Textual Analysis: A Beginner's Guide

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Beginner's Guide to Textual analysis[1]

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Introduction

Preparing the chapter on 'Textual Analysis' for the upcoming third edition of Cunningham and Turner's *The Media in Australia*, it struck me forcibly that we have a very odd lacuna at the heart of Cultural Studies of the media. Textual analysis is the central methodology of Cultural Studies; and yet we do not have available a single, published straightforward guide as to what it is and how we do it.

I think that this can be explained in a couple of ways. Firstly, it seems that the ambivalence of Cultural Studies practitioners towards disciplinarity and institutionalisation has lead to an odd interpretation of our axioms that knowledge is power, that discourses define reality and that there is no such thing as 'objective' knowledge. We know that every methodology is partial, producing particular, and quite limited kinds of information. Linked with an anti-disciplinary trend, this seems to have lead us to refuse to think seriously about our own methdologies, rather tending towards a kind of 'transgressive' methdological approach, where we do whatever takes our fancy. Another, perfectly defensible, response to the same axioms would have been for Cultural Studies to become more methodologically self-reflexive than other disciplines, constantly displaying how knowledge has been produced. But this is demonstrably not the case.

The second tendency in Cultural Studies is, I think, the lingering revenant of the Literature tradition in which textual analysis was first given a central place as a methodology. In Literature, this methodology must be intuitive - it cannot really be taught - for it is precisely the sensitivity of the reader in responding correctly to the text which determines her ability as a scholar. Much Cultural Studies writing - although it does not seek truth and greatness from texts, rather looking for expressions

[1] The Lumby and eyeshadow examples used in this article also appear in the 'Textual analysis' chapter of Stuart Cunningham and Graeme Turner's *The Media in Australia 3rd edition*, St Leonards: Allen and Unwin.

of power and material for identity-formation - still uses this intuitive form of textual analysis.

And so we find ourselves in a situation where, as Cultural Studies scholars and teachers, we insist that the specificity of any methodology must be investigated to reveal the limits to the kinds of knowledge it can produce: and yet our own central methodology is woefully underinvestigated, and still largely intuitive. Most accounts of textual analysis turn out to be accounts of semiotics (see, for example, Thwaites et al, 1994), which is neither the same thing, nor necessarily moves us very far from the intuitive (semiotics seems to me to be about interpretation after the fact: giving a scientific description to an already completed intuitive interpretation). There is no straightforward attempt to describe what textual analysis is, how it works, why it is done, what kinds of knowledge it produces, and how one might proceed in the textual analysis of a text (the closest account is perhaps that of John Hartley, who describes a 'forensic' approach to textual analysis in *The Politics of Pictures*, pp29-35 - but even this does not go systematically through these questions).

So I attempted to write such an account of our central methodology. It was an enlightening process, as I approached the topic from the point of view of a mythical, innocent first year who would know nothing of our concerns, our histories, our assumptions, but would want to understand from first principles what we do and why we do it. Many of the questions that arose I realised I had never thought about before - nor had I ever read accounts of anyone else attempting to address them. Again, at the centre of our work sits a methodological abyss - not a good situation for an area of study which claims to be attentive to the relationship between knowledge and power.

What follows then is my attempt to address the methodology of textual analysis in a straightforward way: to suggest, in the interests both of teaching students, and of thinking honestly about the epistemological possibilities and limits of this methodology, what we do and why we do it. This is very much a descriptive project: it attempts to describe what we do, rather than to insist that it is the only correct approach, or to decry it as unsuitable. For it is only when we have some idea of what our methodology actually is that we can begin to open up debates about alternative methodologies, the kinds of knowledge they can produce, and the ways in which Cultural Studies might proceed in its project of understanding the culture in which we live.

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.***

This is, of course, a simplistic definition, and one which will be heavily refined over the course of your studies, but it will do as a starting point. If we want to understand the role that the media play in our lives and precisely how its messages participate in the cultural construction of our view of the world, then we have to understand what meanings audiences are making of television programs, of films, of newspapers, magazines, and radio programs – in short, of 'texts'.

Textual analysis is a methodology: a way of gathering and analysing information in academic research. Some academic disciplines (particularly in the physical and social sciences) are extremely rigorous about their methodologies; there are certain, long-established and accepted ways in which it is acceptable to gather and process information. Media Studies and Cultural Studies do not police their methodologies in this way. Indeed, one of the key insights of Cultural Studies has been that rigorous methodologies can limit research to a great extent: if you only ever ask the same questions in the same way, you will continue to get very similar answers. By contrast, by asking new questions, and coming up with new ways of thinking about things, you can get different kinds of knowledge.

Given this to reluctance to embrace strict methodologies, what follows will not be universally agreed upon by all practitioners in Media and Cultural Studies. This chapter should be taken as an initial guide; and if you encounter similar practices being described by another name elsewhere, don't panic. Simply be aware that this is part of the process of thinking about what knowledge is and how it is produced – which is an important part of Media and Cultural Studies.

An example illustrates what textual analysis is better than several paragraphs of description.

In his book *Uses of Television*, John Hartley tries to understand the role that television plays in political life. Analysing the American children's program *Clarissa Explains it All*, Hartley finds that it offers a strong image of what he calls 'DIY Citizenship' – where citizens form their own communities and identities from a wide range of

cultural choices. He makes this argument by examining the way in which the character of Clarissa is presented in this text:

> Clarissa Darling is smart, garrulous, talks directly to camera and is at the centre of the show's semiosphere [world of meanings] … what's unusual about it is the control [she] exercises over the space, pace, mood, gags and wisdom of the show … The show teaches family comportment and self-realization through knowing how things work. Clarissa learns each episode the limits to her control of the situation and finds ways of exercising what control she does have … For the rest, she can loll on her bed, accommodating to the realities where her control does not extend (to her brother Fergus for example) … Clarissa 'Explains It All' by focussing the familiar apparatus of the family sitcom on the figure of the teenage girl … the undisputed centre of the show. She is presented not as young girls tend to be in news or actuality, as an attractive victim or unruly body in need of protection, but on the contrary as a mainstream, fully-formed "adult" character, articulate, interesting, full or initiative, clever and congenial. She's clearly a citizen … [in] a world governed by a child … (Hartley, 1999: 13-5)

Are we trying to find the 'correct' interpretation of the text we analyse?

When we apply textual analysis to a television program, or a magazine, or a song, we are not trying to find the 'correct' interpretation of it – because:

> ***There is no such thing as a single, 'correct' interpretation of any text. There are large numbers of possible interpretations, some of which will be more likely than others in particular circumstances.***

This assumption is inherent in the very word 'text'. As soon as we describe a program, magazine or book as a 'text', we are implying a certain approach to it, and a certain way of making sense of it; including the fact that we do not think it has a single correct interpretation. We know from audience research that every television program, or film, or magazine article, can be interpreted in many different ways by viewers. In 1980, David Morley published *The Nationwide Audience*. In this book, he reports on his findings when he showed an episode of the British current affairs television program *Nationwide* to a variety of different groups of people. He found

that the different groups interpreted the program differently. For example, one group thought that a story on the tax system was ‘biased’, showing a right-wing way of thinking about the topic; another group thought that the same item was problematic only because it didn’t go into enough depth on the topic, but did not mention any bias; a third group commented only that the whole program was ‘boring’ and did not engage with the item at all. It is important to understand that none of these interpretations is ‘correct’. They are all feasible interpretations of the same text (Morley, 1980)

Are we trying to measure how *accurate* texts are?

When you are analyzing a newspaper story about Indigenous Australians, for example, or a film about women, or about gay men, it is often tempting to interpret the text as being ‘inaccurate’ – stereotyped or negative in some way, or not showing reality. However, when you are doing textual analysis in media studies, you must *never* do this.

> ***Never claim that a text is an ‘accurate’ or an ‘inaccurate’ representation; never claim that it ‘reflects reality’***

The reasons for this are complex, but rest on the basic assumption of textual analysis that there is no simple, single representation of reality against which you could measure the newspaper story, or the film, against in order to judge how ‘accurate’ a representation it is. Every version of ‘reality’ that we might measure our text against is always – inescapably - another representation – another text.

This is best illustrated through an example.

In a 1998 article called ‘Sourcing the wave: crime reporting, Aboriginal youth and the West Australian Press’, Steve Mickler and Alec McHoul examine the ways in which indigenous Australians were represented in West Australian newspapers during 1991 (Mickler and McHoul, 1998). As part of their research for this analysis, they present a statistical analysis of various elements of the stories: They compare how many crime stories involving Aboriginal youth were published. They contrast the number of stories published each month with 'Actual crime data' – apprehension rates of indigenous youth. This makes clear that the change in the number of stories each month bears no relationship to the number of reported crimes. As they note, ‘the crest of a press crime

reporting “wave” [in September 1991 occurs] during a comparative decline in actual crime’ (128).

But it is important to note that they do not simply claim that they have measured the number of news stories against the ‘reality’ of the statistics: for these statistics are also a text! They are also an attempt to make sense of reality, and they must also be interpreted. Mickler and McHoul are well aware of this and state that: ‘The apprehension rate is unreliable because it might also [be interpreted to] indicate such things as police inefficiency … [and] apprehension rates were clearly affected in 1991 by the introduction of a cautioning system that year …’. Both the newspaper stories, and the statistics on apprehension rates, are texts: texts which attempt to make sense of a particular part of the social world – indigenous youth crime – over the given period.

Surely some texts must reflect reality?

This is not just a problem with statistics. There is a philosophical underpinning to textual analysis which suggests that even simple words and descriptions of the world are necessarily ‘texts’ – there is never one, single, ‘correct’ way to describe anything in the world. There are always many ways in which the same ‘truth’ can be accurately described. We can see this fact at its most extreme when we look at different languages, and the different way in which they describe the same phenomena. I choose only a single, small example here to try and make the point concrete, rather than relying on abstract arguments:

> Take … the concept ‘brown’. There is nothing in nature to say exactly which segment of the colour spectrum is meant by brown. The concept depends not on anything in nature, but on the way the spectrum is divided up by a language …[and] different languages divide the colour spectrum differently: Welsh, for example, has no [word for] brown … (Hartley, 1982: 17) (see also Carroll, ed, 1956)

So a Welsh speaker organising a group of objects according to their colour would do so differently to an English speaker – these ways of thinking about and categorising the world are not natural, but cultural. This means that we can never simply measure a text against reality: because every description of reality is only one *version* of reality

(the Welsh version of the 'real' colour of an object might be 'grey', for example, whereas the 'real' colour in English might be 'brown' – they are both correct, within those languages, those versions of describing the world).

This is not only true across different languages – it also happens within a single language. Different texts can present the same event in different ways, and all of them be as truthful and accurate as each other.

The following headlines all introduced stories in British 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. Yet, none of them is 'inaccurate' or 'false'. Despite the fact they are very different, they are all stories that present the 'facts' of this case. The first foregrounds the disease and the girl's age; the second personalises her with a name, and comments on her status as national spectacle; the third puts her into a context of national policy on disease control.

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 claimed that: "Zoe was killed by aliens: invasion imminent", very few people would think that it was accurate. But this does not mean that there is only a *single,* 'true' account of any event.

In short, even if this section seems irrelevant, there is a simple axiom which expresses all of this:

> ***Whenever anyone claims that a particular text is 'accurate' or 'truthful' or 'reflects reality' – what they are really saying is 'I agree with what this text is saying about the world'***

Some students get very depressed when they first realise that this is an assumption of textual analysis. Without the reassuring safety net of simply appealing to 'reality' as something simple and obvious, how can we do anything useful as we attempt to understand the media?

This need not be the case: for although there is no single, accurate representation of the world - and we can prove that – we still we all get on with our lives pretty well. We all make sense of the world we live in; we all use language; and we reach a consensus of understanding about the society that we share. And this, ultimately, is the process that we investigate and describe in textual analysis: how do we make and share sense about the world we live in?

Why is it important to try to understand the likely interpretations of media texts?

Because there is no simple, single, correct interpretation of reality, it becomes very important to understand how media texts might be used in order to make sense of the world we live in. We cannot simply collect facts about our society – statistics, for example – and then say that we understand our society and culture: because these facts and statistics are just more texts. If we want to understand the world we live in, then we have to understand how people are *making sense* of that world. To return to the Mickler and McHoul example from above, simply collecting statistics about police apprehension rates about Indigenous people in Western Australia doesn't tell us much about the ways in which Indigenous people are represented and understood in Western Australia: but we *can* get some sense of that by doing textual analysis on such texts as newspaper stories, television stories – even on statistics and government reports. By doing this, we get a better sense of how members of that community are interpreting the world around them.

If we're interested in likely interpretations of these texts, why don't we just interview audience members and ask them what interpretations they make?

If we want to understand the possible interpretations of texts, it may seem that the best thing to do would be to simply go out and interview audience members – ask them how they are interpreting the texts.

Indeed, audience research can sometimes produce interesting insights into the unexpected ways in which media texts are interpreted by audiences – for example, Henry Jenkins discovered in his work with *Star Trek* fans that a distinct subgroup of female audience members thought that the relationship between Captain Kirk and Mr

Spock had a powerful erotic undertone, and interpreted the films and episodes of the television program in light of this sexual relationship between the two men (Jenkins, 1992).

However, this approach – audience research – can also have practical and theoretical drawbacks.

In practical terms, the biggest problem with audience research is that it is expensive and can be cumbersome. If the audience's responses are not simply to be ticks in boxes (see the section on 'content analysis' below for a discussion of the limitations of such numerical approaches), then it requires a significant amount of time to interview a large number of audience members – either individually or in focus groups – and transcribe this data.

The fact that this is a lot of work would not, in itself, be a reason to avoid audience research, were it not for the second, theoretical, problem. Audience research often sets itself up as finding out 'the reality' of the interpretations made by audiences (see McKee, 1999). But this is not, in fact, the case – at least, not in the way it is often understood.

Audience research does not find out 'reality': it analyses and produces more texts

Because when you ask a viewer what they think of a particular program, or magazine, or film, you do not find out what they think about the program per se – rather, you find out what they *say* about a program, to an academic who is interviewing them, in answer to a specific question! This is a very different thing.

Ellen Seiter describes some audience research she conducted where she became particularly aware of this fact:

> Throughout this interview [with two television viewers] it was uppermost in these men's minds that we were academics. For them it was an honour to talk to us and an opportunity to be heard by people of authority and standing. They made a concerted effort to appear cosmopolitan and sophisticated… [they] began the interview with a disclaimer about the amount of time spent viewing … This was an unusual start for an interview because Mr Howe had answered a newspaper advertisement asking to interview soap opera viewers … [one] then

> offered an excuse for why they do watch: to see the homes and locations on the shows (Seiter, 1990: 62, 63)

Often people will emphasise the 'quality' programming that they watch, and denigrate programs that they actually like ('those soap operas, they're crap') because they think that this is what researchers want to hear (even if it isn't). Or they might have seen a program once, but not consciously have thought *anything* about it until asked by the researcher – again, we do not find out what they 'really' think about it before we ask the questions – and we never can.

On another level, as viewers we learn how to make sense of and discuss media just like we learn any other parts of language. So it is often from *public discourse* about the media that we pick up the terms we use to make sense of it. Because of this, we often find that audience research can be an expensive and time consuming way to find out what we already know, and what is already obvious.

Take as an example my own work on 'Images of gay men in the media and the development of self-esteem'. I wanted to find out how important television was for young gay men growing up, so I interviewed a number of gay men about their memories of the medium (McKee, 2000). What was most noteable for me in this research was that I could have predicted exactly what I was going to find out before I even started the project – even though I was careful in my questions not to set the terms of discussion, and asked open questions about their memories of television. Most of the men I interviewed complained that they didn't like seeing 'effeminate stereotypes' of gay men on television – and they wanted to see more 'positive images' of 'ordinary', 'normal' men. I did not introduce any of these terms in my questions – but I could have predicted this result before I began the research. This is not to denigrate the men in any way – rather, it is to point out that they, like me, have learned from public debates certain useful terms and ways of thinking about images of gay men.

This is a common issue in audience research – what you actually discover in your research is that audience members draw from publicly available knowledges in order to make sense of texts. It is in part as a way of recovering those publicly available knowledges that textual analysis works.

And sometimes, audience research can tell you less than textual analysis. This is because as soon as you set the terms of the questions, you have in some ways determined the answers. So if I had asked the men in my survey, 'Do you think there should be fewer stereotypes of gay men in the media', I am almost certain that I would have had 100% saying 'Yes' – simply because it is public knowledge that stereotypes are bad. But such an approach would close down a load of other questions that could be asked, through textual analysis: for example, are stereotypes always bad things? Can a stereotype also be a positive image at the same time? Who decides what counts as 'positive' in a positive image? So audience research can end simply discovering the same things over and over again – , for example, 'stereotypes are bad' – and never proceeding any further in thinking about the way in which the media functions.

So how do we discover the likely interpretations of a text?

As you attempt to make sense of a text – say, for example, a music video – first and most important thing to remember is:

context, context, context.

There is no way that we can attempt to understand how a text might be interpreted without first asking, Interpreted by whom, and in what context? So, for example, say we were trying to understand a music video that was made and first broadcast in the late 1970s. It features a lot of blue eyeshadow, crimped hair and very glossy, bright pink lipstick. How can we interpret these features? What does blue eyeshadow *mean*?

If we are talking about the video when it was first broadcast on *Countdown* in 1979, the we know that these elements of the text would have suggested style, fashion, and the cutting edge of youth culture. But if the same video was broadcast in the late 1990s on a nostalgia retrospective program like Bob Downe's *Fabulous, Famous and Forgotten*, then exactly those same elements of the text would have to be read as signifying, perhaps, 'the late 70s' as a concept; perhaps nostalgia, camp, certainly objects of humour and derision. It is only when a text is put into a context that we can start to make guesses about the likely interpretations of particular elements within it.

This context (that is, a series of intertexts - related texts) is what ties down the interpretations of a text. If you put a text into a completely different context, where it

is interpreted alongside different texts, then it will likely be interpreted in a completely different way. A good example of this is presented in Eric Michael's article comparing his responses to texts with those of a Warlpiri (Indigenous Australian) community. Firstly he describes his reaction to a video made by local Warlpiri videographers:

> Warlpiri videotape is at first disappointing to the European observer. It seems unbearably slow, involving long landscape pans and still takes that seem empty … Yet Warlpiri audiences view these tapes with great attention and emotion, often repeatedly … The camera in fact traces tracks and locations where ancestors, spirits or historical characters travelled. The apparently empty shot is full of life and history to the Aboriginal [viewer] (Michaels, 1998: 120-1)

He also describes the differences between his interpretations of the Hollywood film *Rocky* and those of Warlpiri viewers:

> Narrative [in Warlpiri stories] will provide detailed kinship relationships between all characters, as well as establishing a kinship domain for each. When Hollywood videos fail to say where Rocky's grandmother is, or who's taking care of his sister-in-law, Warlpiri viewer discuss the matter and fill in the missing content. By contrast, personal motivation is unusual in Aboriginal story: charaters do things becausee the class of which they are a member is known to behave this way. This produces interesting indigenous theories to explain behaviour in [for example] The A-Team. But equally interesting, it tends to ignore narrative exposition and character development (Michaels, 1988: 119)

To a European-trained viewer, the shots are empty; to an Indigenous viewer, they are full of life and history. If you are familiar with a series of other texts – Dreaming stories about the landscape – then the videos offer up all kinds of meaning. If you do not know those texts, and instead interpret the Warlpiri videos through your knowledge of Western, entertainment videos, then they even appear to be different texts – completely empty of possible meaning. Similarly, to a European viewer, Rocky's grandmother does not exist; to an Indigenous viewer, she is offscreen and must be positioned into the narrative. Again, the interpretations are so different that

they even make the text different: the grandmother, for the Warlpiri viewers, does exist in the text: she is simply not seen.

These are extreme examples, which illustrate an important point: you can do nothing with a text until you establish its context. You can't even simply describe it without implicitly putting it into a context (for example, the Warlpiri video – if you simply described it as 'empty', or 'shots of landscape', you would automatically be putting it into a Western context).

By 'context', I mean other texts that surround a text, which provide useful information for making sense of it, which teach us how to interpret texts (and are, in turn, texts themselves, interpreted in other contexts). I would say that, as a rough guide, as you try to understand any element of a text, you should be looking at three levels of context:

1. *The rest of text*. For example, what does it mean if an Indigenous character is shown as a prisoner in a television series? If the series was a traditional police series like the 60s and 70s Australian cop show *Homicide*, then you would probably say that they were meant to be a criminal and a bad person: in *Homicide*, the police were good and cops were bad. But what if the Indigenous prisoner is in the 70s and 80s soap opera *Prisoner*? In that case, we know that the rules are different – that when a character is shown as a prisoner then they may well be sympathetic. In that program, it was often the supposedly law-abiding characters (police, prison warders) who were shown to be bad (corrupt) while the prisoners were often misunderstood, suffering because they did not fit into an unjust society.
2. *The genre of the text*. Genre is a very powerful tool for making sense of texts. Genres are kinds of codes used to communicate between producers and audiences by following standard rules of signification. For example, if somebody is hit in the face with a frying pan in a Bugs Bunny cartoon, then we know that this is meant to be funny; that we should not be worrying about whether the character will survive the attack, or whether they will be disfigured by it. By contrast, if a character is hit in the face with a frying pan in *Law and Order* or *NYPD Blue* then we know that it is a serious assault, that it hurt, that there will be ramifications in the narrative. Knowing the genre, and its rules helps us to make reasonable interpretations of how a text is likely to be read by audiences.

3. *The wider public context in which a text is circulated*. We can completely misunderstand the significance of a text if we do not look at the more general context in which it circulates. For example, a 1963 episode of *Four Corners* used images of members of the Returned Services League (RSL) drinking beer, and included songs and jokes about how drunk they are. Without some understanding of public debates about the RSL that were going on in 1963, it is difficult to understand how these elements should be interpreted. With some research into those debates, it becomes clear that attacking RSL members for being drunks was a standard part of critical comment against the organisation, so that to audiences at the time this would have been a familiar image, rather than a bizarre one – as it might seem now.

The more that you know about the context of a text – at all these levels – the more likely you are to produce reasonable interpretations of a text. If you do not pay attention to these, then you will end up producing interpretations which are logically coherent, and which do indeed include elements of the text that you are discussing – but which bear no relation to the likely interpretations of that text. Take the case of American tele-evangelist Jerry Falwell, who publicly condemned the British children's series *Teletubbies* for 'promoting homosexuality':

> The sexual preference of Tinky-Winky … has been the subject of debate since the series premiered in England in 1997. The character, whose voice is obviously that of a boy, has been found carrying a red purse in many episodes …Now, further evidence that the creators of the series intend for Tinky-Winky to be a gay role model have surfaced. He is purple – the colour of gay pride – and his antenna is shaped like a triangle – the gay pride symbol (quoted in Wilson, 2000: 18)

Falwell's interpretation is an instance of textual analysis: he identifies elements of the text and suggests possible interpretations. It may indeed be convincing to a certain group of American society (gullible born-again Christians). But to the majority of the audience, such an interpretation would most likely seem ridiculous – or, to the pre-schoolers at whom the show is aimed, incomprehensible. This is what we must try to *avoid* doing when we use textual analysis in our study of culture.

How do we know which are the important parts of a text?

Take an average film, or issue of a magazine, or episode of a television program. There are literally hundreds of things that you could say about that text. In the case of the television program, you could discuss the characters, the lighting, the clothing, the division of characters into good and bad, the editing, the promos, the title sequence … there is, literally, no way that you could ever simply discuss 'the likely interpretations of every aspect of a text'. You would need hundreds of books even to deal with one episode of one television program.

And even if you did this, most of the information that you generate might be quite uninteresting. For all texts have some elements that are more important than others. How do we decide what particular aspects of texts are important and interesting?

Partly this is determined by the context in which they are broadcast: for example, if we watched Channel Seven's mini-series based on *The Potato Factory* in 2000, then we would know that, in that context, it was particularly important that Lisa McCune – multiple Gold Logie winner and audience favourite in *Blue Heelers* – was the star, playing a sex-worker (which was a shocking change from her previous role as Maggie Doyle), and even appearing fully nude. This was emphasised in intertexts such as promotional material, adverts and interviews and articles in magazines.

Again, context must be borne in mind – in different contexts, different elements of a text will emerge as being more important. For example, in one episode of the BBC science fiction series *Doctor Who* in 1967, the central alien character, the Doctor, spoke a single line about his family. In the context of its broadcast, it was an unimportant part of an adventure story. But within the culture of *Doctor Who* fandom, this line has become one of the most important in the series' history, as one of the very few moments when background information was given about this character. It is still discussed and mentioned in articles and books over thirty years later.

This is important for academic work – because whenever we study a text, our approach also determines what we will find important about it. When are you are interpreting a particular element of a text, you have to bear in mind the textual context of the rest of the program: but that does not mean that you have to discuss every aspect of every program at the same time. It is perfectly legitimate to focus on one small part of a text as part of your argument and not mention the rest of it – so long as

you bear in mind the rest of it in your interpretations of the small part that you mention.

Take an episode of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* as an example. In this forty-four minutes of television, there is a wealth of information, presented both aurally and visually. If you were interested in the way in which women are represented in this text then you would focus on the female characters in the text, how they are presented, perhaps, in relation to previous female leads in American drama series, how they are dressed, react to each other, take control of the narrative and so on. You would choose a number of elements from the text which were relevant to your interest, and try to make sense of them in ways which would be likely interpretations.

But supposing you were interested in a different question – say, the way in which our ideas about identity and choice function in late capitalist society. We know from historians that before the nineteenth century in Western society, expectations existed that everyone was born into a certain role in society (peasant, aristocrat, royalty) and that there was no expectation that anybody would be able to change that role. In late capitalistic society, ideas about roles in society have changed so that now we expect to have the right to choose our own career paths, marriage partners and trajectories in society. If you were interested in looking at this aspect of culture, then Buffy would again be an interesting text – and this time you would analyse the relationship between Buffy and Giles, her 'watcher', the authority figure who is constantly telling her that it is her destiny to be a vampire slayer, that she cannot escape it, cannot simply go shopping, do what she wants and be a 'normal' girl (a 'feudal' view of the world); and Buffy's responses to this, how they function in the overall narrative and so on. Again, you would have to make sense of these elements of the text in ways that aimed for likely interpretations – but it would be different elements of the text that you would choose for study.

This doesn't sound very scientific. Wouldn't it be better to make the process of 'textual analysis' more standardised?

Textual analysis is only one way of approaching media texts to try to understand their meaning. Others are more standardised, quantitative (using numbers rather than words) and replicable (able to produce the exactly the same results every time).

However, there are many advantages to the less ‘scientific’ approach of textual analysis.

‘Content analysis’ is an empirical form of analysing texts which originates in mass communication approaches to the media. This form of analysis breaks down the components of a program or a newspaper into units which it is then able to count – for example, ‘How many news stories about Indigenous people in Australia present them as criminals?’. The advantage of such an approach is that it offers ‘hard’ evidence on topics about which we often have quite firm but unfounded opinions. Groups of students working under Graeme Turner, for example, prepared content analyses which compare the international political coverage of the three Australian commercial television networks with that offered by the ABC. Their initial operating assumption was that the ABC, with its reputation for quality news coverage and without the need to allow time for ads, would screen a significantly greater number of international political stories. The research did not often support this assumption. Even more alarmingly, for those who might think the ratings simply test the entertainment value of the news, the research showed that the ratings leader, Channel 9 in this case, actually showed more ‘hard’ news than any of its competitors - including the ABC.

Such empirical information can often challenge and complicate one’s more informal assumptions. But it is commonly acknowledged that contents analysis also has limitations on the kinds of knowledge it can produce.

Firstly, much of the work of analysis - contrary to what might be expected, given the commonly-made claim that numerical data is particularly scientific or objective - is done even before the counting starts, simply by deciding what categories are going to be counted. As an example, much work on representations of indigenous Australians and other minority groups in Australian media counts up the number of stories which are ‘positive’ and the number which are ‘negative’. Even before the counting in such a project starts, it has already made a number of assumptions:

- that all stories are either ‘positive’ or ‘negative’
- that it is easy to decide what kinds of stories fit into which category (often with traditionally middle-class values and representations being unproblematically understood as ‘positive’, and working-class culture being understood as ‘negative’)

- that it is easy to know what responses readers will have to these texts (that they will agree with the researcher on what counts as ‘positive’ and what counts as ‘negative’).

These points do not render the data gathered by content analysis invalid: but they do mean that this is often not the best way to generate new ideas or information; and that the results which are produced should not really claim to be unchallengeable ‘objective’ ‘fact’. They can point the way to useful arguments, but the lack of attention to how texts actually produce meaning when they are circulated means that this is only one possible interpretation of each text - and often a very simplistic one.

Content analysis is replicable and quantitative, but it is no more objective or unchallengeable than other forms of textual analysis. It still relies on interpretation of texts

The second problem with content analysis is related to this - that often the categories used do no justice to each individual text. An example is useful here. One colleague, again looking at indigenous representation in Australian newspapers, developed a set of categories for contents analysis. One category was ‘Equivalence of indigenous people with animals’ – for he had noted a tendency, particularly in older representations, for indigenous people to be equated with animals: either to celebrate their link to nature, or to condemn their lack of civilisation. One story he encountered while doing his content analysis was a celebratory interview with Ernie Dingo - the headline, ‘Ernie Dingo is top dog’. He had to, he explained, put this into the category 'Equivalence of indigenous people with animals', even though it was obviously a very different kind of story to those he had in mind when he developed this ‘negative’ category. If he had not counted the story in this category, then his scientific replicability would have been compromised. To take account of how this text actually worked, and what it was obviously trying to do, would have compromised the whole project of content analysis.

Are there standardised ways of analysing texts without resorting to number-crunching?

Sometimes it can be helpful in textual analysis to draw on the discipline of ‘semiotics’. Developed by Ferdinand Saussure (and, independently, by Charles Peirce in the US), this ‘science of signs’ has been enormously influential in providing ways of analysing

the structure of communicative systems - particularly those of the visual media: film, television, graphic design, advertising, even newspaper layout.

Semiotics breaks down the various elements of a text and labels them. All meaning-producing activities - no matter what medium or process they employ - are gathered under the one conceptual framework: that of '***signification'*** - the making of meaning. Semiotics analyses signification by reducing all communication practices to their most basic unit: 'the ***sign'***. A sign can be a photograph, a word, a gesture - any physical form which refers to something else. Within all signifying systems, signs are selected and combined with other signs in ways that are analogous to our selection of words and their combination in sentences and paragraphs within written language. The context into which a sign is put is called the '***code'*** – so each sign will have a different meaning depending on which 'code' it is interpreted through. A good introduction to the complexity of the language of semotics can be found in *Tools for Cultural Studies* (Thwaties, Davis and Mules, 1994).

The advantage of semiotics is that it makes us stop and consider the various elements of the process of making meaning from a text that we normally do automatically and easily. The terminology and categories employed by semiotics are less important than the fact that we must consider each element of the text, and the ways in which it is likely to produce meaning. The mechanical nature of semiotic analysis can be helpful in ensuring that we pay attention to each stage in the process of making meaning from a text. But even here, with this 'scientific' method of analysis, there is no guarantee that two researchers will produce exactly the same analysis of a given text: they may have slightly different knowledges about the text, its generic and wider cultural context; or they may be analysing the text in order to answer slightly different questions. And this, as suggested above, is precisely the value of textual analysis: the fact that it is responsive to nuanced and complex way in which interpretations of a text can be produced.

Analysing a text: a final example

In *Bad Girls*, her book on questions of gender and representation, Catharine Lumby is interested in the way in which feminist analyses of texts have become mainstream. In

order to explore this phenomenon, she considers a number of possible interpretations of a newspaper advertisement for a Sydney jeweller.

The advertisement shows a woman wearing a flimsy satin dress. A man is standing behind her, his hand reaching down inside her dress to fondle her; she is reading a book, and reaching down between her legs at the same time.

Lumby notes that this advertisement was the focus of a considerable number of complaints when it was first published in a Sydney newspaper, and indeed had to be withdrawn because of the controversy it generated. She considers a number of these complaints, which explicitly claim to be 'feminist' interpretations of this advert:

> It is the most offensive advertisement I have ever been subjected to. It conveys the dangerously misleading message that women condone and enjoy being molested by men and that this behaviour is completely normal. It objectifies women, demeans women and advocates sexual harrassment and abuse, which is absolutely unacceptable. I am disgusted by this advertisement and feel that printing it is yet another crime against women (quoted, 3)

As Lumby points out, this complaint interprets the text in a particular – 'feminist' – way: it contains many elements that are recognisable as a feminist analysis of the advert. These include the concern that because of this advert, all women (not just the model in the photograph) are 'objectified' (presented as sexually desirable to men); that they are 'demeaned' by being presented sexually; that it is thus a 'crime against women'. Lumby argues that the idea of 'patriarchy', as an all powerful, all pervasive and ultimately inescapable force render it very difficult to imagine any representations of women which would be acceptable to a rigorous feminist analysis. She argues that a useful act of feminist textual analysis would involve finding convincing alternative interpretations of texts such as this advertisement, interpretations which pay attention to the way in which gender is constructed and the ways in which inequality between genders has been represented and sustained by the media, and popularising these. She notes that: 'Reading images is never simple' and there are 'hundreds of other interpretations' available of this image (8): so:

> why insist on reading images like the Sydney jeweller's ad as demeaning? Why teach women to read images in a way that makes them feel bad about

> themselves? Why not encourage them to make creative readings of images and to appropriate and reinvent female stereotypes to their own advantage? (8).

Noting that one of the ways in which women have traditionally been disadvantaged is by being denied their own sexuality (14), she offers her reading of the advertisement:

> A woman is sitting in a chair reading a book. She has showered and put on a satin nightgown ready for bed. Her lover, who has just arrived home late from a business appointment, comes up behind her and slips his hand inside the gown to fondle her breast. The gown falls off her shoulder. Aroused but keen to finish the last few sentences on the page before her, the woman begins touching herself through the clinging fabric while her eyes linger on the book … an activity she doesn't seem eager to hurl aside, just because hubby's home from the office. [And] she's touching herslef – behaviour which suggests there's a little more to their sexual relationship than penetration (1, 8).

This is an alternative analysis of this text, presented not as the most likely one for the 'feminist' audience who have already condemned it, but as a possible or likely one for women who are not worried about being represented as sexual beings.

Conclusion: a step by step guide to textual analysis

1. Choose your topic of interest. Which part of culture and which questions interest you? This can come from academic reading, or from your own experience of culture (for example, 'I am interested in the way in which Indigenous Australians are represented on Australian television')
2. If necessary, focus your question to become more specific (for example, 'How are Indigenous Australians represented in Australia soap operas?')
3. List the texts which are relevant to this question from your own experience (for example, 'I know that there was an Indigenous character in *Home and Away*, and in *A Country Practice*')
4. Find more texts by doing research both academic and popular (for example, '*Prisoner* fan websites mention an Indigenous character; *Neighbours* also used to have an Indigenous character; *Number 96*; featured an Indigenous hairdresser'; and so on.)

5. Gather the texts (this is often the hardest bit. Newspapers and magazines are often in University Libraries, although for some popular magazines you may have to go to the National Library in Canberra. For films, television programs and radio programs, you may find video or tape copies for sale. Otherwise, for Australian material, your best bet is Screensound – the Government's audiovisual archives - http://www.screensound.gov.au/main4.htm. Of course, if you choose to analyse current texts, you can simply collect them yourself).
6. Watch as many examples of each program as you can and notice how particular textual elements work in each one (for example, 'I notice that in *Home and Away* it is usual for each young cast member to have at least one emotional/sexual relationship going on at any given time. To do so is to be seen as normal; not to do so is strange. The fact that the Indigenous character never becomes involved in romance suggests that he is outside of the central community')
7. Watch other programs in the same genre to see how they work (for example, 'I notice that in Australia soap operas, it is normal for all of the central characters to be presented in the title sequence. Therefore, the fact that the Indigenous characters in *The Flying Doctors* and *Prisoner* are not in the title sequence suggests that they are not the most important characters in these texts')
8. Get as much sense as you can of the wider 'semiosphere' (the 'world of meaning' – Hartley, 1996) as you can (read newspapers, magazines, watch as much television, listen to as much music as you can) to get some sense of how these texts might fit into the wider context (for example, 'I notice that Ernie Dingo keeps cropping up across the media in travel shows, kids shows and variety shows as well as soap operas. This suggests that his star image – of being a 'nice', gentle, culture-straddling man - will be important in understanding his appearances in *GP'*)
9. With this context in mind, return to the texts and attempt to interpret likely interpretations of them.

Good luck.

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