

What is textual analysis?

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Textual analysis is a way for researchers to gather information about how other human beings make sense of the world. It is a methodology – a data-gathering process – for those researchers who want to understand the ways in which members of various cultures and subcultures make sense of who they are, and of how they fit into the world in which they live. Textual analysis is useful for researchers working in cultural studies, media studies, in mass communication, and perhaps even in sociology and philosophy.

Let's open with a straightforward description

What is textual analysis?

When we perform textual analysis on a text, we make an educated guess at some of the most likely interpretations that might be made of that text.

We interpret texts (films, television programmes, magazines, advertisements, clothes, graffiti, and so on) in order to try and obtain a sense of the ways in which, in particular cultures at particular times, people make sense of the world around them. And, importantly, by seeing the variety of ways in which it is possible to interpret reality, we also understand our own cultures better because we can start to see the limitations and advantages of our own sense-making practices.

Is that the only way to study texts?

Of course, I'm trying to make things simple here, and nothing is really that simple. This book only introduces one version of textual

analysis. Academics who do 'textual analysis' actually practise a huge range of methodologies – many of which are mutually contradictory and incompatible (for a sense of this range, see Allen, 1992). This book explains a form of 'textual analysis' whereby we attempt to understand the likely interpretations of texts made by people who consume them. This is not the only 'correct' methodology for gathering information about texts. Other approaches can also produce useful information: no approach tells us the 'truth' about a culture. It's important to realize that different methodologies will produce different kinds of information – even if they are used for analysing similar questions.

For example, suppose you were interested in what the responses of television viewers to an imported American programme (like the 1980s' soap opera *Dynasty*) have to tell us about how audiences make sense of the nation in which they live. You could try to find out this information in a number of ways. Professor Jostein Gripsrud includes two of these in his book *The Dynasty Years* (1995). On the one hand, Gripsrud draws on large-scale, numerical surveys about *Dynasty* viewers. He uses ratings information, for example, to tell us how many people watched the programme – finding out that in December 1988, 63 per cent of the women and 57 per cent of the men surveyed in his home country of Norway had seen at least one episode of *Dynasty* in the season that had just run. This is useful information – but it doesn't tell us anything about the *ways* in which viewers watch this programme. It doesn't tell us how they interpreted it, what they thought it was about, what relationship they thought it had to their own lives (Gripsrud, 1995: 113). Gripsrud goes on to investigate other issues in this large-scale survey, asking viewers what they disliked about the programme. He points out that less than 25 per cent of the people surveyed thought that the programme was 'unrealistic', for example. He uses this evidence to suggest that the viewers of the programme are likely to be relating it to their own life in some way (ibid.: 116).

But this methodology still doesn't produce any information about *how* these viewers might have been watching *Dynasty*. In order to produce large-scale, generalizable information, it is necessary to turn people into numbers. There's no other way to handle the information. So Gripsrud does this. He produces categories, and he fits people into them but this information doesn't give us any sense of how audience members actually use a programme. To produce that kind of information would require a different kind of approach, different kinds of questions – a quite different methodology.

Gripsrud quotes an interview with one viewer of *Dynasty*. The amount of detail and specificity about this one viewer is amazing compared with her status in the official ratings as a single unit:

[This *Dynasty* fan] is an intelligent bank employee in her thirties . . . her husband has a bit more education but . . . far less intelligence . . . her husband regularly beats her and humiliates her in various other ways . . . When telling the interviewer about her sexual misery, the wife on her own initiative started talking about *Dynasty* 'You know, I'm quite romantic, you see . . . What I like to watch on television is *Dynasty* . . . I dream that I'd like some tenderness and compassion.' (ibid.: 156)

In the methodology of large-scale surveys, processed as numbers, such a viewer becomes, perhaps, 0.1 per cent of the people who don't think that *Dynasty* is 'unrealistic'. Using that methodology, the similarity of her position to that of other viewers is emphasized. But in an interview like this, it is the *uniqueness* of her situation that becomes obvious – the individual ways in which her own life experience informs the use she makes of this television programme, and the interpretations she produces of it.

These two different methodologies produce quite different pictures of television viewers and their interpretative practices. This is because the questions that you ask have an effect on the information that you find. Different methodologies produce different kinds of answers.

This is an important point. There isn't one true answer to the question of how viewers watch this television programme. Depending on how you gather your information, you will find different answers. And you can't just fit these different pieces of information together like a jigsaw to produce the 'truth' about how viewers watch *Dynasty*. You can know in detail how a small number of people watch a programme; or you can know in a more abstract way how lots of people watch. But you can't really know both at once. If we simply interviewed every one of the millions of Norwegian *Dynasty* viewers in this way, we still wouldn't end up with a perfectly accurate picture of how they *really* interpret this text. Quite apart from the inconceivable cost of such a project, at some point it would be necessary to boil down the information, to look for patterns, to reduce viewers' experiences to the things that they have in common, in order to produce an account that wasn't twenty million words long. As soon as the information is boiled down into categories, it presents a different type of picture to that which emerges from the individual interview – but no less of a true one. Different methodologies produce different kinds of information – they might not even be compatible.

What is a text?

If textual analysis involves analysing texts, then – what exactly is a text? Answer: whenever we produce an *interpretation* of something's *meaning* – a book, television programme, film, magazine, T-shirt or kilt, piece of furniture or ornament – we treat it as a text. A text is something that we make meaning from.

So why not just say 'book' or 'film' or whatever?

We use the word 'text' because it has particular implications. There are no two exact synonyms in the English language – words always have slightly different meanings and connotations. The word 'text' has post-structuralist implications for thinking about the production of meaning.

And that would mean, exactly . . . ?

Different cultures make sense of the world in very different ways. Times Books International publishes a series of books to help travellers visiting other countries. The series is called 'Culture Shock' (Craig, 1979; Hur and Hur, 1993; Roces and Roces, 1985). The books are not just tourist guides: they are attempts to help the visitor – as their title suggests – overcome 'culture shock': the experience of visiting another culture that's different not only in language, but in its whole way of making sense of the world. In their book on the Philippines, Alfredo and Grace Roces use this example to explain how different another culture's ways of making sense of the world can be:

After two years in the Philippines, Albert G Bradford, an American Peace Corps Volunteer wrote to one of his colleagues: 'I remember how quickly I discovered that people didn't understand me. The simplest things to me seemed not familiar to them at all. I tried to explain, but the further I got into an explanation, the sillier I looked; suddenly I felt undermined: the most basic premises, values and understandings were of no help to me . . . for these understandings and ways of doing and seeing things just didn't *exist* even. There was a big gap. (Roces and Roces, 1985: 83, emphasis in original)

Studying other cultures makes clear that, at many levels, the ways of making sense of the world employed can be quite different: 'The

Western visitor [to the Philippines] finds he is talking the same language, but not communicating at all . . . he [sic] is in an entirely different world' (ibid.: 1). These differences operate at a variety of levels, from the more superficial, to those which challenge our very foundations for thinking about what reality is and how it works.

Differences in value judgements

At the simplest level, cultures may ascribe different levels of value to things around them. For example, every culture includes people who have more body fat than others. But there is no universal agreement about whether having more body fat than your fellow citizens is a good thing or a bad thing. In Western countries a combination of medical and aesthetic discourses insist that being larger is not a good thing: it is neither attractive nor healthy, we are forever being told. We are constantly surrounded by reminders that this is the case, by people who might, for example, buy a T-shirt that says: 'No fat chicks' ('Enter a room/bar or event and let fat chicks know your [sic] not intrested [sic]', Shirtgod, 2002; luckily, you can avoid such people by wearing a T-shirt yourself that says: 'No morons who can't spell').

And such value judgements aren't natural, nor are they universal. In other cultures, completely different standards apply. In the African country of Niger, being larger is a positive quality and something to be sought after:

Fat is the beauty ideal for women in Niger, especially in the village of Maradi where they take steroids to gain bulk, pills to sharpen appetites and even ingest feed or vitamins meant for animals; many compete to become heaviest and train for beauty contests by gorging on food. (Onishi, 2001: 4)

The idea that different cultures make different value judgements about things is common sense – we already know this. But the differences in sense-making practices in various cultures go much further than this.

Differences in the existence of abstract things

In books about cross-cultural communication, you often find phrases like: 'it has not been possible to find satisfactory English translations for these expressions [of 'Hungarian politeness and greetings formulas and forms of address']' (Balazs, 1985: 163); or '[i]n the Hopi language . . . there is no word for "time"' (Fuglesang, 1982: 40).

Abstract nouns, describing things that don't have a physical existence, vary markedly from culture to culture. We can attempt to translate these from language to language, but these translations are often rough – trying to find the closest equivalents in a different sense-making system, but differing quite widely. 'Hiya' for example, is 'the foremost social value' in the Philippines, according to *Culture Shock*, and can be roughly translated as 'shame' but 'It is rather a difficult word to define', because the range and scope of this concept, and the variety of ways in which it functions in Filipino culture, have no equivalent in English:

It is a universal social sanction, creating a deep emotional realisation of having failed to live up to the standards of society . . . Filipino employees tend not to ask questions of a supervisor even if they are not quite sure what they should do, because of hiya; a host may spend more than he can afford for a party, driven by hiya; an employee dismissed from his job may react violently because of hiya. (Roces and Rocés, 1985: 30)

Some cultures have no words for 'round', 'square' or 'triangular' (Fuglesang, 1982: 16) – these concepts aren't useful for their way of life. Others don't have words for, and don't use the concepts of, abstractions like 'speed' or 'matter' (Whorf, quoted in Fuglesang, 1982: 34). The way in which they make sense of the world is not built on these abstractions that are so familiar to Western culture. Anthropologist Fuglesang describes the culture of Swahili speakers in Africa, and the ways in which they make sense of the world without the abstract nouns that Westerners are used to. For example, the answer to the question: 'How big is your house?' is 'I have house for my ancestors, the wife, and God gave me eight children, Bwana'. With repeated questioning, it turns out that the house is 'fifteen paces'. When asked, 'How long is a pace?', the answer is: 'The headman, Mr Viyambo, does the pacing in the village, Bwana' (quoted in Fuglesang, 1982: 34). In the Western world-view, such answers don't make sense. In Swahili, because measurement is not an abstract, the answer is meaningful – it tells the questioner all that they need to know about *how* this measurement was done. For the speaker, this is the really important thing. Similarly, the absence of an abstract 'time' leads to different ways of making sense of experience: 'When was your son born, Mulenga?'; 'My son was born two rainy seasons after the great drought' (ibid.: 1982: 37–8). As Fuglesang says, 'time only exists when it is experienced . . . In the African village . . . it is simply non-sensical to say "I do not have time"' (ibid.: 38).

Differences in the existence of concrete things

This is the difficult part. It's possible to argue that in different sense-making structures, even physical objects exist differently. The commonest example for this is the multiple words that Inuit languages have for describing snow, where English only has one. An Inuit speaker can describe, can distinguish between – can, in a way, see – many different kinds of object in a snowy landscape (different kinds of snow). An English speaker, who doesn't have the culture, knowledge or experience to distinguish between them, won't see many different kinds of object. For him or her, there is only undifferentiated 'snow'. The different kinds of snow don't exist for the English speaker as differentiated objects. This is not simply a different value judgement on elements of reality – it's seeing reality differently. Objects don't exist in the same way in the sense-making practices of different cultures. Objects – and even people – can be fitted into quite different categories in different ways of making sense of the world:

in western societies there is a tripartite division of age groups into children, youngsters [adolescents] and adults – with an almost cultic social attention accorded to youth and the youthful, and conversely, a badly concealed contempt for old age. In other societies, for example, Bantu societies in Africa, the divisions have a different status emphasis and follow different lines – children, adults, elders. (Fuglesang, 1982: 77)

There is no equivalent of 'elder' in Western culture. Not all old people are elders; not all elders are old people. It is a different kind of person – a wise person with a high social standing because of their knowledge and experience – who doesn't exist in Western cultures.

Differences in relationships between things

Noting that it isn't possible to translate a number of Hungarian words that are 'politeness and greetings formulas and forms of address' into English, Balazs states that until the nineteenth century, Hungary had no general word for 'you' that didn't imply a social relationship of inferiority and superiority to the speaker – everyone had to establish such a relationship every time they spoke to each other. By contrast, in our modern English sense-making systems, we don't need to place each other into a position of inferiority or superiority when we speak to each other. Similarly, the linguist Benjamin Lee Whorf noted that in the Native American language 'Hopi' it is not even possible to say 'my room' – there's no phrase in the language that equates to this.

'Hopi society does not reveal any individual proprietorship . . . of rooms' (Whorf, 1956: 201). So different sense-making systems demand, or allow, different ways of thinking about the relationships between people and things. In English, you *can* own a room.

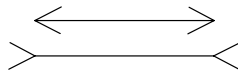
Differences in reason and thinking

The way in which it's possible to construct an argument in Western culture is commonly based on logical reasoning systems that we inherit from classical Greece. These underlie our mathematical systems as well, and we often think of them as being the only correct way in which such reasoning can take place. After all, $2 + 2 = 4$. But they are not the only correct forms of logic. As John D. Barrow, Professor of Astronomy at the University of Sussex, argues, Western sense-making works:

[with] a two-valued logic . . . every statement has two possible truth values: it is either true or false . . . [but in] a non-Western culture like that of the Jains in ancient India, one finds a more sophisticated attitude towards the truth status of statements. The possibility that a statement might be indeterminate is admitted . . . Jainian logic admits seven categories for a statement . . . (1) maybe it is; (2) maybe it is not; (3) maybe it is, but it is not; (4) maybe it is indeterminate; (5) maybe it is, but it is indeterminate; (6) maybe it is not but is indeterminate; (7) maybe it is and it is not, and is also indeterminate . . . We [mathematicians] do not attach any character of . . . absolute truth to any particular system of logic . . . there exists more than one formal system whose use as a logic is feasible, and of these systems one may be more pleasing or more convenient than another, but it cannot be said that one is right and the other wrong. (Barrow, 1992: 15, 16)

Differences in seeing things

Perhaps the most surprising differences come in evidence that people living in different sense-making systems can literally see the world differently. A subdiscipline of psychology looking at visual perception has focused on optical illusions in order to try to understand how our brains process visual information. One of these is the so-called Müller-Lyer figure (two parallel horizontal lines of equal length; the top one has an arrow-head at each end pointing outwards, the bottom one has an arrow head at each end pointing inwards).



Most Europeans get taken in by this optical illusion, and think that the top line is shorter than the bottom line, even though they're both

identical when measured with a ruler. But people from non-European cultures, it turns out, ‘showed much less illusion effect’ (Coren and Girgus, 1978: 140; Robinson, 1972: 109). Indigenous Australians, for example, were ‘decidedly less susceptible to the illusion than were the British scientists administering the tests’ (Froman, 1970: 52). In short, psychology argues that ‘what a person sees is determined by what he guesses he sees’ (ibid.: 59). People from different sense-making systems can literally see the world differently (Coren and Girgus, 1978: 141; Robinson, 1972: 110).

I can see that other cultures make sense of the world very differently but perhaps they are wrong, and my culture is correct?

True. If we accept that different cultures have different sense-making practices, and that they see reality in a variety of different ways, the next question is: how do we judge those different ways of making sense of the world?

I think there are basically three different responses to this question:

- A *realist* response: my culture has got it right. It simply describes reality. Other cultures are wrong.
- A *structuralist* response: all these cultures seem to be making sense of the world differently; but really, underneath, they have common structures. They’re not all that different; people across the world are basically the same.
- A *post-structuralist* approach: all these cultures do indeed make sense of the world differently: and it is impossible to say that one is right and the others are wrong. In a sense, people from different cultures experience reality differently.¹

All these positions exist in current Western cultures; and all have histories that we can trace back to previous centuries. Some nineteenth-century British anthropologists, for example, thought that the other cultures they studied were – as the title of a key book by Professor E.B. Tylor puts it – *Primitive Culture* (1871). They thought these cultures were a less evolved state of society, and studying them could: ‘thro[w] light upon the earlier stages of culture of civilised peoples [i.e. British people]’ (ibid.: 131). These anthropologists thought that their own culture – their sense-making practices – simply described how the world really was. Other cultures were

interesting, but we couldn't learn from them how to think differently. The anthropologists studied them, in a sense, because they were fascinated by just how wrong they were. This is what I call a 'realist' way of thinking about the difference between cultures: thinking that one way of representing and making sense of reality can be the true one; so all others are necessarily wrong.

Other anthropologists in the nineteenth century studied other cultures – and particularly their religions – so they could find out what they had in common. They tried to look beyond superficial differences to find underlying structures: 'the universal spirit which every creed tries to embody' (Haddon, 1910: 137). These anthropologists looked for common images in different religions – like the figure of a sun or a moon god – and then found them in religious texts of different cultures, even when they were not apparent to most observers. As one early account of this practice puts it: 'certain [anthropologists], such as Ehrenreich, Foy and Frobenius find the sun and moon gods in the most unlikely places' (ibid.: 142).

The third approach, what I call 'post-structuralism' (although that word is a recent label for it), can be traced back to the work of nineteenth-century philosophers like Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche's work only really addressed previous philosophical writing, rather than cultures generally, but it is possible to trace a history that links his thinking to the kinds of cultural relativism that I'm describing here (Cuff et al., 1998: 239). He argued that Western culture (in particular, the place of 'reason' as the ultimate form of human thought and best way of organizing a society) was only one possible approach to sense-making, and not the ideal end point of human evolution. Rather than seeing rational descriptions of the world as simply describing the 'truth' of the world, 'post-structuralist' approaches to sense-making see all forms of language – all sense-making strategies – as having their own advantages and limitations (ibid.: 242).

As I said above, all these positions still exist in Western cultures. And because the question is ultimately a philosophical one about the nature of reality and our relationship to it, it's not possible to prove which is correct. There's no irrefutable argument that you can make to prove one over the other.

The position that I'm taking in this book – the one that makes most sense to me – is the third one: the form of cultural relativism that I call post-structuralism. It seems to me that we make sense of the reality that we live in through our cultures, and that different cultures can have very different experiences of reality. No single representation of reality can be the *only* true one, or the *only* accurate

one, or the *only* one that reflects reality because other cultures will always have alternative, and equally valid, ways of representing and making sense of that part of reality. As I say, I can't prove that this is correct. I think this way because of the kinds of information that I've mentioned above – about how very different the sense-making practices of other cultures are – and the fact that many of those cultures seem to function perfectly well even though their understanding of reality is very different from mine. It seems to me that it would be a bit of a coincidence if I just happened to be born into the only culture that's got it right. The reason that I think like this might also be due to some personal experience. I was a born-again Christian for many years, and did believe quite firmly that my way of making sense of the world was right, and everybody else's was wrong. When I stopped being a Christian, I started to be suspicious of people who claimed that their way of seeing the world was the only correct one.

It's worth noting that this kind of culturally relativist post-structuralism isn't just limited to academics who live in ivory towers and have nothing to do with the real world (to use some common insults that are often thrown at us – although I've never actually met an academic who lives in an ivory tower; and most of us still do our shopping in the real world). More and more people are travelling internationally, and business in particular is ever more transnational. This means that even those people who are concerned with making money, and so are often held up as the epitome of 'the real world' (that is, businesspeople) increasingly acknowledge cultural relativism as a necessary reality of their work. You do business with people who are human beings, people that you have to convince, persuade and seduce to work with you (although there is some overlap in international situations, business is slightly different from war – you can't just kill your potential partners if they don't submit). This is one reason that there has recently been a massive increase in research into 'cross-cultural communication' (Loveday, 1985: 31). An increasing number of manuals aimed at business people attempt to explain just how different the ways of making sense of the world of various cultures are (see, for example, Gannon and Newman, 2002; Hendon et al., 1996; Yamada, 1992). It is important for business to understand how colleagues in other cultures make sense of the world differently, accept those differences, and work with them. For an American businessperson visiting Japan, for example:

At first, things in the cities look pretty much alike. There are taxis, hotels . . . Theatres . . . But pretty soon the American discovers that

underneath the familiar exterior there are vast differences. When someone says 'yes' it often doesn't mean yes at all, and when people smile it doesn't always mean they are pleased. When the American visitor makes a helpful gesture, he may be rebuffed; when he tries to be friendly, nothing happens. People tell him that they will do things and don't. The longer he stays, the more enigmatic the new country looks. (Hall, quoted in Adler, 1987: 25)

The physical surroundings may look similar, but the way in which the culture makes sense of them is very different. This is a post-structuralist position, taught to businesspeople as a necessary part of the very real concern of making money internationally. It's not possible to prove that this is the 'correct' way to understand the different ways that cultures interpret their realities,; but for me, and for these international businesspeople, it's one that makes sense.

This, then, is why I use the word 'text': as well as being a convenient term for all the various elements of culture that we use to produce interpretations (including, as suggested above, not just books, films, magazines and television programmes, but also clothing, furniture, and so on), this term has been favoured by post-structuralist writers. Using this word implies a post-structuralist approach to culture – trying to work out how cultures make sense of the world, not so we can judge them against our own culture, and not to seek out deep truths across cultures, but to map out and try to understand the variety of different ways in which peoples can make sense of the world.

It is also why we sometimes use the word 'read' instead of 'interpret' when we're talking about culture; rather than writing 'how do people interpret this text?', we use, 'how do people read this text?'. Even if it's a film or a television programme, we talk about 'reading' it. Again, the word has post-structuralist implications.

What's all this got to do with textual analysis?

Depending on what approach you take to judging different cultures' sense-making practices – the different ways they make sense of the world – you analyse texts in different ways. From a 'realist' perspective, you look for the single text that you think represents reality most accurately, and judge all other texts against that one. From a 'structuralist' perspective, you look for the deep structures that aren't actually apparent in the text, but that you can find by specialized

training. From a 'post-structuralist' perspective, you look for the differences between texts without claiming that one of them is the only correct one.

Okay. Fine. I'm convinced. But most of the texts that I'm going to be analysing don't come from other cultures – they're produced in my own country, or in ones with very similar cultures – America, Britain, or Australia. So how relevant is all this?

Traditional anthropology was about studying exotic cultures – the more different they were from Western culture, the more interesting they were (particularly indigenous African, American and Australian cultures). But in the course of the twentieth century anthropologists realized that they could study their own nations as well (Stocking, 1982: xiii). These kinds of studies made it clear that even within a single nation there exist a variety of different cultures. As Ralph Linton puts it in his 1936 introduction to anthropology: 'While [cultural anthropologists] have been accustomed to speak of . . . nationalities as though they were the primary culture-bearing units, the total culture of a society of this type is really an aggregate of sub-cultures' (1936: 275). That is to say, a national culture isn't made up of millions of identical people who all make sense of the world in exactly the same way. Rather, it consists of a mixture of many overlapping subcultures. For example, anthropologists have identified distinct (sub)cultures – distinct groupings of people who make sense of the world in their own ways – organized around hobbies and lifestyle choices (Irwin, 1962); race (Kitano, 1969); geographical location (Morland, 1971); the kinds of work people do (Turner, 1971); age and cultural (music) preferences (Cohen, 1972); and sexuality (Wotherspoon, 1991), among other factors. And they found that these subcultures made sense of the world in many different ways. Not only their value judgements, but their abstract systems, logic and forms of reasoning could vary remarkably, even within one nation. As above, you can respond to this fact by dismissing other sub-cultures' sense-making practices as simply wrong compared to your own – a lot of early research called these subcultures 'deviant' (Irwin, 1962). But you can also believe that these subcultures may have quite valid different ways of making sense of the world. Many cross-cultural communication guides now include two different kinds of information: 'International' cross-cultural communication (*between*

nations) and 'Intranational' cross-cultural communications (*within* nations) (see Brunt and Enninger, 1985); because: 'Communicative misunderstandings, conflicts and derailments can occur not only between national groups, but also between cultural groups within the same nation' (ibid.: 119). Researchers have argued that although the differences in sense-making between subcultures are not as vast as those between, for example, British and Swahili cultures, they are still real. And you have to take account of these differences if you want to communicate with people from different subcultures. As one cross-cultural guide puts it:

When adults talk with their teenagers about the drug scene, the success of the discussion will depend greatly on the adults' ability to talk about drugs in a way that carries meaning in terms of adolescent concerns and experiences – and vice versa . . . The dictionary meaning is of limited use: 'A substance with medical, physiological effects'. This does not take into account the fact that adults and teenagers bring their own world of experience and association into the meaning of the word . . . The meaning of the word is determined in large part by each person's characteristic frame of reference. (Szalay and Fisher, 1987: 167)

Performing textual analysis, then, is an attempt to gather information about sense-making practices – not only in cultures radically different from our own, but also within our own nations. It allows us to see how similar or different the sense-making practices that different people use can be. And it is also possible that this can allow us to better understand the sense-making cultures in which we ourselves live by seeing their limitations, and possible alternatives to them.

Of course, if I pushed this thinking to its logical limit I could say that within British culture, there's a British youth culture; within that, a Black British youth culture; a Black male British youth culture; a straight Black male British youth culture; a Northern straight Black male British youth culture; and so on, until everybody would be reduced to their own culture, with a membership of one. This is true: but it shouldn't be a paralysing realization. All of us reach a broad consensus about sense-making practices within the variety of nested cultures in which we live. While it is ultimately true that nobody else sees everything about the world exactly the same way that we do, we overlap enough to live together, and to communicate with other. The consensus at the level of the largest communities – say, a national culture – is enough for us to make sense of it most of the time, but may often jar with our own practice: sometimes we'll hear people who share a nation with us saying things that just don't make any

sense to us; we can't understand how they could possibly think that way. As the communities we are discussing become smaller and more specialized, it is likely that the sense-making consensus will fit our own practices more precisely.

You're writing a lot about 'sense-making practices' – but how can analysing texts help us to understand sense-making practices?

Texts are the material traces that are left of the practice of sense-making – the only empirical evidence we have of how other people make sense of the world. John Hartley uses the metaphor of forensic science to describe this process. Forensic scientists never actually see a crime committed – by the time they arrive on the scene, it has gone forever. They can never wind back time and witness it themselves; and they can never be entirely certain about what happened. But what they can do is sift through the evidence that is left – the forensic evidence – and make an educated and trained guess about what happened, based on that evidence. The fact that, unlike physics, this science is not repeatable – they can't murder people themselves to see if it turns out exactly the same – doesn't stop them, as scientists, using their training and expertise to attempt to build up a picture of what happened. This can stand as a metaphor for what we do when we perform textual analysis: we can never see, nor recover, the actual practice of sense-making. All that we have is the evidence that's left behind of that practice – the text: 'the material reality [of texts] allows for the recovery and critical interrogation of discursive politics in an "empirical" form; [texts] are neither scientific data nor historical documents but are, literally forensic evidence' (Hartley, 1992: 29).

As Hartley says, forensic science relies on 'clues'. This is how textual analysis also works. We can never know for certain how people interpreted a particular text but we can look at the clues, gather evidence about similar sense-making practices (see Chapter 5), and make educated guesses.

So we're not analysing texts to see how accurate they are in their representation of reality?

No, this form of post-structuralist textual analysis is not about measuring media texts to see how accurate they are. But, as I said above,

this is only one methodology that can be used in cultural studies, media studies or mass communication studies. The 'realist' mode of analysing texts, described above, is still an important one within these disciplines. This is particularly the case in media studies, where many writers seek to measure texts against reality. Indeed, this is the most common public mode of thinking about media texts. It seems like common sense:

- Texts can be measured as being more or less *accurate*.
- Which is to say, they can be measured as to how accurately they tell *the truth*.
- Which is to say, they can be measured as to how accurately they tell the truth about *reality*. (see Ellis, 2000: 13)

The difficulty with this approach, from a post-structuralist perspective, is that these terms don't recognize that people might make sense of reality in quite different ways (as shown above). People tend to use these words in moralistic ways to insist that there's only one correct way of making sense of any situation, and it's *their* way of doing it; any other approach is not just an alternative – it is necessarily *wrong*.

Take the example of the Christian Minister interviewed on the current affairs programme *A Current Affair* on the 7 November 2001. The debate is about whether children should be caned in school? A 'Parents and Citizens' group is arguing that the law should stand as it is – children shouldn't be caned. They present their reasons and their arguments for this approach. The Minister is then interviewed. He says: 'I can't think of any group of people who are less in touch with reality than the P[arents] and C[itizens].'

Is he right? Do these people have no contact with reality? Are they all quite, quite mad? Of course, what he means is that he disagrees with them. They make sense of the behaviour of children, the role of schooling, and what would make a desirable society in ways that are so bizarre to him that the only possible explanation is that these people have no grasp on reality. And reality is . . . the way that he sees the world. When the interviewer suggests that: 'That's not a very nice thing to say. You're meant to be a Christian', the Minister replies. 'It's the truth. Being a Christian is about telling the truth.' This is 'the truth'. The position put by those who see the world differently from him is obviously not 'the truth'. Their description of the situation, their interpretation of how it should be dealt with, is not the truth. It may be lies; it may be madness; but it is not the truth. What is the truth? The truth is the Minister's perspective (for other examples of

this common tendency, see Bantick, 2001: 13; McGrory and Lister, 2001: 7; Pullan, 1986: 153).

Another term which often gets pulled into these realist forms of textual analysis is 'bias' – a word that's used to claim that a text is not accurate. But as Blain Ellis points out: 'When complaints of bias are received . . . [p]roducers recognize that most charges are made in terms of people's own subjective bias'. He provides one of my favourite statistics: 'Of all complaints of bias [in television coverage] received after the 1975 elections, 412 said the [Australian Broadcasting Corporation] favoured Labor and 399 said it favoured the coalition parties [the two major sides in the election]' (Ellis, 1977: 89). We tend to think that the terms 'truth' and 'reality' are simple, straightforward and obvious. We assume, without ever really thinking about it, that there is only one possible truth about any given situation; or that everyone agrees on what the 'reality' of that situation is. But in practice (in the real world) if you look at how people use the word 'truth' in their public discussions, you see that they in fact use it to mean 'what my community thinks'. It's a moral term: we use it to make a claim about how people *should* think. It doesn't really matter if people disagree with an *opinion* that we have – it's just an opinion, after all. But if they disagree with something that we think is 'the truth' – something that seems completely obvious to us, that it seems that nobody could reasonably disagree with – then we get upset. Despite the evidence around us every day that people from different cultures and sub-cultures see different truths about any given situation, we still want to believe that our culture's got it right, and everyone else is wrong.

In post-structuralist textual analysis, we don't make claims about whether texts are 'accurate', 'truthful' or 'show reality'. We don't simply dismiss them as 'inaccurate' or 'biased'. These claims are moral ones more than anything, attempting to close down other forms of representation without engaging with them. Rather, the methodology I'm describing seeks to understand the ways in which these forms of representation take place, the assumptions behind them and the kinds of sense-making about the world that they reveal. Different texts can present the same event in different ways, and all of them can be as truthful and accurate as each other. If all we say of them is 'accurate' or 'inaccurate', then we never get to the interesting part of the analysis – how these texts tell their stories, how they represent the world, and how they make sense of it.

The following headlines all introduced stories in online newspapers about the death of a British girl from 'CJD' – the human form of BSE (popularly called 'mad cow disease'):

'CJD kills girl, 14' (*Guardian Unlimited*, 29 October 2000)

'Millions watched Zoe's final hours' (*Electronic Telegraph*, 29 October 2000)

'BSE safety controls dropped' (*Independent* online, 29 October 2000)

To state the obvious, these are different headlines for stories covering the same event. But none of them is 'inaccurate' or 'false'. The first foregrounds the disease and the girl's age; the second personalizes her with a name, and comments on her status as national spectacle; the third puts her into a context of government policy on disease control. These are different perspectives and different representations. We can say that all three are 'accurate' but how far does that get us in the analysis, when they are obviously working in very different ways?

If there's no single correct way of making sense of any part of reality, does that mean that anything goes? That anybody can make any claim and they're all just as acceptable?

Absolutely not. This is a common attack made on post-structuralist thinking about culture, but it misses the point. Obviously some texts have very little connection to our normal ways of thinking about the world; for example, if a headline for the above story was: 'Zoe was killed by aliens: invasion imminent', very few people would think that it was accurate. There isn't a *single*, 'true' account of any event, but there are limits on what seems reasonable in a given culture at a given time. Ways of making sense of the world aren't completely arbitrary; they don't change from moment to moment. They're not infinite, and they're not completely individual. Indeed, we've got a word for people whose sense-making practices are unique to themselves and bear no relation to the reasonable ways of representing and interpreting the world in their home culture: we call them mad and we lock them up for it. That's not a cheap joke: the historian Michel Foucault's book *Madness and Civilisation* shows that people have historically been declared mad, and locked up out of harm's way when their ways of making sense of the world were radically different from those of the culture around them (Foucault, 1967). But as cultures change, so do their understandings of what are reasonable ways to interpret the world. People who are called mad in one culture – because their ways of making sense of the world are so out of step

with their fellows – can become geniuses for other cultures for their convincing insights into the way the world is organized. Or one culture's mad people can be perfectly normal, everyday people in another context. In late nineteenth-century Britain: 'records of lunatic asylums show that patients included unmarried mothers' (Powys, 2002); and Edith Lancaster 'in 1895 was incarcerated in a lunatic asylum by her parents when she announced that she wanted to live in a free union [ie, not married] with a socialist railway clerk' (Bartley, 2001). Someone who would flout the social convention that women should always be married before they indulge in sexual intercourse would no longer automatically be regarded as mad, or locked up for it. Indeed, in twenty-first-century Australia, Britain or America, it would seem barbaric to lock someone up because they thought sex before marriage was OK. The idea of single motherhood is now reasonable enough that for someone to propose it as an acceptable lifestyle isn't regarded as madness. Similarly, until 1973, homosexuality was listed as a psychiatric illness – a form of madness – by the American Psychiatric Association (APA, 2002). Anybody who believed that it was possible that two men or two women could have a happy, fulfilling, loving life together was necessarily mad. Everyone knew that this wasn't the case. A strong consensus of sense-making insisted that gay relationships were sick – that is, literally unhealthy – unnatural and unworkable. Once again, in the twenty-first century, when sitcoms based on gay characters show the leads of *Will and Grace* not only as friends, but as both equally deserving of a happy relationship with a man, practices of sense-making have changed so much that you wouldn't be denounced as mad if you suggested that homosexual relationships can be as happy, stable and fulfilling as heterosexual ones.

Not everyone would agree with this point, of course; debates are always ongoing about sense-making, with differing perspectives competing to be seen as the most reasonable, and some people still think that gay men and lesbians are sick and immoral. A variety of perspective exist, but there is a finite number of sense-making positions available within a given culture at a different time. So post-structuralist textual analysis doesn't insist that anything goes, that any representation is as acceptable as any other, or that any interpretation makes as much sense as any other. In fact, the opposite seems to me to be more the case – the reason we analyse is texts is to find out what *were* and what *are* the reasonable sense-making practices of cultures: rather than just repeating our own interpretation and calling it reality.

But surely there must be some elements of reality that all cultures can agree on?

Sometimes $1 + 1 = 0$

Lawrence M. Krauss, Professor of Physics, Case Reserve Western University

(Krauss, 1998: 149)

This is another common claim by writers who favour a realist mode of thinking about sense-making. They insist that there must be some elements of experience that everybody makes sense of in the same way. Two favourite examples are suffering and death. Because, after all, you can't stop death just by making sense of it differently; and you can't avoid pain just by pretending it isn't there.

It's odd that these arguments are repeated so often, as they are not really terribly convincing when you look into them. For how people *make sense* of pain and suffering, or of death, are vitally important to their experience of them. In fact, the cases of death and suffering present are some of the strongest arguments for the variety and importance of sense-making practices.

So, challengers say: you can't just interpret violence differently to make it alright. I'll punch you in the face and you can just interpret that away. Nobody, after all, is going to disagree that torture is undesirable. Nobody's going to suggest that torture might be nice, are they?

Are they? 'How many of us have not wondered, while watching an old war film or reading about the heroines of the French resistance, how well we would have stood up under torture, whether we would have at all?' (Schramm-Evans, 1995: 137). Thus begins the introduction to 'Sado-masochism' in the 'How To' handbook, *Making Out: The Book of Lesbian Sex and Sexuality*. Because violence – or more importantly, our experience of violence – is in fact modulated by how we interpret it, how we make sense of it:

How we experience pain is affected by sexual arousal – the kind of pain experienced during an SM scene bears little relation to what a visit to the dentist might provide. During sexual excitement our tolerance of pain increases enormously and at the point of orgasm it may barely be felt at all. Even women not interested or experienced in SM may well have enjoyed being bitten during sex, or having their nipples squeezed harder than usual. These sensations would be highly unpleasant and unacceptable outside the sex scene, but within it they add a charge of excitement. (ibid.: 137)

Violence and pain may be pleasurable, in the right situation, in the right cultural context. Indeed, this guide suggests, it's not just that we might interpret the pain differently, but that in different contexts, it might not even exist at all. Sometimes, pain isn't pain at all – it's pleasure.

Suffering more broadly – not just violence – isn't always bad. For some harsh, but not unusual, philosophies of life, suffering is useful; or even desirable. That which does not kill us makes us stronger. 'The Bible suggests that suffering may be understood as divine discipline or instruction' (Waters, 1996: 28), and St Paul was made to suffer by God 'so that [he] learned to depend upon God's grace rather than his own strength' (ibid.: 30); for, after all, 'suffering plays an important role in one's piety' (ibid.: 31). We have to learn from our mistakes, and have the right to make them. And so on. In these sense-making practices, pain may be desirable for its reassurance that God cares.

What about death, though?

Death can't be denied simply by interpretation. It's an experience that you can't escape just by interpreting it differently. Nobody could disagree when somebody is dead for example. They either are, or they aren't. Surely.

Again, sadly, the world is not that simple. The examples I gave above showed that value judgements about pain depend on sense-making practices – whether pain is desirable or not, whether pain is pleasurable or not. The same argument can be made about death. Different sense-making cultures disagree over whether death is a desirable, or an undesirable, experience. Death of the body doesn't necessarily mean death of the person. It need not be something to be feared. It may, quite reasonably, be seen as desirable.

Of course, when it comes to those who have died, we have no idea what their experiences are. They may be identical – that is, nothing at all, lack of existence. Or they may be quite different – some in heaven, sitting with God, some in Hell, sinning with Satan. But we know that for those who are dying and for the people who are left behind, death can mean very different things. Take the case of Christianity. Knowing both that God controls every aspect of life, and that there is an afterlife with Him, it's not surprising that for many Christians death is a very positive experience: indeed, it can be a 'healing':

A friend of mine was mortally ill and was given six months to live. His wife was encouraged . . . to pray with her husband daily and to lay her hands upon him for healing. He died almost exactly six months [later] . . . [and] his wife asked what healing he had received . . . She concluded that his quiet acceptance of the destiny of imminent death . . . [was] the healing he had received. (Polkinghorne, quoted in Waters, 1996: 50)

It can also be a 'blessing' from God (ibid.: 57): 'Our death . . . is something we welcome . . . There is a sacred timing that should be honoured in the ending of our lives' (ibid.: 58). This is one way of making sense of death. For other sense-making communities, death is deeply undesirable and must be avoided (with an extreme case being those who freeze their bodies cryogenically, for revival when science has progressed).

And again, like pain, it's not just a question of different value judgements because different ways of making sense of the world in fact disagree about when someone is actually dead; or where the line is between things that are alive and things that are not.

Take scientists. For the non-scientists among us it might seem obvious that some things are alive (people, animals, plants) and that other things aren't (stones, cars, pieces of paper). These definitions work very well as generalizations in our everyday lives to the point that we get arrogant and start to believe that things really are that simple, and this is a description of reality that everybody must agree with. But scientists, who deal with the uncertain edges where things aren't so clear, make sense of the world differently.

Professor Anne Simon – Head of the Department of Biochemistry at the University of Massachusetts – knows that the everyday consensus about life and death is not the simple 'truth', but a rough generalization that works fine so long as you don't think about it too hard. She knows this because her own research is into viruses – specifically, 'turnip crinkle viruses', with which she is very much in love – and they don't fit into such black and white categories. Viruses, she says: 'are simply a set of genes on the prowl':

students often ask me if viruses are alive. I like to answer this question with the question 'How do you define life?' Occasionally this prompts the follow-up, 'Why do you always answer a question with a question?'. To this, my standard response is, 'Do I?'. Since this generally leads to vacant stares, I usually issue the reassuring statement that entire books have been written trying to explain the scientific meaning of life. (Simon, 1999: 86)

It shouldn't surprise us, then, that death is like any other part of the world – sense-making practices about death have changed over time, and differ between cultures:

Determining when death occurs has changed over time . . . Throughout the nineteenth century and much of the twentieth, death was defined in terms of the heart and lungs . . . A person was not declared dead until the physician verified . . . that the heart and lungs were no longer functioning. Yet over the past few decades advances in medicine created an unusual and unprecedented situation. With the aid of drugs, various invasive techniques, electrical shocks to the heart and a respirator, the heart and lungs could keep going after a person's brain was 'dead'. This raised a unique question: Could an individual without a functioning brain, but whose heart and lungs continued to work with the aid of machines, be considered alive? Or even a person? (Waters, 1996: 8)

The same situation in different centuries would mean that you were dead in one, but just waiting to be revived (still alive, or still potentially alive) in another. And the debates between different sense-making practices go on: 'Under current conditions, a person is not pronounced dead until the entire brain has ceased to function . . . There are proposals to define death as the cessation of higher or cognitive brain activity' (ibid.: 9).

There is no part of reality that we can point to and say, 'Everyone can agree on this. All cultures will make the same interpretation of this part of the world. Nobody could disagree that this is how things are.' For every area of experience has multiple sense-making practices associated with it: even those that might initially seem as incontrovertible as suffering and death.

OK, no single text is simply the accurate representation of reality: but surely some texts must be better than others?

Better for what? Although it's a common everyday formulation to say that 'this is a good film'; or 'that was a bad programme'; 'this is his best novel'; or 'that is a great painting', these kind of judgements aren't relevant for the kind of post-structuralist textual analysis I'm describing here. For this methodology, you have to know what question you're asking before you can answer it (see Chapter 3). It's true that aesthetic judgements of value ('this is good/great/masterful/his best film') are one kind of textual analysis, and one that is still

taught in many Literature Departments and Film Departments. But this is a realist approach – this is *really* the best text, that is an objective claim, you cannot disagree with that – and it doesn't fit in with the methodology described in this book.

I would say that there are two main uses of these aesthetic kinds of judgement, and they tend to overlap strongly. First, we use terms like 'good', 'great', 'masterpiece' as synonyms for 'I liked that', 'I really liked that', and 'I really, really liked that', respectively. As journalist Dominique Jackson puts it: '*Talking Movies* host Tom Brookes is an informed and open-minded but demanding critic. He offers crisp, unbiased and intellectual analysis. In other words, he agrees with me' (2002: 22).

Second, there is a tradition of aesthetic judgement for analysing works of art and literature, where a set of established criteria are used to judge a text, including 'coherence', 'intensity of effect', 'complexity' and 'originality' (Bordwell and Thompson, 1993: 53–4). These criteria supposedly produce 'objective' (ibid.: 53) interpretations of texts rather than just individual response but they are still only one possible interpretation of them. This is the sense-making practice of an educated culture, one that has decided that qualities like complexity are a good thing in a text (whereas other cultures might think that 'simplicity' is more important). Ultimately, this way of interpreting texts still comes back to personal preferences (i.e. they are no more objective than simply saying 'I like this').

This tradition of aesthetic judgement can be very useful as 'cultural capital'. It can be useful to know which films have been regarded as 'masterpieces' by cultural critics, because that kind of knowledge has its own value. As the film magazine *Empire* puts it, in its monthly section, 'The Bare Necessities': 'Never seen a Fellini film? Can't be bothered trying to understand the random mumblings of Marlon Brando? No problem! Just read our cut-out-and-keep guides to bull-shitting your way through any awkward social events with the black-turtleneck latte brigade' (*Empire*, 2001: 11).

It's good for your social mobility to have 'cultural capital' – to know the history of which films, books, paintings and television programmes are regarded as the best (see Bourdieu, 1984). In order to be in the trendy crowd, for example, you must have certain kinds of knowledge (about films regarded as masterpiece) and if you don't have that knowledge, circulating in a particular class of people will be 'awkward'. And so the *Empire* series tells us, for example, what is the 'reputation' of great films? ('regarded by many as a landmark in American filmmaking' (*Empire*, 2002a: 13)); 'Why is it so good?'

(‘what really makes it stand out is the glorious use of colour and attention to detail’ (*Empire*, 2002b: 11)); ‘What to say at dinner parties’ (‘Argento takes you to the darkest corner of your mind, the places you don’t even admit to yourself’ (*Empire*, 2001: 11)), and ‘What not to say’ (‘The ballet scene is fantastic!’ (ibid.: 11)). Knowledge of the tradition of aesthetic judgements can be useful but as *Empire* shows, you don’t have to take it seriously to make use of it.

All in all, aesthetic judgements of texts – which are ‘good’, which are ‘bad’, which are ‘masterpieces’ and which are ‘failures’ – can be very useful for a number of cultural purposes, but they shouldn’t be taken at face value as objective claims about worth, and they’re not part of a post-structuralist form of textual analysis.

If there’s no single correct way to make sense of the world, isn’t this book just one possible approach?

Ah. Yes – you’ve caught me out. This book is self-consistent, and it tries to explain one methodology in detail. But it’s not the only way to think about the production of meaning, or about how texts function. As I noted above, realist modes of textual analysis remain important in media studies, cultural studies and mass communication studies. For example, some ‘political economy’ approaches to texts insist that legislation, industries and economics are the material ‘reality’ of culture. Other realist forms of textual analysis see the process of interpretation as much more straightforward than post-structuralist textual analysis – assuming that the interpretation that the researcher makes will basically be the same as the interpretation that other people make. Structuralist approaches, which see deep structures across the sense-making practices of various cultures, are still also an important element of much work in our disciplines. Marxist approaches, for example, see the relation to the means of production in cultures as a basic, material reality (that is, who gets to take the profits from people’s work, by dint of owning the machinery or networks that allow things to be made and distributed). Psychoanalysis sees the formation of the psyche – how our minds work – in early childhood as a basic reality that must be taken account of in writing about culture.

There is a history to this kind of textual analysis (see Turner, 1997 and Hartley 2002). It comes from a certain tradition, and can only answer certain questions. It can never do that with absolute certainty, nor can it always produce statistics to back up its claims (see

Chapter 5). There are certainly other ways to deal with texts but post-structuralist textual analysis is, I think, one useful way to answer questions about meaning-making.

Case study

John Hartley (1999) 'Housing television: a fridge, a film and social democracy', in John Hartley, *Uses of Television*. London and New York: Routledge, pp. 92–111.

Each chapter of this book finishes with a case study: an example of how to do this kind of textual analysis.

In 'Housing television', John Hartley wants to find out how texts come to be seen as 'realistic': what should a text look like in order for Western audiences to think it is showing them what reality is like? He researches this question by looking at historical evidence – a 1935 short film called *Housing Problems* – and showing that what one decade thinks is a 'realistic' text can look very dated and artificial for later decades. He makes this point by comparing how that short film represents ordinary people, compared with how they were represented in earlier texts. He performs textual analysis on this film to show that it doesn't just *reflect* reality: it finds new ways to *represent* reality that now seem obvious, but at the time were new and unusual. The film isn't just 'the truth' – no text ever is – but it's made in a certain way that makes it seem more realistic and truthful.

Hartley argues that this film represents a turning point in the processes of sense-making for British culture, released as it was in 1935, just as British television was starting to evolve into its present domestic and broadcast form. He points out that television's producers had to decide how they were going to make programmes for this new medium, and they picked up ideas from the culture around them. In fact, lots of the strategies that television uses for representing reality – including the things that it shows, and the ways that it shows them – can be traced back to films like *Housing Problems*.

Hartley points out that *Housing Problems* shows a mixture of 'public spectacle' linked with 'domestic life' (ibid.: 92). He argues that this film – as television programming would later do – represents 'ordinary' people from a dual perspective. Partly, it's concerned with large-scale issues about society (How can we live together? How can we deal with social problems?), and at the same time, it's interested in the most everyday level of lived life (so the debates about large-scale public problems aren't conducted on a completely abstract level of political philosophy).

The film . . . comprises two main sequences. The first sets up the 'problems' of the title, showing slum housing in London's East End, with a commentary

by a local councillor and a succession of working class tenants speaking for themselves, telling the viewer about the lack of light, water, clean air and cooking facilities, and illustrating with vivid unscripted anecdotes the dilapidation, vermin and noxiousness, the want of privacy, sound-proofing and amenity, of their tiny flats and rooms. The second section produces what are clearly meant to be seen as ideal solutions to these problems, introduced by an unseen and unidentified 'expert' voiceover, with a professional, male, authoritativeness. (ibid.: 92)

Textual analysis is about making educated guesses about how audiences interpret texts. For example, how does Hartley know that the unidentified voiceover is likely to be interpreted by viewers as an 'expert'? He makes this guess because he knows how this genre works (see Chapter 5). Western film viewers know that the voiceover in documentaries has a status like that of a newsreader: both are supposed to be almost the 'voice of god'. They are not really human, giving a single, fallible subjective viewpoint: we are meant to think that they are objective, simply telling us the 'truth' about the situation.

Why does Hartley make a point about the fact that the voiceover is male? Again, we know from contemporary documents (particularly around the appointment of presenters on radio) that men at this time in Britain were thought to be more authoritative, more rational, and more intellectual than women – a series of linked ideas which some people still believe.

Hartley points out that, historically, the ways in which *Housing Problems* represented ordinary people and social issues – its process of 'semiosis' (meaning-making) – were startling and radical at the time. Particularly important, says Hartley, are the film's 'immediacy' ('unrehearsed and unscripted' working-class voices); and its 'visuality': it is 'remarkably revealing', and puts on screen domestic working-class spaces that have not – literally – been seen as being fit to be shown before. There was no *Coronation Street* or *Roseanne* at the time this film was made and these sights were new ones.

In trying to understand how the language of 'reality' in this documentary works, Hartley notes that:

Its most radical innovations are the very aspects that are now most easily overlooked, for the simple reason that what was surprising and never-before-tried in 1935 has since . . . become the bedrock of standard practice. *Housing Problems* uses real people, not actors. They are named in the film, which lets them speak in their own words, in their own houses, not to a verbally tied-up, editorially vetted and visually shaped script. It treats a mundane object seriously, ordinary life with respect, and working class people without patronization. (ibid.: 94)

Again, we can only make educated guesses about this text. It may be that some viewers of the film will think that it *is* patronizing to the working-class people shown: Hartley can only claim, as he does, that based on his understanding of the codes of representation, of the ways in which a media-literate audience of the time was expected to understand certain

codes, that it is not *likely* to have been seen that way. Drawing on contextual evidence, he points out that:

In 1935, ordinary people did not participate in public culture without a script. Every interviewee on BBC radio, for example, had to follow a script, even if they were engaged in what was intended to sound like an impromptu or improvised conversation. Ordinary people, speaking for themselves, were almost unknown in mainstream cinema . . . The idea of putting real people on the screen, without the mediating 'help' of a seen interviewer, to articulate in their own words the truth of their circumstances, was indeed an innovation. (ibid.: 97)

As he points out, the textual features that he is describing are an almost perfect fit with what we now call an 'actuality segment' or 'reality TV' (see *Airport, Sylvania Waters, The Village*, etc.). But this representation of 'reality' is not simply 'real' – it is a set of practices and techniques for making texts, with its own history – which begins to emerge in the UK with this 1935 documentary film.

Hartley also notices how the meaning of elements of texts can change. Discussing the history of British housing, where crowded inner city slums were cleared and the tenants moved into new, badly serviced and designed 'housing estates' and 'tower blocks' that had, in many cases, much worse social and health problems than the slums that they replaced, Hartley notes that:

With severe conviction and militant self-confidence [the film] wants to clear away slum conditions. But the shots it uses to demonstrate how uncomfortable and intolerable such life is for tenement dwellers – shots of women sweeping and beating the dust out of rugs in the back alleys, while the children play and muck around – these are the very scenes which the next generation claim as illustrations of the solidarity, community and supportive mutuality of working class life. (ibid.: 95)

Hartley draws on historical texts – accounts of social life – in order to contextualize and help make sense of the text he is analysing. He notes that:

the slum clearances which began in the early 1930s, and which were continued after the war into the 1950s and 1960s, struck at the physical heart of 'family' and 'neighbourhood'. It was only later that commentators started blaming 'the media' – television especially – for the dislocated culture, 'broken' families and hostile neighbourhoods of some working class life. (ibid.: 95)

By drawing on contextual evidence – other relevant texts – from the time of this film's release, Hartley is able to show that it holds an important place in changing representations of the people of Britain. It develops a visual and editing vocabulary that was taken over into television, and now represents an important part of our everyday sense-making of the cultures in which we live: through television news, current affairs, documentaries

and ever increasing numbers of 'reality TV' programmes. None of the representational strategies of these programmes – letting non-experts speak, doing so informally, showing working-class living spaces in the public sphere – are simply, obviously, 'realistic'. They have a history of developing that claim. By looking at one of the texts that contributed to that history, and making an educated guess at likely interpretations of it, Hartley uses a post-structuralist form of textual analysis to provide evidence for his research on this kind of representation.

Each chapter of this book ends with three sections. The first, 'And the main points again', is a summary of the arguments presented in the chapter. The second, 'Questions and exercises' gives you some work to do to develop and expand on the points made, and allow for a bit of active learning. The third, 'Textual analysis project' leads you through a complete work of textual analysis in the course of the book, in simple, step-by-step stages in each chapter.

Questions and exercises

- 1 Spend an afternoon listening to the radio. Tune in not only to your usual station, but to the stations aimed at different groups: talkback radio stations, easy listening music, news channels, youth music stations. Spend some time listening to each one. Make a detailed list of the differences in their assumptions about the world. What do they think is interesting to listen to or talk about? What issues do they raise? What views do callers present? Are callers allowed to talk at all? What is challenged by the host and what is left unchallenged? What kinds of language do they use? Make a list of things you hear that just seem so ridiculous that surely nobody could believe them.
- 2 Go to a newsagent. Browse through the magazines, and see what subcultures they serve. Buy a few (or, if you're lucky, find a library that stocks them). Get one that speaks to a group that you don't belong to, and that you wouldn't normally read. If you're male, buy a woman's mag; if you're female, buy a man's. Get one that's aimed at an interest group that you have never heard of (if I had never picked up a copy of *Modern Ferret* magazine, I would never have realized that a community of ferret-fanciers existed, what an important part ferrets played in their lives, nor how much of their social, ethical and even political thinking was tied to their ferret-owning pursuits). Again, make a detailed list: what do these cultures think are worth reading about? What assumptions do they make about their readers? Does this group have an enemy that they have to struggle against? What does the magazine say is different between its readers and other people? What function does the magazine serve for the community? How do readers see the magazine? (Look at the letters pages.) Does the magazine engage with party politics, the government, issues of policy? Or does it focus on private and personal life?
- 3 Go to a library. Find more than one newspaper from the same day (it's best if they serve different constituencies, for example, get some local and some national papers; or tabloids and broadsheets; or left-wing and right-wing papers). Find their coverage of the same story. Write a detailed list of the differences between the stories: what elements do they emphasize in their headlines? What photos do they use? Whose voices are heard? How many different perspectives are given? With whom is the reader meant to sympathize? And any other elements that seem relevant to

you. Choose the story that seems to you to be most 'unbiased'. Does it fit in with your own beliefs? Or do you disagree with its position?

- 4 Do the same thing with newspapers from more than one country – how do they cover the same story differently?
- 5 Go on the Internet and go to www.google.com. Type in the phrase: 'the truth of the situation is' (including the quotation marks), and press the 'Google search' button. Visit a number of the websites that contain this phrase. How often do writers use this phrase to present a truth that doesn't fit in with how they personally see the world? How often do they use it as a synonym for 'This is how I see the situation'?

Textual analysis project

- 1 Write down some topics about culture and how people make sense of the world that interest you.

Which parts of culture, and which questions about it, interest you? This can come from academic reading, or from your own experience of culture. Textual analysis can provide information about the way in which culture works; the way that particular groups or parts of the world are being represented; or about how people are making sense of the world ('sense-making') more generally.

Familiar questions that academics use textual analysis to answer include those that concern party politics (How are particular political parties represented in the media?; How is an election campaign covered?; Which forms of social organization are presented as most attractive in the media?) and identity groups (How are men/women/lesbians/older people/etc. represented in the media?). But if you have interests in other areas, the beauty of textual analysis is that it can be applied to any texts to answer any question about sense-making (analyse different versions of the Bible to see how ideas about the relationship

between God and man have changed over hundreds of years; analyse graffiti in toilets to see how cultural differences between men and women work in these private spaces, etc.). Read lots of histories and theories of culture for new ideas, perspectives and questions.

2 Focus your question to become more specific.

Let's say your initial question was 'How does the media contribute to men's sense of what it means to be a man?'. That would be a massive research project. Try to make it more focused, both by limiting the number of texts you are discussing, and looking for a specific question that you can actually find an answer to.

Avoid vast questions that want to generalize about the whole of culture. Even before we start studying and researching culture, we all have a lot of knowledge about how the media works in our culture – promoting stereotypes, avoiding positive images, dumbing down and looking for the lowest common denominator . . . please forgive me if I exaggerate for effect – forget it all. This attitude is based on profound ignorance.

Think honestly – what do you actually know about how people consume texts? You've probably got a series of prejudices in your head – the masses are hypnotised by television, magazines and tabloid newspapers that sensationalize and trivialize stories because readers are stupid and have short attention spans . . . again, please allow me to exaggerate to make a point, and insist that all of this is rubbish. Everyone thinks that other people are affected by, and mindlessly consume, the media in this way. Nobody actually does it. If you want to find out how readers actually make sense of texts, then you need evidence about that (see Chapter 4). We think that we can just say, 'our culture represents men like this'. But you really can't generalize very easily about these things, and it will take years of research before you know enough about the vastly different kinds of masculinity in culture across, for example, news programmes, soap operas, women's magazines, men's magazines, self-help books, DIY manuals, Rotary club newsletters, etc., to make these kinds of generalizations. When you're starting out, it's best to keep focused, and try to answer specific questions, that you can find specific answers for. For example: 'How do "lad mags" teach their readers to be men?'

Note

¹ Those three descriptions were the hardest part of this book to write. These questions have been discussed for over a century in a number of university disciplines, and even writers in the same disciplines don't always use the same words to mean the same things. On top of all this, the words are borrowed and used with different meanings across disciplines. Because of all this, it's impossible to produce labels for these tendencies that will make sense to all readers in all disciplines. The descriptions I've chosen are fair enough uses of the words within cultural studies, literary studies and anthropology – and, I hope, everyday language. They don't fit in well with the way these words are used in philosophy: better labels for philosophers would be (in the same order): cultural chauvinism; anthropological structuralism; and cultural relativism (Gibson, 2002).