesbians more than the court case, actually.

Thus a discourse of pleasure in femininity hinges on a multiplicity of meanings, a polysemy, both within subjects and in the collectivity across subjects. Femininity as a text is opened up to incorporate a diversity of meanings which crosscut age, class, race and sexual orientation. The rousing theme of postfeminism is "here's to heterogeneity!" Such a celebration of differences within femininity intersects with the notion of the particular. Dorothy Smith (1987) amongst others, has endorsed sociology's need to recognise 'the local' and its specificity, in order to combat the totalizing effect of grand theory. I am suggesting here that femininity is riddled with differences. There cannot be a unitary definition of femininity; indeed, as the present study shows, differences within 'difference' can get caught in some kind of infinite regress, ultimately being relegated to the level of the individual. The postfeminist group at Parklands School, for example, is a microcosm (in one sense) of Year 10 girls at the school, who are in turn but part of the town's population of 15-year-old girls in general. Rather than retreating into demographics and issues around sampling, I want instead to cite the production of pleasure around diverse sexual expression a both **empowering** and **empowered** by Beth Jordache. This argument overlooks the self-referential Channel 4 documentary which was presented by Anna Friel, the actress playing Beth Jordache, who cited her

(Beth's) character as something of an archetypal postfeminist lesbian. This claim serves as a reminder that masquerade and simulation are constructed as integral in femininity. This will be discussed in due course. Furthermore, it resonates with the notion that feminism currently engages more with cultural representations of femininity than with the practice of femininity itself. It is these very partial and heterogeneous representations, causing consternation amongst many feminists that need now to be examined.

Feminism's confrontation of celebration of diversity in sexual expression, centres Madonna as the quintessential purveyor of 'the dance of subjectivities' in cultural representation. The main objection is that such texts endorse a self-indulgence that violates feminism's public political movement. Indeed, the textual play of sexual expression is seen to disrupt the feminist project before it has run its historical course:

> ... in substituting the private pleasures of interpretation for the public
> intervention of authorship, feminism again has prematurely abdicated its place as
> an insistent critical pressure within mainstream narratives.

>   (Mandzuik 1993: 181)

The pleasure produced by a free play of signifiers is at risk of overlooking the historicity of feminism. Mandzuik (1993: 181) argues that such a discourse of specificity is lost if synthesised with postmodernism. Feminism cannot afford to relinquish the authority of identity or to be torn away from transformative possibilities. To subsume pleasure with feminist politics is to be engaged in a project of noncommitment (Mandzuik 1993: 182). With an onus on the private pleasures of interpretation it is easy to overlook the manipulation of the text by the producer, a reminder that the young female consumer is not at the centre of cultural power. Such subordinate positioning is seen to be exacerbated by the very artifice which Madonna projects and celebrates in her femininity:

> "... it is, indeed, possible to argue that Madonna's displays of sexuality exist on
> the level of seduction and appearance and not in the realm of sex, at the depths of
> desire".   (Pribram 1993: 199)

In my view the concerns expressed by feminist theorists are not upheld. Firstly, the success of populist texts has done more to promote feminism through cultural representation of empowerment than feminist analysts could have ever achieved alone.

The impact of televisual texts devoted to an active female expression of sexuality infiltrates (though not directly influences) the real life positioning of teenage girls. Feminist scholars, according to Walters (1995: 141), experience themselves as anachronistic. Moreover, Walters suggests that feminism is increasingly located in scholarship rather than in activism. Much of this is attributable to 'postfeminism' a term coined in 1982 but subsequently defined by Stacey (1991) as an unconscious internalization of certain basic feminist goals with a depoliticisation and individualisation of such goals. And yet, I contend, feminism and 'postfeminism' are overlapping discourses. Both doctrines are not located in a sequential arrangement of linear development. They are not historically mutually exclusive, as illustrated clearly by Ember (15), who it must be said, **has** declared her manifesto around the free-will of the individual and yet offers her subscription to gender equality:

R.B: *Would you call yourself a feminist?*

Ember: *I wouldn't say I ... well, I mean, I don't like the way feminists go around sort of, like, saying ... I mean, feminists try and put the men down, whereas **I think we're all equal**.*

The perception of equality with men is underwritten by the advancements gained by feminism. Ember's comments, shared by many of her contemporaries helps explain teenage girls inheritance of 'a battle won' though they are invariably unaware of such political progress, taking it somewhat for granted. This might help to explain what Walters (1995: 141) regards as nasty suspicion or tired indifference towards feminism in the early 1990s.

However it is analysed, making the first move in expression of desire represents a progression of femininity away from the traditional construction of passivity towards a more active positioning. In talking about Annalise in 'Neighbours' asking out her boss, Amelia (16) had this to say:

What she would say is that she went after what she wanted. She's got determination.

Yet the following statement acts as a critique of the hypodermic model of media effects research, once again serving as reminder that compliance is far from inevitable, even with the most powerful of representations.

> R.B: *I was interested to know if you thought it was alright for a woman to do the running, yeh? I should say a young woman, a girl or a young woman.*
>
> Amelia: *Yeh, that's alright, yeh.*
>
> R.B: *Ah-hah.*
>
> Amelia: *Yeh, if she wanted t, definitely I'd say good luck to her but I wouldn't myself because I haven't er ... got the courage to do that. You see what I mean?*

Desire is thus not synonymous with an active expression of female sexuality. It can be brought under conscious control if the risk is too great, when for example, as Cindi (17) has illustrated, getting turned down is a distinct possibility. Desire can be debilitating in the face of male seduction, as illustrated by Cindi (17) in her reading of Seleena in 'Home and Away' who exhibits an ambiguity 'mouthing off' about how terrible Jack is, only to 'melt' at his advances:

> Cindi: *She's sort of taken in by him, she believes everything he says, and he says she's the only girlfriend he wants, but that's not true, and she believes it.*

In such a way 'making the first move' is curtailed sometimes because it simply isn't necessary in the environs of rampant male sexuality. Yet such a feature does not sit comfortably with proclamations by the popular press:

> *Amongst the 15 - 17 age group, women for the first time have overtaken men in emphasising the importance of values like hedonism, risk taking and seeking excitement.*   (Forna 1995)

Such mere speculation is nevertheless worthy of attention. It is evident that the feminist analysis of difference can no longer be premised on biologically 'essential' characteristics of women. Rather, gender ambiguity is evident (Butler 1990). Cultural formation arguably involves 'gender trouble' featuring the masculinization of women and the feminization of men. Girls asking boys out is, I suggest, one such example whereby, it is claimed, girls are behaving more like boys. I will pursue this theme in the next section which seeks to examine the female gaze, so as to explore the possibility of gender inversion or in continuing the theme of desire, the disappearance of gender division. Along the way, I hope to enhance understanding of this feature of femininity, which is irrevocably incorporated into girls' production of pleasure in television viewing.

d) The female gaze.

Girls gazing upon boys throws up interesting ambiguities in the cultural construction of femininity. This is a complex terrain, made so by a history in which patriarchal constraint of female sexuality has predominated. In viewing good-looking young males on television, teenage girls express desire which is counterbalanced by traditional constraint mechanisms such as modesty and lack of satisfaction in objectifying male pin-ups (van Zoonen 1993: 102), thus full-blown voyeurism of men is circumscribed as being antagonistic to femininity and girls are left to negotiate limited choices; rather, they 'read' a character such as Brad in 'Neighbours' in terms of his surfing, as part of a strategy to legitimate desire. Such characterisation of young men feeds into the traditional binary division of public/private spheres and as we shall see this dichotomy lies in tandem with a traditional gender identity. Femininity is constructed as 'passive' and masculinity as 'active'. But how can this be so in relation to television, given the contemporary consensus in cultural studies of the active viewer and, moreover, with the girl as owner of the gaze?

I want to explore in this section how the female vulnerability of teenage girl viewers acts to undermine post-feminist notions on which girls looking upon boys is empowering. The abiding motif which emerges from the data is this: 'I get lost in the presence of beauty' after a song by Alison Moyet. Such is the hold that good-looking men have over teenage girl viewers that they (the young male characters) seem free, interpreted by viewers as absolved of responsibility to develop and maintain intimate relationships, a representation driven by tradition which attributes girls with the relational skills. The very viewers who define themselves as rational agents in other contexts of meaning, ironically, seem to be more trapped by the gaze than emancipated by it. Thus the outline of how such a phenomenon can be analysed will now follow.

Girls 'ogling' at handsome boys seems, at first hand, to invert second wave feminism's critique of women's objectification, referenced as that is by a challenge to the hegemonic gender formations that have served young men's interests. And yet in problematizing the female gaze, young males in soap operas are rendered all the more desirable and thus obtainable by being represented as feminized. Equally, girls

experience a shift in positioning by being subjects rather than objects. Yet, feminist politics has to resort to the same gender polarities it seeks to undermine. An alternative perspective to be presented will combat the essentialism of a conventional feminist analysis, by transcending the orthodoxy and its concern with difference.

A power discourse underwrites the 'market value' of boys in terms solely of their good looks in soap operas. Thus, rather than pointing to any materialistic basis of differentiation amongst boys, it seems that looks link with power; being handsome provides boys with privileged access to girls, a privilege that is largely fed by a remarkable consensus amongst girls as regards the appeal of a particular 'beau'. Notably the portrayal of such characters avoids materialism and social positioning. Girls inadvertently collude in constructing 'lookers' as the ones to win and yet conversely aspiring to strategies of secrecy premised on the maxim: "if you've got a good thing, keep it to yourself". In lived reality such a principle may well have been arrived at through a painful process of learning. To be outmanoevured in rivalry for a boy by the very person one has chosen to confide in, a best friend, is constructed as one of the more traumatic experiences of teenage femininity. Girls DO talk about boys with 'drop dead' looks, both in their everyday gender relations and on television screens, as illustrated in a comment made by Ember (15), a solicitor's daughter:

> *I suppose they think that's quite good, quite good to know how it's going, how far you've been and stuff like that. Everybody wants to know those sort of things, so I suppose they put it in the soaps so, **I mean if they get a really good- looking bloke on, everybody comes to school, they say:** "cor, did you see whoever's new boyfriend on ...?"* whatever *programme last night, and hat gets talked about, **just because of what t hey look like.** And they do that so people will watch the programmes more, **because if you really fancy somebody on there then you're bound to watch it more.***

Such positioning of girls serves as a reminder that any move towards a predatory subjectivity, so much traditionally associated with 'active' male sexuality, is no guarantee of female empowerment. I intend to show now how the female gaze may be emancipatory and yet conversely perpetuates subordination for teenage girls. It would be foolish to underestimate what is at stake here; as Walkerdine (1984) argues, failure to make 'a catch' results in stigmatisation of the teenage girl. The girl's development of

competent femininity (Christian-Smith 1993) is brought into question. She is not to deny the voyeuristic pleasure of the gaze, looking upon handsome young male soap opera characters is part of teenage female heterosexuality and yet is 'safe' in that they are always beyond reach. This realisation inveighs against 'action demand' in sexuality. Nevertheless, soap opera characters such as Rick in 'Neighbours' play with intertextuality by appearing regularly in teenage girl magazines, and indeed, on promotional television appearances.

Such a phenomenon requires serious consideration if feminist practice is to enter the classroom. It must pay heed to the pleasure of heterosexual desire in the positioning of teenage girls' femininity. I concur with Walkerdine (1984) when she argues that feminism for fifteen-year-olds must incorporate the important elements of fantasy and desire. Fox (1995), in coining the present moment for young women as 'the age of the Wonderbra' rather than 'burning bras', bears witness to Walkerdine's sound advice going unheeded.

It is notable that the female gaze both serves the subordination of girls in the 'sexual enslavement' of desire whilst endorsing an active expression of that same sexuality. Both sides of this dichotomy are inherent in girls' subject positions, as derived from, and as invested in, television texts. It is evident that the promise of a female backlash has not been fulfilled. If sexism in representations of girls is to be defeated, it is through measures of equality with young males, not through domination over young males. Repeatedly girls in this study reported a wish to be seen as equals to boys; I have no evidence that fifteen-year-old girls aspire to the dominatrix position of supermodels like Naomi Campbell. Instead the more academic girls seek educational achievement as a catalyst for more freedom of choice, whilst simultaneously being constrained by a 'proviso of romance' in some indeterminate future:

> *Ember (15):* *That's really up to you what you want to do in your life, and anybody who says different can just go, sort of like, jump off a cliff, or something, because nobody else really matters in your life, I mean, **unless you fall in love with somebody and get married**.*

In spite of such argument the potential has been provided for an inversion of the objectification that women have been subjected to by men in modernity, with all its

patriarchal narratives. "Let them see what it's like!" might be the argument so redolent in the irony of the Chippendales, but as we shall see, this is playfulness rather than revenge.

Another strand of the culture of teenage girl femininity which inveighs against girls' objectification of boys is the move towards more fluid representations of gender identity in which diversity is apparent **across** gender just as such objectification persists **within** gender divisions. Indeed, van Zoonen (1993: 102/3) argues:

> *"It thus seems as if a pleasurable heterosexual female gaze depends on the denial and disruption of traditional gender identities. Ambivalence, contradictions and negotiations can stimulate female voyeurism rather than frustrating it".*

Fiske (1987a: 186) also adds his voice, suggesting that women's view of masculinity in soap opera departs from a male standpoint. The 'good man' in the text is caring, nurturing and verbal. However, teenage girls' construction of the 'good woman' is at variance to their adult counterparts. Good looks equate closely with the pleasure of the gaze, at the same time constructing not so much diversity as stratification in males themselves. Such a context is therefore underwritten by difference within difference. Good looking boys are represented in the text as not only having sexual power over gazing girls but also as being advantaged in relation to other boys:

> *R.B:*   *What I want to go back to is, is to ask, to wonder about ... whether these programmes portray this thing about looks in, in males. Do you think there's a message that if, if the boy is good-looking, he can't go wrong? Let me give you an example... it's not...yeh, go on.*

> *Cindi (17):*   *No, I think I know what you mean, because Shane's quite good-looking and he's got, he's g a girlfriend, whereas Damien, he's quite bright, but he's not all that good-looking, and he hasn't, he hasn't got a girlfriend, and he hasn't had a girlfriend I don't think.*

Clearly Australian soaps offer a relatively conventional reading of lived reality. (3) In Although the text leaves room for a negotiated reading, the celebration of 'gender play' Michael Winner's (1995) film 'Dirty Weekend'; a mini-skirted young woman is ogled and 'wolf-whistled' by men. I'm to assume this is a parody of the 60's genre. Isn't it?

for example, deconstructs Madonna's video 'Express Yourself' in its reworking of gender identity in a playful show of strength. Madonna sends ambiguous signals; the pretence of being a man involving feminine and masculine codes threatens to subvert the convention of feminine 'reading' skills, as we shall now see.

The making of meanings around teenage femininity draws upon soap opera texts in particular. As a feminized genre, soap opera engages the audience by dint of those reading skills which are traditionally associated with women. Central to such competency in the viewer is the capacity to see through the appearance/reality division (Fiske 1987a: 183): things are not always as they appear to be, or what is said is not necessarily what is meant. The gendered basis of audience leads in to understanding the prolific use of close-ups that provide girls with the raw material for their interpretation of characters and moreover, constitutes the focus of their gaze. The problem with such an analysis is that the two activities are somewhat distinct. The interpretation of female characters by females involves a direct gaze, all the more geared to 'weighing up' the character. In this study the 'caring versus autonomy' polarity, in particular, emerged through such reading. 'Girls gazing upon guys' presents something of a contrast however. As I was conducting research at Site 1, Parklands School in the autumn of 1994 and Site 2, Clearwater College in early 1995, Brad featured prominently in the 'Neighbours' narrative. The analysis will now shift to girls gazing upon Brad as exemplary of the major principle: girls' desire overrides all other considerations, to the extent that their judgement appears temporarily suspended.

Brad is often looking away from the camera. This is problematic, not only disrupting the reading of his face but also constructing him as the passive partner although no less desirable, as is illustrated by his place in the narrative at the time. Cindi (17) a printer's daughter, saw it like this:

R.B.: *Brad, it seemed that both Beth and Lauren threw themselves at him, well, no, but they couldn't resist him, because he was recognised, clearly recognised as absolutely good-looking.*

Cindi: *But he didn't have much .... he wasn't very bright was he! He was just ...*

What Brad does have is his surfing. He is often represented by girls in that light, in that he isn't deemed responsible for his part in any relationship to the extent of being a mere target for predatory females like Beth and Lauren. They are represented as competing to get involved with him, albeit with a certain, if reluctant co-operation between them. Brad often frowned at the time and my reading of him was that he was torn between Beth and Lauren:

> R.B: *I thought he was lost actually. I really thought he was completely lost. He didn't know what to do. He couldn't even begin to make his mind up between Beth and Lauren.*
>
> Cindi: *Yes.*
>
> R.B: *He kept going from one to the other. He didn't have a clue as I saw it. But he got away with all that, because ....*
>
> Cindi: *Yeh, Beth went back to him.*
>
> R.B: *..... he's so good-looking.*
>
> Cindi: *Yes.*
>
> R.B: *Does that make sense to you?*
>
> Cindi: *Yes. No, I would agree with that, yes. Yes.*

I will take the opportunity to interpret Cindi's low-key involvement in this interview. I would, at first hand, have appeared to ignore the classic exhortation: listen more and speak less. However, as an alternative explanation I point to the homophobia which is rife in popular consciousness. Masculinity imposes sanction on heterosexual men commenting on, or complementing other men's looks, as I have found by experience. Yet it must be argued that complementing other females' looks represents a major convention in orthodox femininity. Given that male/female interactions privilege masculinity whilst at once taking a symbiotic formation, it could be that Cindi was uncomfortable with my unorthodox comments. 'Malestream' thinking permeates female subjectivity, such is it's force. Kirstie (15), a daughter of a businessman, presents a prescription for Beth which, nevertheless, denies desire:

> Kirstie: *If I was Beth, I don't think I'd go back with Brad, after what he'd done.*

Kirstie goes on to say that it's not just his looks, it's his personality too. But she concedes that girls do fall for 'them' ('the lookers') sometimes.

The distracted gaze, epitomised by Brad looking away from the camera, presents a challenge to feminist film criticism as pioneered by Mulvey (1975) in work on the

female gaze. In this perspective the genre is said to be characterised by the aggressive male stare. He (the pin-up) violates any possibility of female voyeurism by gazing from the television screen directly at the female viewer. This theory falls down in light of a new distracted male gaze within the television text particularly in the context of the invisible or film-goer observer. If male, the invisible observer is deemed powerful through riding on the convention of objectification of women, as described earlier, whereas the invisible female observer, through meeting the defiant male glare, is rendered powerless. This theory does not transfer well to television and, moreover, fails to incorporate the young male character's gaze, which is feminized and distracted (looking away from the camera), into the analysis. Fundamentally a feminist analysis has to fall back on gender-stereotypical opposition in order to make its point, premised as that is on difference, in itself likewise a cornerstone of male sexism. My interview with Cindi illustrates the point that a feminist politics is undermined by the female gaze/desire:

R.B:	*...how are girls going to gain full equality if they just fall at the feet of a good-looking boy?*
Cindi:	*They won't!*
R.B:	*Is that right? Should they?*
Cindi:	*No!*
R.B:	*What?!*
Cindi:	*They shouldn't, like they shouldn't, shouldn't judge a person on their looks.*

So if feminist political theory fails to offer a sufficient analysis of the female gaze, because of its inherent essentialism, then it is to the interactionist perspective that I now turn.

Efrat Tseelon (1995) offers a way through the problems of the monolithic feature of feminist film theory in relation to the gaze. First of all, to repeat: the female invisible observer (in feminist film criticism) as trivial is powerless, in contrast to her as a television viewer who, conversely, is able to stare without being stared at by the distracted male character. Thus Cindi (17), for example gazing upon Brad in the 'Neighbours' narrative renders Cindi as powerful. If objectification is brought into the equation, however, according to Tseelon (1995: 68 - 69) it is the visible objectified character who is powerless, unlike the visible prominent character, who is powerful and

dominant. In this context it is Brad who is prominent, given that it is he who is coveted by two females who desire him in the text and unconsciously collude in his power position. In a parallel situation, Jack in 'Home and Away' had three girlfriends at once. When they find out, the resulting narrative focused on the girls collaborating against him but they also fought over him. Cindi (17) (talking of Seleena and Jack):

> *Cindi:* *She's sort of taken in by him, she believes everything he says, and he says she's he only girlfriend he wants, but that's not true, and she believes it.*
>
> *R.B:* *How much is that to do with his looks, then?*
>
> *Cindi:* *A lot.*

So, rather than being objectified as a disempowering strategy, good-looking boys, by looking away distractedly violate the feminist thesis on the gaze, which is premised too closely on women as 'gazed upon'; AND moreover, such boys defy any inversion of objectification. An interactionist perspective offers an alternative approach:

> *"Contrary to feminist theory, objectification here is viewed not as a demeaning state exclusive to women, but as a general state: the essence of reflexive consciousness".*   (Tseelon 1995: 75)

This perspective thus regards male conduct, like female conduct, as self-conscious. Reflexivity is not gendered. In his dramaturgical analysis Goffman (1971) points to 'stage' and 'back stage' behaviour. By looking away and by looking lost and undecided, Brad succeeds in maintaining an 'information preserve' which he paradoxically uses to his advantage. Girl viewers help to produce and reproduce the discursive formation around handsomeness. Rather than interpreting this as an active and thus empowering expression of female sexuality, an alternative masculinizing yet passive channel of empowerment is provided, averting the unifying feminist discourse and by implication, dissolving difference.

The female gaze has been seen to involve a convoluted articulation of femininity in that teenage girls cannot deny desire, and rather than police this component of their being, they may actively pursue sensation-seeking, engendered as it is by a heterosexual discourse. This does not necessarily inveigh against feminist politics; indeed, it comprises a post-feminist position which happily legislates the will to desire and be desired into subjectivity. Thus something of a challenge is presented to the lexicon of orthodox feminism, which still has concerns regarding the objectification of women.

Feminist film theory is inadequate for an analysis of the female gaze. Films involve far more close-ups and there is a closure of narrative not found in soap operas. The female gaze extends further, and is much more than the reflexivity of femininity articulating with the critique of objectification. There is some mileage in proposing the female gaze as part of an interactionist process, rather than as a mechanism of subordination. Beth is driven to gain control of her relationship with Brad partly through a lens which looks at him at the same time as he privately looks at her. Through such a vehicle, she organises him, conveying the possibility of a competent femininity that is not so much a tool of essentialism, more a representation of the reality of JOINT self-consciousness. This must be viewed in respect to intimacy management, a prominent feature in the characterisation of Beth which foregrounds her relationships. Initimacy management must therefore be examined in the next chapter.

7

Intimacy Management

Women, traditionally located in domesticity, have been ascribed as naturally caring and responsible for parenting. Indeed, the mother/daughter relationship has already been cited as the fulcrum of a continuity of caring in the cultural construction of femininity, serving as it does as a counterclaim against the biological determinism of sexual difference. A corollary of women's situation the caring role has been the designation of responsibility to women as regards emotional labour. (Hochschild 1983: 162). Feminism has conventionally analysed such power structure from the separate spheres opposition, which is in itself concomitant with the 'female as passive', 'male as active' construction. In their self-determination and move towards autonomy 'high-flyer' teenage girls are maligned by feminist orthodoxy for an avowed self-gratification which challenges a unitary identity of 'women' and engages with semiotic free play. Resistance to fixed gender role identity, moreover, collides with the hegemonic construction of femininity. In their move towards dismantling the private/public opposition so redolent of femininity, teenage girls in their contemporary location must yet confront the discourse of romance, which as I will argue in this chapter, still persists in serving the interests of patriarchy.

The main tenet of meaning-making for aspirant girls is represented in relations of equality, as marked contrast to subversive styles of femininity. I wish to illustrate how characteristics of conventional femininity act to circumvent equality in heterosexuality. That a struggle for greater independence in relationships is contained within desire underscores the critique of a 'dance of subjectivities' and the alleged fluidity of gender ascribed to 1990s postfeminist young women. The 'girls are more like boys' thesis is thus challenged by forms of femininity which rely on relatively fixed characteristics, rendering the possibility of a female dominant partner as remote. Yet, for all that top stream teenage girls' empowerment is not totally jeopardised, they continue the struggle to kick into a pivotal positioning within intimacy, at some distance to conventional subordination.

a)   Strategies of control and subversion.

Being in love is not defined by empowered girls as grounds for passivity. There is little sympathy for Saleena's reaction to a predatory Jack in 'Home and Away', in which she 'melted' in thrall of his advances. Rather, a more active positioning is constructed. There is encouragement to exploit the greater fluency in expression of feelings which is constructed as part of femininity. In this context talking is a vital form of competency. Claire (15) prescribes how Sharon in 'Eastenders' should deal with her romance with her brother-in-law Phil Mitchell:

> *She's in love with Phil. It wasn't a wise thing to do to go and see him in hospital . They should sort it out with each other. Then Phil can decide whether he still loves Kathy and stuff, so it would all get sorted out better.*

How girls insert their own meanings into television narrative ensures the elision of any univocal definition of femininity. There **is** complexity, as always, and girls are sensitive to stereotypical representations.

> *R.B:*   *They're (girls) always shown as being best at expressing their feelings. Do you think that would be stereotyping girls as the only ones who can talk about emotions?*
>
> *Cindi (17)*   *Yeh, because it's probably not true, is it? Some boys are able to express things.*

Major competencies attributed to females in relationship are intuition and conflict-resolution. Teenage girls consumption of, and in an active sense, reading of television texts mirrors their leaning towards negotiation, as opposed to a male proclivity for conquest and climax. Soap opera narratives are ongoing **and** privilege intimate relationships. This analysis explains how soap opera has been so widely regarded as a feminised genre, notwithstanding Geraghty's (1993) textual analysis, which involves an insertion of masculinity.

Nevertheless, a feminist analysis is somewhat at odds with notions of the centrality of romance in the production and reproduction of femininity. Romance has been marginalised by mainstream thought through its association with femininity, which is itself designated as 'otherness' and inferior (Heller 1995). Feminism too has upheld a dismissive view of romance, and as Heller argues, it is only through Radway's (1984) groundbreaking study that any kind of historical shift is observable:

Thus, there may be in the representation of family and in the organizing logic of romance ,niches of feminist recuperation and resistance.   (Heller 1995: 227)

Admittedly any resistance that is apparent is confined to reading practice in Radway's study. The teenage girl romance has been, in the past, 'read' as a resistance to the harsh reality of school and work. A more contemporary analysis by Sue Lees (1993: 112) views girls' romance as but part of an oppressive gender system. Indeed, Heller (1995: 224) refers to a tradition in mainstream feminism of emphasising patriarchy's 'romance with the family'. In this linear progression, teenage romance safely contains female sexuality in long-term relationships and ultimately marriage, so that men's control of women is legitimised in the family. Pippa (15) explains Debbie's wish in 'Eastenders' to marry Nigel:

> *... she wanted to have a home with a husband and Nigel is so good to her and everything (..........) It is someone to be supportive towards you, someone to look   after you. If you have got someone like a child from another marriage you need someone to be there don't you?*

On the other hand, high-achieving girls inscribe a contextual femininity in the contemporary dual-role patterning in families - having to juggle career and home. Beyond this, there may be resistance to the idea of marriage.

> *Claire (15):   No, no I don't want a husband (....)*
>
> *Lesley (15):   Right, I think that you shouldn't have a partner, well you could if you want, but I wouldn't have, because you have got your own problems, and like, if sometimes your husband has got problems they have got to be piled on to yours as well.*

I locate this viewpoint at the macro level of social change in Western society, specifically in relation to the high divorce rate. Additionally marriage per se is somewhat remote from 15-year old girls in that they are not legally entitled to marry until the age of 16. Such a positioning resonates with the old adage "I sunk into his arms and now my arms are in the sink", derived, I think, from second wave feminism. I must be cautious, however, in necessarily equating romance with marriage. I hope to show how my current subjects produce pleasure from a basis of non-marital romance that is quite illicit, lacking the legitimisation of the marital relationship, and thus providing a forum for risk-taking. Moreover, I would localise the current achievers as distinct from Lees' (1993) sample of working-class girls. Lees shows how marriage offers a compensatory

strategy for low achievement, not unlike Phoenix's (1993) analysis of teenage motherhood as the sole recourse to compensation for socially oppressed girls.

Romance remains a major concern with top-stream teenage girls, even as they are immersed in examination revision. This concern revolves around getting a boyfriend and keeping him:

Claire (15):   It's not totally essential. Um... but I think, I don't think I could um... I don't think I could live for ages without a boyfriend.

There is considerable consensus around this viewpoint:

Claire (15):   Yes, I don't know if you all feel this but when you have a boyfriend you feel better about yourself.

Lesley (15):   (......) if you are not going out with someone and there are loads of people, loads of couples and you are sitting in a room and they are like all over each other and you are sitting there thinking: "I wish I had a boyfriend".

Sally (15):   Depressing, you know. You feel lonely and left out.

Angela McRobbie, in her critical theory of contemporary femininity argues that romance is missing from the equation:

..... patterns of meaning which were once emblematic of the experience of teenage femininity (i.e. romance) have disappeared and have been replaced by a more   diffuse femininity, one which has been cut loose from the firm underpinning provided by romance.   (McRobbie 1994: 172)

I disagree with this viewpoint. Whilst McRobbie is correct in mapping a historical transformation in 1990s femininity, I think she oversimplifies such a shift. My findings suggest that within an empowerment ethos, teenage girls are constrained somewhat by the continuation of a discourse around romance. Witness the proviso in Chapter I part (a) of this section: "unless you fall in love", as a current restraint upon greater independence within femininity. Also in the same section, the subliminal message emanating from the mother-daughter relationship as represented in films; namely, careerism can carry the threat of loneliness and non-fulfilment in adult femininity. It is not that I have to conflate desire with romance (the family romance) in order to demonstrate the continued prominence of romance within teenage femininity. As the three 15-year olds demonstrated, a need for intimacy, along with a requisite competency in intimacy management, can be excised from any fantasy that 'one day my prince will come' (Walkerdine 1984). In observing the dismantling of the marriage discourse from

teenage romance, I see instead a focus on the romance of necessary intimacy, an intimacy nonetheless still largely grounded in heterosexual relations.

There is much of McRobbie's exposition that I **do** agree with. Her exclamation of how so very complicated and ironic teenage femininity appears as a current historical formation (McRobbie 1994: 166) has much resonance. For example, I would endorse her example of the Gossamer Wonder-Bra; at first sight trivial, it is representative of the centrality of body image and style in the current construction of femininity and indeed, management of relationships. I want to insert body image in to the key tasks of finding a boyfriend and keeping him associated as this is with a postfeminist 'babe' positioning, and present this in tension with a greater move to equality in relationships (McRobbie 1994: 173), which I will proceed to shortly. I have tried to demonstrate how the management of intimacy draws upon competencies highly valued in a subculture of teenage femininity and yet undervalued in mainstream ('malestream') culture. Girls' meanings around real life relationships are strongly reproduced in readings of Beth and Annalise in 'Neighbours'.

These two characters, I suggest, represent differential competencies in the maintenance of relationships. It is Beth who is close to being an exemplar, as she speaks to an ideology of assertiveness and equality which teenage girl achievers inscribe in to their own relationships:

> *Pippa (15)*   *Beth's in control of the relationship. Brad messes around. Beth just really wants to settle down.*

Amelia (16) regards Beth as an extremely dominant character. However, Amelia's interpolation is again contextualised within an ongoing difficulty in Beth's relationship which has to be negotiated. Part of the gendering of 'doing intimacy' is to take control when this is logistically possible and fundamentally necessary, as for example, with a recalcitrant boyfriend:

> *Amelia:*   *Well to start with Brad was quite a weak character, I think. I mean, he was basically portrayed as quite stupid, almost in inverted commas.*

Annalise is seen as something of an antithesis to Beth's assertiveness, pragmatism and control in relationship-maintenance:

> *Geraldine (17): I think she (Annalise) just fulfils the new bimbo stereotype really and emphasises it. But I think everybody knows that and she gets a negative image because of it.*
>
> *Edwina (17):* **Often she needs help** *or she like, has accidents and um ... she's portrayed as quite a weak sort of person. A sort who'd basically* **complain if she happened to break a nail or her make-up wasn't quite perfect.**

Clearly Annalise's exaggerated femininity doesn't chime with this group of assertive aspirational girls. It must be acknowledged that as 1995 has wore on (in real time) a shift has been discernible in the way Annalise is presented. She has taken to writing poetry and has strived to gain more control of her life, for example, initiating a relationship with her boss. Nevertheless her strategies are still deemed incompetent (her boss was married), albeit understood as an attempted career boost:

> *Geraldine (17):It's something you don't really do. Erm ... get involved with people erm... like your boss or something 'cos she feels to get anywhere she has to do that. I don't know whether she did it because she wanted promotion or something.*

The admixture of academic achievement and teenage femininity appears to produce a cultural formation around which equality in relationships is universally embraced. This explains how Annalise's overblown femininity is interpreted by such girls as at odds with their own positioning in real life. She is something of an anachronism. Annalise's personality is antagonistic towards a proclaimed fluidity of subjectivity, and serves the hegemonic conservative discourse of femininity. Finn, in contrast, a character in 'Home and Away' who represents academic success, went away to university and was lost to the audience. Cindi (17) reads Finn's capacity for intimacy management thus:

> *R.B:*   *How much control does a girl like her want? How much does she want to be in charge of the relationship?*
>
> *Cindi:*   *I would say half and half.*

The fusion between text/audience articulation and lived reality is again evident:

> *Veronica (17):I reckon in a relationship you should have umm, you should, it's not right that you should be dominated by someone because it* **should be equal in an emotional relationship.**

This is not to suggest that equality is a 'given', however. Top stream teenage girls are aware of oppressed women from the classic sex-money-power configuration

which any gender politics has persistently had to address. Gender has been theorized as a class in itself, but it is interesting that patriarchy is not necessarily explained from a materialist position as Beechey (1987) would have it. Sharon in 'Eastenders' is a case in point. Her emancipation has been won through struggle; an accompaniment of such struggle has been the transformation in 1995 of Grant, her husband, from oppressive male almost to 'New Man'. Although on a par with Grant in class positioning, Sharon has fought for her newly acquired equality (rather than Grant simply changing). Her affair with Phil (Grant's brother) is read with some sophistication as a challenge to one oppressive male through affiliation to his brother, constructed as relatively articulate and emotionally expressive:

> *Pippa (15):*   *Sharon's like, really strong. I mean, she helped, like everyone looked up to her, I mean like running the pub and getting over her dad and mum and that.*

Equality in intimacy incorporates the philosophical conjunction of rights and responsibilities. In extra marital relationships this is overridden, however, by the cultural proscription of female infidelity, in whatever circumstances. Sharon, in her femininity, confronts the double standard:

> *Bonnie(15):*   *It was Phil as well. And they're saying it's all Sharon's fault: "cow!" But Phil, they're letting him get away with it.*

'Strength through struggle' presents an alternative representation for girls, lest they take equality for granted. Male oppression can be confronted. Empowerment may result from such struggle, indeed, in such a dimension is contingent upon it.

The conjunction of contemporary femininity with equality cannot be contextualised within a straightforward adversarial structure around struggle, however. Heterosexual intimacy management is replete with conundrums, the most visible of which is the complementarity 'engendered' in intimacy, at once distinct from equality. Femininity overlaps, and intersects with, masculinity in this predominant form of sexual orientation. Annalise's subjectivity doesn't so much antagonise her boyfriend Mark's masculinity as interrelate with it. In fact, his sensitive male persona seems juxtaposed with Annalise's 'needingness' (as it is now constructed):

> *Sherrie (15)*   *I think the only reason that Mark went to Paris and that, or England, or somewhere. I don't know. She went away and he went   after her. I think the main reason he went after her was*

because, one, it was pathetic (laughs) and two, he thought: "oh well, she's just a feeble little female". Annalise the feeble blonde, can't take care of herself!

Complementarity in intimacy may thus be set up as a contradistinction to equality in relationships. Aspirant, assertive teenage girls align themselves more with Beth who purveys sense of control. Yet a reflexivity in femininity continues to persist, as does subversiveness. No matter how outmoded Annalise's representation of such capacities, these images must be confronted in a project of female empowerment.

b)   'Watching you, watching me'?: reflexivity in femininity.

The literature on femininity has long centred on reflexivity in the cultural construction of teenage girl subculture. In early cultural studies, ethnography has shown how self-esteem is built on how one looks. In adulthood too, women continue to evaluate their self-worth as premised upon physical attractiveness. This 'beauty myth' has been found to drive women's persistent quest for approval from significant others, and in heterosexuality, males in particular. The need for attention alone is held up as maintaining a vast beauty industry which services women's insatiable consumption of cosmetic products (Coward 1984; Wolf 1991). Nevertheless, I would argue that such overarching theses are charged with being monolithic. Each study largely overlooks historical and cultural diversity. It has been left to Dorothy Smith (1987), for example, to highlight local diversity in her critique of a unitary definition of femininity (4). If Smith is correct, it is reasonable to cite discourse as pivotal in the construction of femininity, as indeed she does. Yet discourse can mediate resistance to conventional femininity. It is in such a context that the current audience refuses the stereotypical young woman embedded in the beauty myth, Annalise. It is odd that Annalise is positioned in a sort of cultural vacuum, rarely seen to be engaging in a feminine discourse. In the narrative she is pictured largely with men, indeed her engagement with men is foregrounded, attributable perhaps to her depiction as unpopular with other females. This alone might account for academic-achiever teenage

(4) Local resistances in consumption do occur. For some reason the women of Toronto, Canada were found to avoid the colour green (Smith 1987)

girls distancing themselves from her, but I suggest they point also to her personal history.

Amelia (16) for example cites her resistance to Annalise's femininity as attributable to Annalise's psychological makeup, referenced as this is by loneliness and lack of confidence (5).   Any amount of Annalise's attractiveness fails to convince:

R.B.:   *Would you like to be like Annalise in any way?*

Amelia: *She's pretty, ain't she? (laughs). I'd like to be pretty.*

R.B.:   *Right. But I sense ... I sense that there's something else that you don't like about her.*

Amelia: *She's very insecure as well isn't she?*

R.B.:   *Uh-huh.*

Amelia: *And she hasn't got any family ... and ... um, I just wouldn't like to be like her really. **I think she needs men too much to make   her feel good.***

Bianca in 'Eastenders' is interpreted in a similar way:

Sherrie (15)   *... she definitely lies to get her own way, I feel, and because she likes to be **the best, the centre of attention, "everybody love me because I'm blonde"**, sort of thing, because viewers like that, that sort of thing **"I have to be the centre of attention, I feel I'm the best"**, sort of thing.*

Ember (15)   *Not like she'll go and sleep with anything, but she'll see how many people fancy her. You know, she likes to get that through, she wants to see how many people think she's a bit of all right. She, she gets a kick, just from that.*

As McRobbie (1978) first documented, girls such as Bianca who dress primarily to win male approval have to strike a balance between the 'slag' and 'drag' dichotomy as a fulcrum of their femininity. It is felt that Bianca fails in this endeavour, leaning too far towards the 'slag' image. Such viewing opposition is interesting, if only in comparison with feminist critical theorists who have cited Madonna's posturings as constitutive of her status as a feminist heroine.

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(5) It is notable that Amelia herself is the exception in talking about television texts with her boyfriend rather than other girls.

However, whilst contested by Madonna's transcendent self, neither is reflexivity underpinned solely by the configuration of body image, style of dress and persistent checking that one is being noticed (summarised succinctly in the phrase 'watching you watching me'). Annalise represents a guise as 'poor helpless female' and in doing so seeks recognition, even empowerment of sorts, in a subversive form. By subservision I mean a partial, non-assertive challenge to male hegemony. Subversion does not overcome patriarchy, I contend, in contrast to at least one feminist who suggests otherwise:

> *... a more confident and empowering approach which foregrounds the possibilities of 'subversive', that is, non-patriarchal modes of female spectatorship.* (van Zoonen 1995: 97)

I thus equate Annalise's subversiveness, namely her retreat further into femininity by the adoption of a helpless pose, as partial and unsuccessful:

> *Edwina (17)* *It looks like it's some sort of attention-seeking act. She wants male attention and that sort of thing.* **That's the way she goes about doing it.**

On the other hand Annalise feeds into a playfulness around femininity as an exaggerated masquerade, a kaleidoscope of appearances that undermines identity in its capacity for seduction (Pribram 1993: 199). The current audience rejects Annalise's incompetence and her abdication of a direct and open approach in their empowerment project. And yet, in the way of a contradiction, they occupy something of a subversive standpoint themselves in their production of pleasure in the excess, melodrama and parody of television texts. In such a way, I suggest, they effect a challenge no matter how partial, to the institutional view of the mass media, with its masculinist positioning. The proliferation of hegemonic meanings, of which Annalise is part, is subjected to an ironic reading which in itself is part of an accelerated shift towards female autonomy. Distancing from an exaggerated femininity, whether through irony or otherwise, is as much constitutive of an autonomous femininity as is engagement with a more assertive, aspirational and careerist form of subjectivity. In such a spirit I will now attempt the difficult task of summarising the extensive findings of my study.

8
Summary of the findings

In this study I have regarded my own position of researcher as data in itself. In addition I have sought to include in my analysis how my effect on subjects has shaped their reports. Nevertheless, self-examination can become **the** data if overdone. Moreover, such indulgence can easily lead to an infinite regress at the expense of actual data gathering. In the event, I think despite my efforts it has been difficult to maintain a reflexive stance, such is the pressure to gather information, to analyse information and finally to write up my interpretation of that information. Having said that, I have been mindful of the relatively unusual research dynamic operating in the current study, and I hope that my research of the 'other' will pave the way for future endeavour, in a similar research frame to that which I have attempted in my undertaking. In light of a shortfall in reflexivity, at least as regards my own expectations, I will at this stage mention the autobiographical nature of my research, before summarising the main findings of the study. Towards this end, I intend simply to reveal what led me to conduct the study in order that I try to remedy any misconceptions that may arise.

I will follow the lead of Liz Stanley (1993) and Judith Aldridge (1993) in adopting a semblance of autobiography as a precursor to revealing my findings, that in male dominated sociology were so long regarded as the only 'real' data. I follow this recent turn to auto/biography in the discipline as a way of inserting something of the researcher/writer standpoint. By so doing I attempt to facilitate some redress in a tradition which has incorporated little, if any, of the researcher's experience in the presentation of data. The key question often put to me during the current study was, "why do you want to research teenage girls and television?" I can point to three key stages in my student life which go some way to answering this complex question. Firstly my longstanding interest in youth culture, dating back to 'A' level sociology in 1972. My study of it as an 'extra' to the part-time taught course helped me scrape a pass! Secondly, and more recently, my participation as an undergraduate in the Culture seminar 1991-92 in which I focused on postmodernism and popular culture 'in particular'. Thirdly, a year later I attended the 'Gender Divisions in Contemporary

Societies' course as the only undergraduate with a group of postgraduates. More recently still, the many configurations and contradictions within femininity have led me to try and develop a greater understanding of it through the lens of feminist theory, with my own gender relations subsumed in, and complementary to, my learning about the phenomenon.

In my attempt to adopt a collaborative style of interviewing, my main aim has been to achieve mutual understanding with those I am interviewing, hence the subtitle of Part 1. I draw upon Foucault's theory of power/knowledge (Foucault 1979) in which he argues that discourse is the means by which power is produced. Thus a shared discourse is intended as the facilitation of understanding in the research relationship, for as discourse is productive, my collaboration with subjects should promote my comprehension of femininity and my capacity to transcend the common sense assumptions of those who directly experience femininity:

> .... *the world is intelligible only through discourse: there is no unmediated experience ...*   (Belsey 1980: 61)

Many feminist researchers would have it that my masculinity circumvents an understanding of femininity, given that I can at best share the experience, but not live through it. This argument seems to me to suggest polarised gender typing, yet the data which I have collected goes some way to indicating a more marked gender fluidity, in which the active/passive, public/private oppositions have begun to be dismantled. Anyway, as I have argued, feminists with all their best intentions, can also be exploitative in their research. On further examination of the research dyad I have come to acknowledge Lofland and Lofland's argument that full immersion is achieved at the price of losing the capacity for a transcendent reading. Transcendence can only occur with a capacity to stand back and see through actors' nonreflexive readings (Lofland and Lofland 1984).

I have thus tried to reconcile the need for a sharing of subjectivity, that parallels the way teenage girls form a confederacy of their own, with an exploitation of my inevitable position on the periphery of femininity. So positioned, I enjoy privileged access in constructing transcendent meaning around femininity, and I will now struggle to formulate my findings, in the process unravelling the many configurations and

complexities which both fascinate and confound students of femininity like myself. Furthermore, I must now try to anchor the role that television, in general, and soap opera in particular, has to play in the construction of femininity. I gained access to teenage girls as they were immersed in a subculture of academic achievement. Being streamed and labelled as 'achievers' brought their watching of soap opera into sharp focus. Those immersed in exam revision in 1995, in particular, were confronted by two particular discourses that vilify soap opera viewing as 'trashy', feminine and thus worthless. An academic culture, most notably at 'A' level, epitomises how girls struggle to justify viewing pleasure. To compound this, a moral crusade of the New Right has been conducted since the James Bulger murder in 1994. This viewpoint. which posits video violence as **the** cause of crime in the young, has heavily drawn upon media effects research. Inconclusive findings have sometimes filtered through to popular consciousness as demonstrating a causal link. Even a casual enquiry about television soap opera across all income groups is likely to generate very negative comments, especially from men, but also from women and girls, including those that are engaged in regular reception. Teenage girls, deemed successful in their studies are no exception, exhibiting marked resistance as an audience just as they comply in certain respects.

Teenage girls are resistant to the soap opera narrative. Soap opera merely provides an opportunity to disengage from the rigours of the academic day, to unwind. The Australian 'soaps' occupy a space in the day for girls seeking a break before perhaps confronting an evening of study. Soap opera offers escapism and nothing more. It is not designated as like real life; indeed 'clever girls' are absent from the narrative, at least in the sense that doing homework and revising is absent from the text and anyway would offer no playfulness for the viewer. Girls at school, in particular, seek melodrama and excess for viewing pleasure or alternatively, older girls engage in a more sophisticated ironic pleasure. Yet viewers engage with female characters, to the extent of differentiating those who project a competent femininity from Annalise-type figures who represent a 'blonde bimbo' form of feminine subjectivity at variance with academic girls' situations. Interestingly, enjoyment of television soap opera

incorporates 'being on the edge of your seat' whilst simultaneously realising that 'it's only a story'.

Girls' reading of diverse femininities, as represented by soap opera characters, demonstrates a tension in dissociation from 'passive' 'manipulative', 'man mad' and 'unworthy of respect' constructions and those characters who demand more respect, who are read as assertive, open (in the sense of not being deceitful) and fairminded. At the same time, girls make no illusion of reality, **NO** characters are deemed to be role models. Moreover, girls dissociate themselves from self-representation; seeing themselves in the text would bring to light the boring reality of lived existence, thus denying girls the pleasure of escapism. It is notable that girls represented in the text as academically able are located very much in the context of relationships. Such images speak to a constitution of modesty, even denial of ability so as to be not too threatening toward real (and potential) boyfriends.

A prescription by top stream teenage girls for more positive representations of femininity aside from, and overriding academic achievement, contrasts with the significance of viewers' social positioning in their construction of meanings. Through such adherence to the social, be it by way of individual or group, cultural studies stands apart from theories of more psychological identification such as Livingstone's (1990) work, criticised by Silverstone (1994) as failing to place audience members in a social context. This brings into relief the articulation of text and viewer. In trying to incorporate the text in my analysis I have become cognisant of what terms such as 'multiple subjectivities' mean, threatening as they do the possibility of vast polysemy. In this sense soap opera is exemplary, in offering up narrative gaps to which girls bring their own meanings. In other words, the text does not speak for itself but addresses the reader. Ironically Eco (1979a) regards the **closed** text as offering up maximum promise for suturing of meaning, rather than with an open text, which he equates with textual closure. Other researchers disagree. John Fiske for example, consistently emphasises the move away from textual analysis; his audience studies position open texts in a practice by which meanings lean towards the subjectivity of the reader, rather than the ideological power of the text (Fiske 1987a: 66). Nevertheless, I have refused a

reduction of meanings down to the level of the individual, mindful of a need to draw out generalities amidst such multiplicity:

> *It is, after all a prerequisite of qualitative analysis that the researcher is able to say something absolute, something that holds throughout the text corpus under scrutiny.* (Alasuutari 1995: 74/75)
>
> *Interpretations can always be challenged, but without them there isn't much point in cultural studies.* (Alasuutari 1995: 77)

I see the way through this text/viewer articulation, and the struggle to find patterns of interpretation, in the feminine discourse. Femininity is largely constructed as a subculture, through the collective, involving strategies of collaboration and conflict-resolution. At the same time a dearth of evidence has been apparent in demonstrating how meanings around femininity are actually directly modified in oral culture, although the group dynamics around mediation are apparent. Certainly 'girl talk' is constitutive of femininity, most notably in pockets of particularistic subjectivity in relation to the pleasure and politics of television viewing. I have found evidence of competitive co-operation (Eckert 1991) a context in which a modification of views occur, but I would suggest that widespread mediation of meaning is curtailed somewhat by the academic discourse of which individual achievement and by implication, individual empowerment, forms part.

'Clever girls' gossip groups around television viewing expose a double contradiction in the audience's interpolation of television messages. Their reception, as articulated when talking about texts, is marked by both resistance and compliance. They malign soap opera narratives as irrelevant to their own lives in the face of the producer Phil Redmond's claim that (adult) soap opera is laden with social issues, whilst seeking the pleasure of parodying such programmes as 'Baywatch'. Parody and irony are interesting, in that such activities are usually designated as resistances. Indeed, these strategies are representative of challenge to social control, being constituted in the interstitial temporal spaces created by girls within the school (or college) day, and set against the hegemonic institutional discourse. However, if placed within teenage girl oral culture I suggest a reading of a parallel audience activity as compliant is possible. My argument goes something like this: the feminine discourse is central in the constitution of femininity. A sharing of what Mary Ellen Brown (1990: 191) calls the

carnivalesque forms an integral part of actors' consciousness of membership in a female subculture. Such membership of the collectivity is contingent upon familiarity with the narrative. Catching up with 'soap' stories thus is crucial, by being productive of, and reproduced by, collaboration.

The complexity in the construction of femininity which I am referring to is marked by a prescribed sense of co-operation between girls. Yet a further contestation, in what I have defined as a double contradiction is illustrated by placing the observation of the individualist ethos fed, I suspect, by an institutional discourse heavily directed towards academic achievement, in opposition to a group milieu in which girls mostly seek to concur with their contemporaries. The manifestation of free will, in its most florid expression with the postfeminist group of Pinewood girls, will be summarised shortly in a summary of 'the pleasure and politics of femininity'. For now I again highlight a tension within aspirational teenage femininity, between watching and talking about television as cultural capital in femininity and a libertarian struggle for autonomy from the dominance of institutional and patriarchal systems.

Romance interrupts teenage girls' emancipatory moves, however. The individualist ethos in gender relations places an embargo on any straightforward collective will-to-power, rendering it problematic. Competitive conflicts come to the fore, most notably when girls' heterosexuality shapes them as powerless in gazing upon the good-looking boy. Jack exploits his status in 'Home and Away' as Saleena first competes with two other girls to 'catch' him, to the extent of physically fighting them, but then colludes with them in a joint move aimed at subverting Jack's dominance. Such a narrative gives rise to the issue as to whether meaning is **produced** in the text by the viewer or **reproduced** by the viewer in real life. Following a tradition in cultural studies, I will not make any claims of unravelling the intricacies of such an articulation. I will suggest, however, that meaning is an admixture of both practices. Viewers are socially determined, 'taking on' a resistance as derived from the 'hypodermic' model of media effects research. This discourse posits 'contamination' solely from a position of textual determination and immediate behavioural effects, which serves as a reminder that texts too are socially determined. Clearly further research is required if the text/reality configuration is to be better understood, although I am

sceptical of any such advance becoming possible. My abdication of responsibility to advance knowledge around this phenomenon is compounded by the limitations imposed in the current study, so as to render observation and analysis of lived experience impossible.

Part III further illustrates how certain features, immanent within femininity, serve to constrain high-flying teenage girls from achieving an historically unprecedented opportunity for autonomy. Vestiges of traditional femininity serve to hold girls back at the cutting edge of a new-found liberty and the promise of power. Whether they perpetuate their relative subordination or not, remains something of a mystery to them, owing largely to their common sense, insider knowledge of femininity. The need to care emerges as culturally relevant, beyond claims of naturalistic 'essence'. The continuity of the mother-daughter relationship seems significant, to the extent that teenage girls apply a materialist construction to Bianca's and Tracey's resistances, symbolically allying themselves firmly with the mothers. This 'money speaks' position contrasts starkly with the power and pleasure invested in a contemporary active female sexuality, although the icons' flaunting of their power through beauty is still grounded in the materialist privileges of celebrities like Madonna. The exhortation to 'express yourself' is brought into sharp relief, as but a representation, in Madonna's real life court case in which she is called to testify against a male stalker who has fantasised about being able to look her in the eye (Whittell 1996). Can this simply be referenced as Madonna's 'dance of subjectivities' project? Is it yet more postmodernist irony or a resultant real life male backlash? My capacity to raise such an issue is underpinned by claims that at moments in 1995, television messages intersect with real life in a seamless web. I refer to the Jordache trial in 'Brookside':

> *It was one of those storyline that make a spark leap between life and fiction, **like the sudden jolt of tinfoil on a filling.*** (Sutcliffe 1995)

I find no evidence, however, of teenage girls finding meaning in the Jordache - domestic violence issue-laden trial ON television (in contrast to an emergent media trend towards trial BY television). Rather, they are immersed in, and constructed by, a traditional positioning in which girls 'do' intimacy better than boys do. Their insertion of competency in managing relationships, driven by a superior ability to express

feelings, promises autonomy, as embodied in Beth of 'Neighbours'. Beth is favoured in preference to Annalise, whose exaggerated femininity is constructed as mere guise, the play of appearances, the seduction of traditional female subjectivity. Yet Annalise is understood as using her sexuality in her struggle to 'have her own way' through her subordination in having nothing else to fall back on, given her low-achievement position. The contrast of Beth is by no means read as contemporary and careerist, yet her assertiveness within intimacy speaks to the audience as promising a progressive political text. Annalise's positioning in reflexivity, her identity and self-esteem, contingent upon passively being the centre of attention, is refused by aspirational girls in their competent femininity.

It is yet another Beth, deemed **the** pivot of 1995 soap opera, who most of all offers a postfeminist pocket of girls the libertarian experience of free sexual expression. This diversity of subjectivity, incorporating lesbianism, is unprecedented prior to 'Dyke T.V.' television and challenges the compulsory heterosexual (Rich 1980) constitution of teenage femininity:

> *Elizabeth (15): I think females should be represented, there should be lots and lots of different ... there should be that on television, and there should be (....) nice women, and horrible women, and flirty women, and plain women, and all sorts of women because, I mean, we're half of the population, so there's no reason why we just have to have one image of us. There should be lots of different images.*

Elizabeth's proclamation acts as an endorsement of Kate Nash's (1993) call for anti-essentialism in research.. In this historical moment, in which aspirational teenage girls look to inherit a social structure in which the gender gap around promotion, for women under 25, is almost zero (Wilkinson 1996), in which opportunity is offered to appropriate a productive pleasure in the politics of empowerment, it is academically able teenage girls who of all social groups, can anticipate the opportunity to incorporate both equality and difference within the power structure of their femininity. This is not to suggest the end of history, but girls 'in the fast lane' are currently positioned to look back upon their active television viewing pleasure around progressive texts with satisfaction in connection with the persistence of traditional femininity. Such a shift

locates them propelled in a project of empowerment unheard of, and only dreamt about, by previous generations of women. In inheriting the legacy of female struggle, privileged teenage girls now have a greater capacity to occupy positions of power than their counterparts have had at any point in the entire history of femininity.

Appendix 1

Methods

The study of how teenage girls make meanings from television texts at once gives rise to the question of what methodology should be employed. A hermeneutic approach (Weber 1949) is deemed appropriate in cultural studies, in its capacity to analyse the fluidity and complexities that have to be confronted, when attempting to understand such cultural phenomena as examined by sociological research. Research methodology must always be appropriate to the research problem. In this instance, the emphasis is placed upon interpreting meanings involved in the construction of femininity, which lends itself to qualitative research. Quantitative research, which examines distributions and may or may not involve a hypothetico-deductive model is unsuitable, as this study does not seek to examine statistical correlations or indeed, cause and effect relationships. Moveover, a number of variables located within subjects' lived experience cannot be isolated and controlled in the laboratory setting of truly positivist research.

Qualitative interviewing, which will form the cornerstone of the methodology in the current research proposal in eschewing casual analysis, instead of attempting to find regularities and patterns that can be generalised from the data. Thus qualitative work lays claim to a respected scientific validity through description rather than explanation (Cuff and Payne 1979). The substantive, an account of a limited number of variables within a particular setting (Silverman 1985: 24) must, by necessity, draw upon wider 'macro' theories of social structure if it is to stand up as rigorous research. In such a way, subjectivity of respondents in the present study is seen as socially embedded. The need to view individual subjects as socially positioned is essential if a sound sociological analysis of teenage television viewing is to be achieved, as Silverman (1985: 15) emphasises:

> *"... any investigator who fails to understand the broader social context in which face-to-face interactions occur is not worth his (sic) salt."*

Questions have to be raised about the issue of comparative representativeness in a small scale study as that being proposed, relying as it does on less rigorous sampling than is employed in quantitative methods. But such concerns will have to be deferred for now until a

much later stage of the research process. Rather, a more immediate issue is that 'micro' analysis has to be made manageable.

Indeed, a more urgent concern at this proposal stage is the need to specify the research problem in order that the chosen methodology is appropriate and controlled. The ensuing account will seek to outline the proposed means of accessing and sampling before proceeding towards considering the means by which a focus on femininity can be achieved through the methods chosen. Towards such ends, a questionnaire will be used, along with a rationale for this research instrument, more commonly associated as it is with quantitative methods. The linch-pin of the proposed study, depth interviewing, will then be evaluated along with the intended use of group interviews and diaries. A particular problematic confronting the present proposer will need to be addressed: the issue of a male interviewing female subjects. This will be attempted within the framework of feminist methodology. At issue here additionally is the endeavour of enhancing feminist critical cultural theory, which along with many current analyses of consumption and popular culture as a whole, lacks a sufficiently substantive basis. Lisa Lewis' (1990) work on the appeal of videos in consumer girl culture is just such an example. We will start, however, with the question of access, before going on to the sampling issue.

It is intended that access will be gained through the researcher's step daughter on an informal basis. This specifically requires her to see her head teacher and mention the research project to him. This will be followed up by an explanatory letter seeking permission to undertake research in the school. A school setting has been chosen because of easier access; it is essentially an open situation in which a subject sample is, hopefully, readily obtainable. This is in contrast to a closed situation for which, in Dennis Marsden's (1991) words: "you need a cover story". Moreover, the need for informed consent becomes imperative, recognising the exhortations of leading researchers in field work to ensure that ethical requirements are met (Lofland and Lofland, 1984: 22). This inevitably raises the question: how much information should be provided in the covering letter? Bearing in mind that the research problem is at least

potentially controversial, it has been decided to emphasise the **textual** component of the research and to endorse the academic basis of the work (See appendices).

It is anticipated that there might be difficulties in arranging qualitative interviews in the school mentioned above. Therefore another school, school 2, has been accessed through a teacher friend, with the idea that it can act as a reserve setting. On the other hand, if full access isn't possible at school 1 then school 2 will be the chosen site with school 1 serving as a pilot site for the questionnaire only. The same principles of informed consent will apply in school 2 with additional personal contact to augment the covering letter. The major issue which presents at this point is that relating to the size of sample, a matter which must now be considered.

It is anticipated, provisionally, that a sample of twelve subjects will be sought in school 1, but some leeway must be allowed given the proposed method of selection: snowball sampling. This method of sampling is chosen where privileged access is not possible or where a key figure can operate as a pivot. Such a key person can act in personally recommending the researcher, particularly when the potential subjects of the research are likely to be sceptical of the intentions of the researcher (Hedges 1979). However the issue of representativeness emerges. Small scale samples, as in the current proposal, utilising qualitative methodology, do not engender the same sort of concern about representativeness as do large scale survey methods. Furthermore, probability sampling is not usually appropriate for small scale or qualitative research (Arber 1993: 73).

Nevertheless, it is fair to say that all social researchers involved in such methodology seek a representative sample of the subgroup they wish to study (Arber 1993: 2). This principle applies to the current proposed study. The restriction on resources is one variable involved in the utilisation of a small sample, as is, of course its suitability to the chosen methodology prominent in this proposal, qualitative interviewing. Another factor, according to Oakley (1974), is the identification of a key characteristic which is expected to have a significant impact on the research findings; in this case it is femininity. Differences in femininity have been linked, for example, in teenage girls with variations in academic

achievement, associated as it is with choice of reading material (Christian-Smith 1993). At one and the same time, the isolation of such a characteristic helps in specifying the research problem and thus narrowing down the focus in the interviews.

Concern about narrowing down the focus of the research problem largely rests on the need to be clear about what specific areas to examine, and moreover, what not to examine. It is not possible to cover the gamut of phenomena in such audience-orientated research. This means that emphasis will be placed on investigating the actual television texts which teenage girls take on in their viewing habits and the meanings which are derived from these. Particular narratives around femininity from such as soap operas and videos will be incorporated into the questio...naire, which will be discussed shortly. What is NOT to be included is an investigation of girls' gender relations in their everyday lives as this would extend their research to an unmanageable degree beyond available resources. Anyway, it defies direct observation, unlike work of the sort carried out in the ethnography of investigators examining viewing within the family context.

In the methodology to be employed, subjectivity as socially situated will be **reported** rather than observed. In essence, such reporting by subjects is representation, the first stage of interpretation before 'the story' is further interpreted by the researched. Subjectivity is yet more limited by the fact that as already mentioned, actual lived gender relations will not be investigated. To redress such a shortcoming and to acknowledge a wider context, it becomes incumbent upon the researcher to incorporate methodology which casts the spotlight on female 'gossip networks' in which talk includes topics from television. Soap operas in particular can initiate the decoding of narratives which are then monitored, regulated and often transformed in meaning, suggesting that female oral culture has a significant impact on the subjective experience of consumer girls, located as it is in a discourse of pleasure. Underpinning such an assumption is the analysis that text readers and discourses are socially situated (Fiske 1987a). The group interview will provide an opportunity to test such theory, representing as it does an

approximation of girls' friendship networks, a strand of consumer culture ideally investigated through participant observation.

It is expected that grounded theory will make up the main component of investigation and data analysis in the proposed study. Grounded theory seeks to understand the words, ideas and methods of experiences of 'insiders' in a setting but goes beyond this by interpreting symbolic meaning and conceptualising such data as a means of establishing new theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Silverman (1985) reminds us that little sociology is pure abstraction on the one hand or purely empiricist methodology at the other extreme. It usually is comprised of an integration of the two entities. The present study promises to be no exception to the rule. Abstractions will be sought in data analysis in an inductive 'bottom-up' approach, yet at the same time theory will be employed to guide investigation and facilitate focus. By so doing the 'particular' and 'general' (Silverman 1995: 24) or what, Smith (1987) calls the 'local' and the 'external' will marry up, with the hope of creating synthesis in an interrelating perspective. The questionnaire is introduced with such a task in mind. It is therefore to the questionnaire that this proposal will now turn.

Questionnaires are not much utilised in qualitative research. But as mentioned above, such methodology can be justified if an improvement in data collection can be demonstrated. In the current study the centrality of semi-structured interviews would, at first hand, appear to negate the need for a questionnaire. As in all qualitative investigation, questionnaires tend to be viewed as reductionist and findings tend to be truncated to such an extent that they are of little use other than providing data for detailed quantitative statistical analysis. But in this instance, no such sophisticated statistical analysis is planned other than to isolate 'deviant' respondents who do not provide any relevant data to investigate. Put another way, after many subsequent drafts, it is intended to design questions which are informed by narratives in soap operas and videos. For example, questions must be formulated which connect with feminist and femininity discourses of soap operas featuring existing theory. This will involve asking about the ongoing narrative in women's viewing of soap operas, characterised as it is without a closure, unlike

male narratives in which sexual conquest and climax is predominant. Moreover, star texts in videos (Lewis 1990) will be investigated by pertinent questions which aim to promote greater understanding of how such meanings, centred on pleasure, are made.

The questionnaire has a further function. It is hoped that such an instrument will facilitate communication. It is expected that more often than not, both the age and gender difference of the researcher could inhibit the exchange of information within ensuing interviews. The questionnaire is thus intended as a platform from which semi-structured interviews can be planned in advance, whilst at the same time interviews will not being too rigid, in order to enable some flexibility. It is intended that questions will be numbered to provide guidance for respondents. Notably questions are to be coded in order that a crude statistic can be formulated of how many respondents, for example, watch soap operas, in order to give something back to subjects. Also 'negative cases' (Denzin 1970) can be provisionally singled out at this stage as likely to deviate from major theoretical conceptualisations in the data analysis. It must be noted, however, that removing deviant subjects earlier and not following them up for interview will negate the possibility of generating negative cases, which are identified, after all, in data analysis. The question will always be, nevertheless: what to do with negative cases? Clearly if an individual doesn't report watching ANY television or videos, interviewing would seem to be an unproductive exercise. One way of facilitating the identification of subjects suitable for interview is to provide filter questions in the questionnaire with clear directions so that the respondent only reads questions appropriate to her circumstances (Newell 1993). On the other hand given the small sample, it is not expected that many subjects will be eliminated before the interview stage, if 'rich' data is to be collected as hoped, unless of course they select themselves out of the study!

The use of the questionnaire is thus intended to facilitate the interviewing phase of the research process, and to narrow down the research problem, in order to utilise resources most efficiently by asking the right questions. It is evident that a survey questionnaire may be linked to interviewing; indeed, in terms of large scale surveys conducted in High Street settings it will

represent the main research instrument. The questionnaire in such an instance is associated with the structured interview in face-to-face interaction. Newell (1993) is careful to distinguish the questionnaire in face-to-face structured interviews with self-completion questionnaires. Newell focuses on the latter method, as indeed the present researcher intends to do. Lee (1993: 98) identifies varying modes of administration of questionnaires, and notes that the self-completion questionnaire can be undertaken either with the interviewer absent or alternatively, present BUT passive. Much debate has occurred regarding the effects of an interviewer being present. It is interesting to note that Bradburn and Sudman (1979), who have been recognised as authorities on questionnaires, found that varying the mode of administration of a questionnaire had no consistent effect on the results obtained.

The nature of the topic to be researched does not lend itself to the use of the questionnaire as the sole research instrument. Notwithstanding the hybrid methodology as currently proposed, involving questionnaire and interviews, the use of qualitative interviews are strongly advised as the best means of exploring the fluidity of experience which subjects are likely to report. Single questions and precoded categories alone cannot begin to analyse meanings contexts. Interviewing is suited to investigating the many contradictions and complexities likely to be thrown up in an area of cultural studies like, for example, the study proposed. It is worth considering at this stage the sensitivity of the topic to be investigated. Lee (1993) very much emphasises depth interviewing for sensitive topics. The study of teenage girls as a television audience would not seem to be as controversial as say, Lee's (1985a) study of Catholic-Protestant intermarriage in Northern Ireland; rather, it is the context of the data collection methods, namely gender and age difference, which could cause concern. Such an issue connects with a number of interrelated questions which arise in relation to the form of qualitative interview proposed. Why the semi-structured interview and not the unstructured interview? How to ask the questions? To conduct a single interview or dual interview for each subject? It is these questions which must now be briefly examined.

Burgess (1982) talks of the unstructured interview as 'a conversation', suggesting that the interviewer allows the discussion to develop freely. Burgess argues that respondents are given space to raise significant issues and in so doing enable the data collected to be that much deeper. Nevertheless, the concept of conversation in research must be criticised. The interviewer is inevitably in control of the interview, as distinct from everyday conversation. Moreover, a checklist or interview guide, is likely to be used even in an unstructured interview. Thus it is difficult to conceive of a totally unstructured interview in sociological research. The nature of the population under study adds weight to the proposal to employ semi-structured interview techniques. It is anticipated that most subjects will be reticent to talk about their experience as an audience in face-to-face interviews, hence the questionnaire. Furthermore, questions will be taken from the questionnaire to form an interview guide, in order to explore the data more extensively. On the other hand too much reliance on asking questions in a set order will lean too far towards the structured interview. To avoid being charged with conceptual 'hair-splitting' let us now consider how to ask the questions.

Open-ended questions are usually advised in qualitative interviewing, allowing as they do interviewees to develop answers (Newell 1993: 105). On the other hand, interviewees may be mistrustful or they may not understand open-ended questions. As the interview guide will take up points from the questionnaire some closed questions will, it is felt, provide a balanced approach. The main problem is likely to revolve around the interviewer and interviewee understanding each other. This must, involve the researcher talking the same language as the respondent; she is **very** likely to be confused by terms such as 'narrative' 'subversion' or 'closure'. Of course, the difficulty is drawing a balance; not to be patronising and yet recognising the greater intelligence of certain interviewees.

Clearly so many pitfalls await the researcher! Factors like the complexity of the topic and the relevance of it to the individual will determine how questions are to be presented. Flexibility is required, and should facilitate the process to a degree. If a respondent remains unwilling or unable to talk, then a number of strategies are available. One useful idea is to

present a range of options to the respondent in the hope that she will be able to take up one of these as relevant to her experience. The inexperienced researcher must then be careful not to lead the respondent too much. This point takes the proposal next on to the plan to undertake single interviews, creating yet again much debate.

Single interviews are likely to be less demanding for interviewees, a point which may be very relevant for those in the present study sample. But it is argued that something is lost by conducting single interviews - the opportunity to develop a more comprehensive, deeper account (Oakley 1981: 44). Oakley terms the single interview an 'ethic of detachment' notably at odds with her notions of mutuality, rapport and shared experience in feminist methodology, to be discussed shortly.

Resources limit the capacity to undertake dual interviews and must be viewed as testing the commitment and investment of respondents as well as the goodwill of the schools involved in the study. It is intended to resolve this problem by the use of group interviews.

The group interview has been promoted in the research literature as follows:
"To social scientists the strength of group discussions is the insight they offer into the dynamic effects of interaction on expressed opinion....."

(Fielding 1993: 137)

Such methodology enables data to be gathered on how textual meanings can be regulated or transformed when girls talk about television. It is intended that the group interview will broaden out findings to a wider social structure for the purpose of data analysis. This format is cited as an approximation of peer group or friendship networks, which are prominent sites for the production of discourse around texts. Sociological research must extend beyond the subjective experience of individuals to investigate that which lies in the context of social relations. Group interviews can provide data on how talk proceeds:
"(Group) interviews can be used to get acquainted with the phraseology and concepts used by a population of respondents"

(Fielding 1993: 137)

Such investigation will be conducted within a classroom setting, so the class group will be studied rather than the loosely-structured peer group as such. Nevertheless, as the two

groups may be synonymous there need not be any great concern. Additionally dynamics and talk can be **observed,** thus meeting Sacks' (1992a: 28) advice that the capacity to see social activities in an observation study is a much more valid method than receiving representations. Within the restrictions of the current research detailed ethnography is not possible, yet at least the group interview pays heed to Sacks' exhortation. The group interview also presents an opportunity for the validation of data from single interviews. Bloor (1983) argues that subjects are in the best position to validate the data. Given that findings are shaped and constrained by the circumstances of their production, it follows that group members' pronouncements can be regarded as a sound test of validity.

A brief word on diaries will now follow. These can serve as facilitation of the interviewing methods discussed above, diaries kept strictly on a day-to-day basis can overcome recall difficulties which may be experienced in questionnaires. In addition they can promote extended probing into the data so as to better understand, for example, subjective experience as socially embedded. For example the 4WH model - what, when, where, with whom and how (Zimmerman & Weider 1982) is to provide a way to dig deeper into data, and at the same time helps validate data within the group interview. In the context of the latter, sub-cultural sanctioning of behaviour can be observed. Finally diaries can promote a better exchange of information if the interview situation is experienced as problematic.

Therein lies 'the rub': Can males study females? Feminist sociologists would suggest not, as indicated in the following:

"... the males have a serious handicap because they are frequently unable to take the role of their female subjects. Male actors and subjects are portrayed by male sociologists with 'loving empiricism' so that we see the world through their eyes, watch them in the process of defining, coping and interacting, but the researchers have often been unable to achieve the same empathy with female subjects".
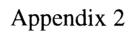
(Millman & Kanter 1987:35)

Smith (1987: 109) endorses this view in arguing that for women to establish their own sociology, taking women as knowers and subjects, involves producing traditional texts which reconstruct women as objects. 'Masculinist' sociological method with its emphasis on

objectivity and reason is clearly under threat from a feminist methodology. Ann Oakley (1981) is in the forefront of such criticism. She argues particularly for feminist interviewing, citing the survey interview as muting women's self expression. She posits a commitment to a style of interviewing involving 'reciprocity' and a process of 'mutual self revelation'. Genuine rapport is seen to encourage greater self-disclosure and thus enhanced data. Rejecting the traditional social science perspective, which privileges reason, distance and detachment, some collaborative approaches point to being responsive to, rather than rejection of, respondents' reactions. From this position, even the dynamics of the interview is seen **as data.** Lee (1993: 108) agrees that a lack of shared identification is likely to impede the relationship between a male interviewer and a female respondent. In the study of sensitive topics, for example, the sexual behaviour of young people, females are generally more comfortable when interviewed by a female interviewer (Johnson and Delamater 1976).

Such a standpoint presents real problems for the current researcher. Rather than being utterly deterred, it is necessary to confront such an argument. Firstly, qualitative interviewing is not therapy. It is easy to see it becoming just that if Oakley's model is to be followed. Brannen (1988) argues that interviewers should seriously question their wish to help interviewees. If anything, they should seek to help themselves if encountering stress, she argues, although this is made more difficult for lone researchers. It is Wise (1987) however, who is most vocal in criticising Oakley. She argues that Oakley assumes a shared structure for women without sufficient evidence. Wise terms this 'a magical device for the instant dissolution of inequalities' (Wise 1987: 66). Imbalance can still occur, Wise argues, when females interview females. Success in interviewing has more to do with the structural positions of interviewer and interviewee and the skill of the interviewer than the simple identity of gender. The current proposer, nevertheless, has not lost sight of the task before him: to strive for shared subject positions, understanding himself as socially positioned whilst alleviating structural inequalities is, indeed, a formidable prospect.

To proceed cautiously, but undaunted, is the plan. It is timely now to recap on what lies ahead. The chosen research methodology is seen to fit the topic to be studied, although the questionnaire is more contentious. It is justified as a means of making the semi-structured interview more empathic and thus more productive as a data collection instrument. 'Getting in', to be achieved through personal contacts and snowball sampling is an apposite way to study the identified population, given the restricted extent of research design. The demands on resources has, as is so often the case, demanded a narrowing down of the research problem. Textual readings and the consumption of such readings will be examined, but not ensuing gender relations in subjects' lived experience. Examining the latter would be riddled with problems; girls' relationships with boyfriends are not directly observable and giving information on these aspects is particularly prone to misrepresentation. The proposed questionnaire, likely to go through several drafts, will incorporate narratives from cultural criticism on television phenomena like soap operas and videos. The single interviews will hope to enrich data gathered from questionnaires, utilising a range of questioning techniques in recognition of respondents' expected difficulties in analysing what are in effect, some complex and contradictory messages.

It is the group interviews, however, that will be more likely to offer data on the subject in her social context. It is expected to act as a simulation of the 'gossip networks' in which girls exchange information and in so doing, transform subjective meanings. Ideas such as introducing visual excerpts from television texts, will be expected to promote the possibility of directly observing the discourse and dynamics assumed to be representative of the research population. Will the sharing of subjectivities in the proposed methodology be possible? To find himself becoming a therapist, unlikely as this is, would be in a sense positive for the proposer and yet must be controlled within manageable limits. The only way to find out is to do the research. Reading the literature is a necessary step but only goes so far. The best way, ultimately, to learn how to be a researcher is through direct experience.

Appendix 2

The following questionnaire sets out to ask about girls' views of television and 128
videos. Please answer ALL questions relating to YOUR television and video
watching.

BACKGROUND

| 1 | Age (please tick ONE box) | 15 ☐1 | 16 ☐2 | 17 ☐3 |

2 School type   private ☐1 state ☐2 college ☐3
   (please tick appropriate box) school   school

3 School pupils   single sex ☐1   mixed ☐2
   (please tick appropriate box)

4 Year group   4th form ☐1 5th form ☐2 6th form ☐3
   (please tick appropriate box) (yr 10)   (yr 11)

5 Father's occupation   _____ ☐1

   Mother's occupation   _____ ☐2

CATEGORIES OF TV PROGRAMMES

6 Which of the following categories of TV programmes do you watch at least
   once a week?
   (please place a tick in the box or boxes which apply to you)

   a)   documentaries (eg World in Action)   ☐1
   b)   game shows (eg Gladiators)   ☐2
   c)   soap operas (eg East Enders, Brookside)   ☐3
   d)   police dramas (eg NYPD Blue, The Bill)   ☐4
   e)   news and current affairs   ☐5
   f)   romances (eg Danielle Steele's Heartbeat)   ☐6
   g)   comedies (eg Birds of a Feather, Absolutely Fabulous) ☐7
   h)   serials (eg Baywatch, Soldier, Soldier)   ☐8

   i)   others (please specify)   ☐9

   j)   none of these   ☐11

HEARING ABOUT TV AND VIDEOS

7   How do you normally get to hear about the i) TV programmes OR ii) videos which you watch at least once a week?
(please place a tick in the box or boxes which apply to you)

i)	**TV programmes**		ii)	**Videos**	
a)	from friends	☐ 1	a)	from friends	☐ 1
b)	in TV advertisements	☐ 2	b)	in TV advertisements	☐ 2
c)	from magazine advertisements	☐ 3	c)	from magazine advertisements	☐ 3
d)	because it features my favourite star	☐ 4	d)	because it features my favourite star	☐ 4
e)	because it makes news	☐ 5	e)	because it makes news	☐ 5
f)	other reasons please specify _____	☐ 6	f)	other reasons please specify _____	☐ 6
g)	not applicable (I don't watch television programmes)	☐ 0	g)	not applicable (I don't watch videos)	☐ 0

TALKING ABOUT TV AND VIDEOS

8   Who do you talk to at school about TV programmes and videos?

i)	one friend	☐ 1
ii)	a group of friends	☐ 2
iii)	teachers	☐ 3
iv)	none of these	☐ 4

A CURRENT FAVOURITE

9   Think of and write down a fictional TV programme which you have particularly enjoyed recently (for example, Heartbreak High, Quantum Leap, Byker Grove but NOT Public Eye, Wipeout, Gladiators)

REALITY AND FANTASY

10   Think about the example you have given.
      Please circle the number which you think best indicates your opinion of the
      statements below (statements A, B and C) in relation to the video or
      TV programme you have already chosen.

      i)   Statement A
              "The PEOPLE in it are like in real life"

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree

      ii)   Statement B
              "The EVENTS in it are pure fantasy"

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree

      iii)   Statement C
              "It gives me ideas about how to deal with real situations in my own
              life"

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree

A LEADING FEMALE CHARACTER

11   In the SAME example that you have chosen, is there a leading female
      character?

      a)   yes   ☐ 1   who is she?   _____

      b)   no   ☐ 2

      c)   don't know   ☐ s

      If your answer is `no`
      or `don`t know` please go to question 13

IDENTIFYING WITH THE FEMALE CHARACTER

12   If there is a leading female character in the example you have chosen, please circle the point which best indicates your opinion of the statement below. The statement this time is as follows:
"I can relate to the leading female character and would like to be like her"

1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**
Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree

STARS

13   i)   Who is your favourite female film star (if any)? (please write her name below)

_____

If 'none' please go to question 14

ii)   Who is your favourite male film star (if any)? (please write his name below)

_____

iii)   What is it about this particular FEMALE star that you like? (please tick no more than TWO boxes)

☐ 1

b)   her style of dress and general appearance   ☐ 2

c)   cares for others   ☐ 3

d)   confident   ☐ 4

e)   dominates men   ☐ 5

f)   dominates women   ☐ 6

g)   attractive   ☐ 7

h)   don't know   ☐ 8

i)   other reasons, please write here   _____

☐ 9

j)   none of these   ☐ 10

SOAP OPERA CHARACTERS

14   Identify ONE female character in a soap opera which you watch and write her name below

_____

OR I don't watch soap operas   ☐ 0

If you have ticked this box please go on to 17

RELATIONSHIPS

15   In the SAME example that you have chosen in question 14, think about how
she gets on when going out with somebody and tick the boxes below that you
think apply to her.

    a)   she tries to catch the other person out   ☐ 1

    b)   she likes to care for the other person   ☐ 2

    c)   she tries to get round and control the other person   ☐ 3

    d)   she tries to be equal to that person   ☐ 4

STARTING RELATIONSHIPS

16   Still with the SAME example from questions 14 and 15, think about how she
gets on in starting relationships and tick the boxes below that apply to her.

    a)   she always gets the person she wants
        to go out with without any problems   ☐ 1

    b)   she gets the person she wants to go out with eventually,
        but with a lot of problems   ☐ 2

    c)   she never seems to get the person she wants to go out with
        but goes on hoping!   ☐ 3

GIRLS' BEHAVIOUR

17 Below is a list of girls' behaviour as shown on television programmes.
Place a number in each box which in your opinion shows the level of
importance of each behaviour. (thus the most important 1, along to the least 7).

    a) Making yourself look as attractive as possible   ☐ 1
    b) Concentrating on school work   ☐ 2
    c) Expressing real feelings   ☐ 3
    d) Waiting for a someone you like to make the first move   ☐ 4
    e) Caring for others   ☐ 5
    f) Competing with boys in schoolwork   ☐ 6
    g) Planning a career   ☐ 7

REPRESENTATION OF GIRLS AND BOYS

18 In your opinion, how should girls be portrayed in television programmes in relation to boys?

Tick ONE box only

a) as dominating boys ☐ 1

b) as equal to boys ☐ 2

c) as dominated by boys ☐ 3

d) don't know ☐ 4

---

19 Thanks so much for your time and co-operation in completing this questionnaire. Please remember to return it to me as soon as possible. I would like to interview some of you in more detail. It would take up to 2 hours in school time if this is convenient.

Would you agree to be interviewed?
If so, please write your name, and school, below.

_____

_____

_____

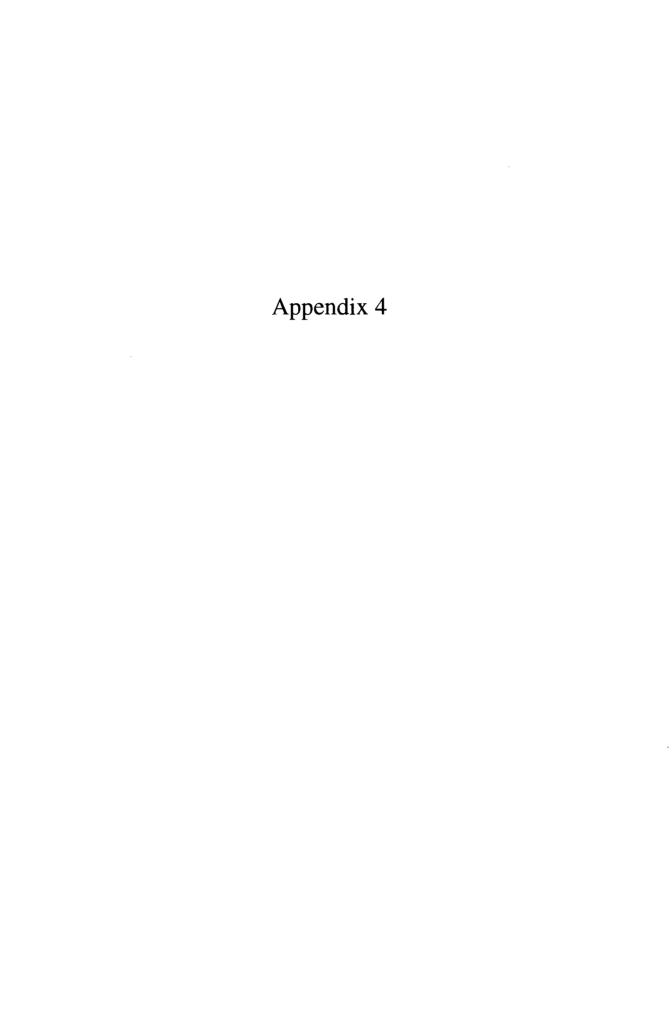Appendix 3

Date as postmark

Dear respondent,

Thank you for agreeing to participate in my current research project. 'Forms of femininity' is the title of the study which is part of a Master's degree in Sociology. The current study tries to examine how the media influences the development of femininity in teenage girls. The enclosed questionnaire is intended to be the first stage of research, with a view to conducting follow-up interviews at a later stage.

Please try to complete this questionnaire and return it to me as quickly as possible. It should take no more than 1/2 hour to complete; please do so CONFIDENTIALLY, don't compare it with your friends.

I should stress that you are being asked to complete this questionnaire only if your head teacher/principal and parent/s have given their consent and you too, of course, have agreed to participate.

Thank you once again.

Richard Barrett

Appendix 4

Dear Parent/s

I am planning to undertake research into teenage girls' viewing of television and videos. This is part of a Master's degree course in Sociology at the University of Essex. I am writing to you to seek permission for your daughter to take part in this study. If this is possible she will be asked to complete a brief questionnaire which may be followed up by individual and group interviews, taking up a maximum of two hours. It is intended to conduct all of the study within the school setting.

In order that full informed consent is obtained from parents before undertaking research, I am asking you to complete the declaration below by placing a tick in the appropriate box. Please return this to the school as soon as possible

Richard Barrett

I agree to my daughter participating in the
proposed research

I do not agree to my daughter participating
in the proposed research

Signature

Daughter's Name

School

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