CHAPTER 1

HOW REAL IS TELEVISION?

INTRODUCTION

This thesis is about children’s and young people’s television modality judgements; that is, it explores and charts the ways in which children from early childhood to adolescence perceive the reality status of television content. It traces the ways in which those perceptions change and develop as children grow older and it identifies the key indicators used in making those judgements. Recognising that cognitive judgements are not isolated from other aspects of human functioning, this thesis also explores how children’s and adolescents’ television programme preferences reflect the ways in which modality and important social reality issues are connected. In addition, the participants’ use of the modality discourse to position themselves socially and to create individual identities is also presented.

In this chapter, the work that forms the substance of this thesis is introduced, justified and contextualised. The chapter begins by showing how important concepts of ‘perceived reality’ have been both in public debate about television ‘effects’ and in academic research. It also shows, however, that most public debate draws on outdated or misconceived notions of cause-and-effect and that few firm conclusions can be drawn from the bulk of academic studies which have traditionally investigated the question of how children perceive television reality.

At this point, the concept of modality - a major focus of the present study - is introduced and the radical differences between this and the concept of ‘perceived reality’ (which was the focus of previous research), are demonstrated and explained. There then follows a more extensive examination and critique of the three theoretical frameworks within which research on children and television has been carried out. The contributions of each to the conceptualisation and the theoretical framing of the present study are demonstrated.

A critique of two models of cross-disciplinary research that have dealt with the question of children’s modality judgements is then presented. In the final section of the chapter, the specific research methods and approaches adopted by the present study are set out and examined.
THE IMPORTANCE OF ‘PERCEIVED REALITY’ CONCEPTS IN PUBLIC DEBATE AND ACADEMIC RESEARCH

The Concept of ‘Perceived Reality’ in Public Debate

The tragic events that occurred in Dunblane and Port Arthur during the early part of 1996, leave one in no doubt as to the importance the general public attributes to questions of modality (perceptions of reality) in relation to the media.

On Wednesday March 13th 1996, Thomas Hamilton, armed with semi-automatic weapons, walked into a primary school gym in Dunblane, Scotland and systematically shot and killed 16 grade one children and their teacher. Only six weeks later, on Sunday April 28th, Martin Bryant, also armed with automatic and semi-automatic weapons, walked calmly around the historic site of Port Arthur in southern Tasmania and systematically shot and killed 35 men, women and children who were visiting the tourist attractions there.

In both instances, as so often has happened in previous catastrophes of this kind, it took little time for commentators in the print media to blame the electronic media for directly influencing - even inciting - the perpetrators of these terrible acts. On the day after the Dunblane tragedy, for example, Allan Massie in a feature article in one of Britain’s national dailies, The Daily Telegraph (14/3/96: 16) claimed:

Never in the history of mankind have so many people had such immediate access to images of violence with which to feed and corrupt their imagination ... Most people, being healthy-minded, can almost certainly watch most of this with sufficient detachment and discrimination; so there is little reason to suppose that they will be harmed or corrupted by it.

He then makes quite explicit the assumption that it is the ability to make the distinction between reality and fantasy - the ability to make 'appropriate' modality judgements - that is the vital link between violent images and subsequent behaviour:

People who are in good mental and spiritual health do not find it difficult to distinguish between reality and fantasy. But those who are not do.

Massie goes on to suggest that Thomas Hamilton was not in 'good mental and spiritual health' and concludes that he:

... was certainly a lonely man and it is credible that, alone, brooding, suspicious and suspected, he fed his imagination on images of violence.
In a similar fashion, the press in Australia attempted to paint Martin Bryant, the Port Arthur gunman, as someone who had difficulty living in 'the real world'. Much was made of the 'fact' that he had lived for some time with an unrelated elderly woman; the 'fact' that he slept with a pet pig; the 'fact' that his neighbours claimed they felt unsafe and uneasy living near him and so on. So eager were the press to reinforce this notion of Bryant as a disturbed young man, out of touch with reality, that several leading dailies printed a large front-page picture of him which, they were later forced to admit, had been doctored, giving his eyes a wild, crazed, maniacal look. The pathological confusion between media images and reality was, in this case, all the media's own work.

Within days of the tragedy at Port Arthur, the Australian press also drew the connection between the murderous behaviour of the gunman and television/video violence. This time, claiming that exposure to violent media socialises people into violent behaviour. The Sydney Morning Herald (4/5/96: 1), for example, eerily echoing the reporting of the 1993 murder of James Bulger in England, ran a front-page headline 'Next target: violent videos'. In the lead article, Tony Wright claimed:

The gunman at Port Arthur was obsessed by violent videos, according to media reports yesterday, particularly Child's Play 2, which features an evil doll called Chucky who comes to life by killing...

He quotes Senator Richard Alston, the Minister for Communications, as saying that:

'...mindless violence could create a climate which tends to downplay the significance of violence and therefore make it seem to be a more acceptable manner of behaviour. Having said that, we have to say that the great bulk of the population who are exposed to these things manage to restrain themselves.'

In the weeks and months after the shootings, there were concerted campaigns in both Britain and Australia for some kind of censorship of violence in videos and on television. In Australia, the number of letters to the editors of the main dailies and the extent to which television current affairs programme and talk-back radio time were devoted to this topic made it very clear that there was no doubt in the public mind about the capacity of the media to affect behaviour. However, as is clear from the press examples above, concern was generally expressed about the media's effects on 'other' people; people who, for one reason or another, are either unable to discriminate effectively between fantasy and reality or who have been over-exposed to 'unsuitable' media material. In this discourse, children, either implicitly or explicitly, form a particularly vulnerable category of 'other'.
These anxieties are not new. From ancient Greek philosophers\(^1\) to contemporary Australian Prime Ministers\(^2\), British royalty\(^3\) and the Pope\(^4\), everyone it seems has a view about the effects of popular culture on children and, for the most part, these views are highly critical. Current anxieties, which most frequently find public expression in the popular press\(^5\), focus heavily on television's entertainment programming which is variously accused of having the power to corrupt, confuse, deceive, de-sensitise, mesmerise and brainwash children (see also Mander 1978, Postman 1983, Winn 1985, Bennett 1994).

Central to the concerns embedded in popular opinion are two key common-sense and seemingly intuitively correct assumptions about children and television. The first, also evident in earlier public anxieties about the effects of comics and films on children (see Luke 1990b), concerns how the "television effects" process is thought to operate. Television is essentially seen as a powerful teacher, presenting in a particularly effective way all kinds of lessons containing both desirable (e.g. educational/factual information or pro-social messages) and undesirable material (e.g. violence, stereotyping, consumerism). The young viewer is presumed indiscriminately to learn these television lessons.

The second assumption concerns why children (and others identified as being at risk) are so vulnerable - so likely to learn television's messages. Mature viewers, it is assumed, are able to distinguish between fantasy and reality, fiction and non-fiction, the unreal and the real and this enables them to filter out or discount the messages arising from the former kind of content while entertaining the relevance of the latter to their everyday lives. Immature viewers are presumed to be incapable of accurately making these distinctions for such reasons as lack of experience in the world and unsophisticated cognitive abilities. As a consequence, they are at risk of being deceived into thinking that all television content

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1 Plato, for example, warned in The Republic of the dangers of allowing the young to see or hear the dramatic poets' fictional (or as he termed them 'allegorical') accounts of the lives of the gods for fear that they would have a bad effect on children's characters. Inability to detect the difference between truth and fiction (or the 'allegorical' and the literal) was what was thought to produce this effect.

2 In 1992, the Prime Minister of Australia, Paul Keating, reported that one of his daughters had suffered nightmares after watching a violent film on television. In 1993, at his insistence, TV stations changed the broadcast time for violent feature films from 8.30 to 9.00 p.m. He was not so successful in achieving change when, in a later attack on 'TV violence', he called for a TV family channel with the brief of broadcasting inoffensive programmes suitable for family viewing.

3 Buckingham (1993a: 3) cites an address by HRH The Prince of Wales on opening the Museum of the Moving Image in London in September 1988. The Prince attacked what he saw as an 'incessant menu of gratuitous violence on both cinema and television'.

4 In 1994, the Pope attacked 'graphic depictions of brutal violence' on television and told parents to switch off their sets.

5 Headlines like the following are typical: Suicides On TV Increase Teen Risk (Australian 11/9/93), Does TV Rot Kids' Brains? (The Advertiser 19/11/94), Unsupervised TV Equal To Inviting A Stranger To Influence Your Child (Australian 3/4/93), Telly Ads Put Them In A Trance (Herald Sun 22/7/94).
has the same truth value because they cannot discern differences in the reality status of different programme content.

This is seen as a particular problem with television because visual realism is the dominant form of presentation. Only cartoons and certain programmes and advertisements that use fantastic special effects (e.g. morphing) self-evidently have no equivalents in real life. People and locations in news broadcasts, soap operas, situation comedies and police/doctor/action shows are visually, equally realistic and even fantasies like The New Adventures of Superman use real locations and actors.

Assuming that children are incapable of (or at least have impaired abilities in) judging the difference between real and unreal content leads to a litany of fears about children's physical and psychological safety. It is feared, for instance, that young viewers will imitate the dangerous behaviours of fantasy characters\(^6\) and the violent interpersonal style of those in cartoons. Soap operas and family shows concern parents who worry that depictions of impossibly harmonious and happy families will result in children becoming dangerously dissatisfied with their own. Police/crime shows, on the other hand, cause anxiety because they may lead to a paranoid perception that the world is a violent, dangerous, fearful and crime-ridden place - and so the list goes on.

The Concept of 'Perceived Reality' in Academic Research

Both the key assumptions described above have the status of common-sense or received wisdom in public debate about children and television. The question of how and in what ways television affects viewers' attitudes, beliefs, perceptions and behaviour, however, has also been the focus of a considerable amount of serious academic research for over forty years. Indeed, according to Livingstone (1990), this question has dominated research on television in general and audience research in particular, with the greatest concern and effort being concentrated on investigating television's effects on children.

Psychology has been the discipline that has shown the greatest interest in this question with early research located in the behaviourist/social learning theory tradition (e.g. Bandura et al. 1963; Bandura 1965) and a large volume of studies subsequently carried out in the tradition of cognitive psychology (e.g. from Greenberg and Dominick 1970 to Wright et al. 1995). The third academic tradition to show interest in the effect of various kinds of media on viewers has evolved from a combination of sociology, phenomenology, anthropology, linguistics and communication studies and now tends to fall under the general heading of cultural studies. The bulk of research here has concentrated on the analysis of

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\(^6\) The story about the child who leapt off the garage roof believing he could fly like Superman is probably apocryphal, however it illustrates this kind of concern.
media texts rather than on the reception of those texts and, with very few exceptions (e.g. Kinder 1991), the focus has been on the adult rather than the child viewer.

Despite the enormous amount of research time, money and energy that has been devoted to the investigation of media effects in all three traditions, the findings are disappointing for those seeking definitive proof that television has consistent and predictable effects on various kinds of viewers. Hawkins and Pingree (1983) in a review of the psychological literature, concluded that evidence for effects was weak and fraught with problems. Dorr (1986) also states that:

Television content effects are not found in every study. Where found, effects never apply to every child participating in the study. And where found, effects are rarely of enormous size or generality.

(Dorr 1986: 83)

Not only is there little consensus within the traditional disciplines concerning television effects, there are few points of agreement between them either. In each case, different theoretical frameworks, contradictory constructions of the viewer and the communication process and divergent research methodologies have led to widely discrepant conclusions that neither mesh with nor amplify each other.

Many contemporary researchers in the field blame the inconclusive and contradictory results obtained thus far on ‘... theories and methods that have been overly partial and inadequate.’ (Hodge and Tripp 1986: 2). However, failure to provide definitive answers to the question of what television’s effects might be is not solely the result of using inappropriate theory or research methods. It is quite possible that the wrong question was being asked in the first place. So little is known about how people - children in particular - make sense of television content that to begin with questions of effect (no matter how understandable that might be, given public anxiety), seems a particularly crude and premature starting point. A more appropriate one would emphasise television’s meanings and the ways different viewers interpret them.

Accordingly, the central concerns of this thesis are shaped around the following questions:
Do children interpret television meanings differently at different points in development?
How are these meanings constructed and how do they connect with everyday life?
THE SIGNIFICANCE OF MODALITY

The Concept of Modality in Language

The concept of modality, which is central to this thesis, derives from linguistics and refers to 'the status, authority and reliability of a message, to its ontological status or to its value as truth or fact' (Hodge and Kress 1988: 124). Messages can, of course, be communicated in various ways: linguistically, paralinguistically, through images, sounds and so on, but it is linguistic modality that has been most extensively studied (e.g. Hodge and Kress 1988; Kress and Hodge 1979; Halliday 1976). In verbal and written language, Halliday (1985) demonstrates how statements and propositions may be couched in ways that convey either low credibility (e.g. 'He possibly lied' or 'He may have lied'); median credibility ('He probably lied') or high credibility ('He certainly lied'). As the examples show, levels of modality can be communicated through the use of various words that have degrees of modality built into their meaning (e.g. possibly, probably, certainly); they may also be conveyed through words expressing frequency ('He sometimes/usually/always lies'); through terms conveying objectivity ('It's unlikely that he lied') or subjectivity ('I don't think he lied'); through the use of 'verbs of saying' ('He claimed/reported he lied') and through tense ('If it were/is the case that he lied').

In a similar fashion, various kinds of paralinguistic factors will affect modality or the truth value attributed to propositions. If something is said emphatically ('He lied!') then it is clear this is meant to be regarded as a truthful, factual statement, whereas if the tone rises at the end of the sentence ('He lied?') then the statement is to be regarded as a question rather than a statement of fact. An ironic or sarcastic tone of voice, laughter, facial expressions like smirks and grins, physical actions like crossed fingers behind the back, will generally weaken the truth value of the simple proposition 'He lied', while an angry tone, shouting, tears or a serious frowning expression will generally serve to strengthen it.

The modality status of a linguistic statement is not a matter of assessing how closely it approximates absolute truth. As Kress and van Leeuwen (1990: 50) point out, what one social group claims to be an absolute truth may well be disputed or rejected by another. Rather, modality is established through a semiotic (and therefore social) process by which meaning is constructed and exchanged. The modality systems that are thus produced are interpersonal rather than representational - they serve to relate interactive participants in a socially-produced version of reality rather than reflect degrees of truthfulness existing in an objectively apprehendable real world 'out there'. Within this framework, according to Hodge and Kress (1988: 122), 'truth' is:
...a description of the state when social participants in the semiotic process accept the system of classifications of the mimetic plane ... there seems to them a perfect fit between the systems of classification and the objects which that system describes; a relation which seems at once transparent, natural and inevitable.

The Concept of Modality and Television

In language there is a highly developed system of specialised modality markers and a complex set of context-specific rules for using them. Other semiotic systems also communicate meanings through socially-constructed modality markers and cues (Hodge and Kress 1988: 128). Images, for example, are interpreted as more or less real and the modality systems in operation here also rest on culturally and historically determined standards of what is real and what is not, not on the objective correspondence of the visual image to a reality defined independently of it.

In the case of television - a verbal and visual medium - there are many modality cues and markers that viewers use to make meaning from what they see. They have to be learnt and are acquired given time and experience with the medium.

Distinctions have been made between 'internal' and 'external' indicators of television modality (Hodge and Tripp 1986; Buckingham 1993a). Internal indicators include an awareness of transformation or distance from reality and signify children's growing awareness of television as a constructed medium. They include knowledge of such forms and conventions of television as the ways narratives are constructed to achieve particular effects; the differences between television genres and speculation and/or knowledge about the television production process. Thus, production features that cue weak modality might include such things as the two-dimensional form of the television image; the fact that the image is framed by the edges of the television screen; the presence of music, a laugh-track or unusual sound effects; drawn rather than realistic images; flat, unshaded primary colours rather than natural ones; the inclusion of a cast list at the end of a programme and so on.

External indicators concern what viewers know or believe to be true about the world, thus their modality judgements are based on the extent to which the content of television matches their experience of life. They include images, characters and events that would be classed as unreal by most people's normative version of reality - for example fantastic characters/landscapes, impossible feats, the use of slow motion and so on. Given the clustering of these kinds of indicators in different kinds of television programme, different genres can carry different modality status, thus, the images in news programmes are generally 'read' as being more truthful or closer to reality than, say, those in a drama series or a cartoon.
Modality and the ‘Effects’ Process
Some have claimed that the better the modal fit between a message and the receiver’s perceptions of reality, the more it will be responded to emotionally and cognitively as though it were reality. Hodge and Tripp (1986: 116) suggest that: ‘When taken to be real [the message] will ... affect behaviour and learning in the same way as would the relevant aspect of reality itself.’

Buckingham (1993a) is less convinced, however, about modality’s role in influencing viewers. He claims that not only is there no necessary connection between modality judgements and behaviour, there is little research evidence to support such a view either. Judging something to be ‘unreal’, he suggests, does not necessarily mean it won’t play a part in our perceptions of the social world. Indeed, the role of pleasure, fantasy and wish fulfilment in our everyday lives is complicated, often irrational and still fairly uncharted territory (Buckingham 1993a: 241).

The question of how and in what ways children’s television modality judgements might influence subsequent attitudes, behaviour and beliefs is still very unclear. This study recognises that it is an important question, however, and aims to provide more data and insights to assist in coming to some less contested conclusions.

The Significance of Children’s Television Modality Judgements
Apart from the question of how children’s television modality judgements connect with everyday life, there are several other reasons why these judgements deserve to be studied: first, for adults, years of practice and familiarity with the medium have made the processes of judging television modality mostly automatic and unconscious. Only rarely does some new visual technique (e.g. morphing, holograms) or a new kind of programme (e.g. docu-dramas or so-called ‘reality programming’) raise the issue of modality for conscious judgement and remind us of the intellectual processes necessary for solving modality dilemmas. For children and young people, the modality status of television and its images has to be consciously worked at. Modality cues and markers have to be learned - is what can be seen on the screen actually going on inside the box or is it a representation of things that go on in real life and if the latter, how like real life is it? Our picture of how children and young people go about making these decisions has, so far, been incomplete and inconclusive. Certainly, studies examining the way in which very young children (i.e. 3 - 5 year olds) interpret the reality of television have been very scarce.

The second reason why it is important to study the question of children’s modality judgements is because those who get to define what is real can exert power and social control over others. In relation to television, questions of what is real, what is not and who can
tell, form a highly contested area. Public anxiety about television and children, often exacerbated by the alarmist claims of well-intentioned lobbyists, illustrates the agendas of power and control that have been in operation since television's inception. As can be seen from the examples at the beginning of this chapter, inability to judge television's reality, it seems, is always a problem for other people - people who generally belong to social groups with less power than those claiming to be sufficiently mature and sophisticated to be unaffected by television's 'harmful influences'. As a consequence, throughout forty years of television research, children, women, people who are black or from ethnic and working class backgrounds have often been identified as incapable of making mature television modality judgements and have therefore been seen to be in need of protection from the medium. Protective solutions have ranged from prohibition (e.g. the last two chapters in Winn's 1985 book, The Plug-In Drug, are entitled Giving Up Television for Good and No Television Ever; a more recent 1994 publication, again using the 'television as drug' metaphor, is entitled Kick the T.V. Habit), to censorship or changing the classifications of popular programmes, to intervention strategies designed to bring the reality-judging skills of the vulnerable up to speed. Research which demonstrates the modality skills of television viewers of all ages and social groups is significant because it has the capacity to return to those people, some of the power and control that had been assumed by well-meaning others.

As popular anxiety about television indicates, children's ability to distinguish between fantasy and reality is of great interest and concern to adults. What is less obvious, however - and this is the third reason for the topic's significance - is that it is also of central importance to children and young people themselves. The rich imaginative lives of children demonstrate the importance and the pleasures of the reality/fantasy distinction from very early ages; the youngster who gallops around the house making whinnying noises claims to be a horse and may even extend the fun by calling her cereal 'hay' and the garden her 'paddock'. In young children's pretend play, it is not uncommon to find key players briefly dropping out of role in order to direct others so that the play may be more enjoyable. They then resume their role and re-immerses themselves in the hospital/school/family fantasy scenario. Older children will enquire whether their mother is 'really' cross or whether an animated model is 'real'; adolescents may interrogate a friend's story by asking 'Are you for real?'.

In all these cases, the child/young person is recognising or testing the boundary between the real and the not real, the true and the untrue, the genuine and the fake - because it is a

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At the time of writing (late 1995), there was considerable pressure being brought to bear by the Australian Council for Children's Films and Television to have The Mighty Morphin Power Rangers' G classification changed to PG.
crucial distinction. To some extent, it may determine subsequent behaviour - if it's a real dinosaur or if mother is really cross, then evasive action may be required; if the story is really true, then it may be appropriate to either laugh or cry. To be caught making the wrong response can be either dangerous or embarrassing. Learning to distinguish between what is real and what is not is a major preoccupation of childhood and adolescence and one that television, as this study will show, is ideally placed to serve.

The Difference Between the Concepts of Modality and 'Perceived Reality'
In behaviourist/social learning theory research, the question of how children might interpret the modality of the television stimuli with which they were presented, was ignored. Cognitive research in the area has certainly relied heavily on the notion of 'perceived reality', but in practice, the reality this research assumes is naïve, unproblematic, normative; it takes for granted that the 'reality' to be 'perceived' is fixed and objectively apprehensible and that insofar as subject characteristics like age, class, gender and ethnicity affect perceptions of reality, they do so only in terms of cognitive abilities.

There is, therefore, a radical difference between the concept of modality and the concept of 'perceived reality' that features in so much cognitive research. Unlike 'perceived reality', modality is not a fixed property either of a message or of the message's relation to reality, but is rather an individually-constructed, subjective judgement that draws on socially shared knowledge. Ways of seeing, ways of interpreting what is 'real' are thus seen as being culturally produced and socially passed on to and learnt by individuals who then share in the culture.

Given the inconclusiveness of the research that relied on a simple normative notion of 'perceived reality', this thesis adopts the more flexible and complex approach to understanding children's perceptions which is offered by the concept of modality. In doing so, it asks how subjective interpretations are involved in making meaning from television and whether there is any pattern or regularity to be found in these perceptions among different groups of children and teenagers. Any such patterns would have major implications for those adults who make children's programmes and others who make decisions about their suitability, regulation and classification. It might also assist us in understanding the popularity of different types of programmes for different age groups.
THE THEORETICAL TRADITIONS

Behaviourist/Social Learning Theory Research and 'Passive' Viewers

Behaviourist theory concerns itself with learning. It is unconcerned with interior mental processes but rather views learning as a result of stimulus and response pairings. Learning may be conditioned, it may be the result of simple associations of a stimulus and a response, or it may be the result of favourable/unfavourable consequences following a response. Social learning theory developed from classic behaviourism and focused, among other things, on imitation as a powerful means of learning. This learning was thought to be especially effective if the model was reinforced for the behaviour being imitated.

The 'threat' of new media and the research agenda

Historically, research about children and any new medium - be it film, radio, comics or television - has always been strongly influenced by public expressions of concern about media effects (Wartella and Reeves 1985). New forms of the media have generally become convenient 'whipping boys' for a society acutely aware of its failure to control all the perceived ills besetting it and new media like television (and more recently, video/computer games, the Internet and so on) become targets for these social frustrations. Public debate, then, has always influenced this research agenda and any new medium appears to have begun its life as a research subject already pathologised, already seen as a potential danger and threat to its young consumers. Television, from its earliest days, was considered such a threat and a good deal of this early research was motivated by the desire to prove it so.

Early laboratory research

Many studies during the 1960's and 70's were based on a behaviourist/social learning theory model of learning and used an experimental laboratory-based research method8. A direct, unmediated causal link was assumed between the viewer and what is viewed and, thus, the viewer was conceptualised as a passive and powerless subject unable to avoid being affected by powerful television messages. The communication process itself was seen as simple, unidirectional and unambiguous with the emitter's clear and precise meanings passing uncorrupted to the receiver. In this tradition of research, television stimuli appear to bypass the viewer's intelligence, background knowledge, personal history or motivations to lodge directly in the individual's behavioural or attitudinal repertoire. The viewer does not appear to process or interpret the stimuli in any active way and certainly any questions

8 Urie Bronfenbrenner once described such laboratory-based experiments as studies of 'the strange behaviour of children in strange situations with strange adults for the briefest possible periods of time.' (Bronfenbrenner 1979: 19).
of how the television stimulus was perceived or was interpreted by the viewer were not considered.

Bandura and his associates (Bandura, Ross and Ross 1963) conducted an experiment, within a behaviourist/social learning theory framework which became extremely influential in the debate about television's ability to cause aggressive behaviour in the child viewer. Nearly a hundred pre-schoolers were assigned to one of three experimental conditions in which children watched either a filmed adult, a real-life adult or a cartoon model repeatedly punch a Bobo doll on the nose, hit it with a mallet, toss it into the air and kick it aggressively. A control group experienced no treatment. After viewing, children from all four conditions were taken to a playroom and given an opportunity to use a variety of toys, some of which were designed to promote aggressive play and others, not. Bandura found that children in all three experimental groups engaged in far more aggressive play with the toys than did the children in the control group and many of their behaviours were exact imitations of the adult model's aggressive responses.

A similar study (Bandura 1965) replicated the Bobo doll experiment but this time showed the aggressive adult model either being rewarded, reprimanded or ignored after the demonstration of aggressive behaviour. Again, Bandura found that children who watched the aggressive model under any circumstances behaved more aggressively than hitherto but that the children who had seen the rewarded model were more aggressive than their peers. This was taken as conclusive proof that filmed aggression caused children to behave more aggressively. It is clear here that not only did Bandura and his colleagues fail to take account of the children's perceptions of the reality of the television images they saw (some of which, being realistic, presumably had high modality status), they also ignored the modality of the children's response - hitting a doll (especially one designed to be hit) has a lower modality status than hitting a person (Hodge and Tripp 1986).

Liebert and Baron (1972) subsequently assessed the results of 18 experiments which were similar in design to Bandura's. Children were brought into laboratories and were exposed to either violent or non-violent programming and then the two experimental groups were given an opportunity to commit aggressive acts. None of these studies considered the participants' perceptions of the 'reality status' of the televised material. Sixteen (89 per cent) of them found that children became more aggressive after watching violent sequences on television.

*Early field research*

Concerned that laboratory-based experimental research, of the kind carried out by Bandura, might be testing children in unnatural and artificial circumstances, other research
was designed to look at what happened to children when exposed to televised aggression in everyday life (e.g. Friedrich and Stein 1973; Steur, Applefield and Smith 1974). Friedrich and Stein (1973) set out to see not only whether antisocial and aggressive responses were caused by television but whether socially desirable behaviours were also caused by the right kind of content (i.e. that promoting sharing, cooperating, self-control). Over a period of a month, more than 90 nursery school children were required, each day, to watch one of three types of television show: aggressive cartoons, a prosocial programme (Mr. Rogers’ Neighbourhood) and educational films with neutral content. Before, during and after the exposure the children’s aggressive and prosocial behaviours during free play were observed and television effects were calculated on the basis of before and after assessments. Friedrich and Stein found that television treatments had a dramatic influence on children’s behaviour. Those who watched the aggressive cartoons showed a decline in tolerance of delay (e.g. being able to wait for materials or for adult attention) and rule obedience in the classroom. An increase in hitting, teasing, name-calling, telling tales and yelling was also found but only in those children with above average aggressive levels to begin with. By contrast, children exposed to the prosocial programming displayed higher levels of task persistence, rule obedience and tolerance of delay. Positive interpersonal behaviour (e.g. cooperating, helping, comforting, verbalising feelings) also increased but only for children who came from low-income families. This study was seen to extend Bandura’s earlier work by showing that the imitation of film-mediated aggression/prosocial behaviour does occur in everyday life. Once again, no attempt was made to examine how children actually perceived the reality of the television images to which they were being exposed.

Longitudinal and correlational research

Not only did this kind of research set out to prove that children were causally affected in the short-term by what they watched on television, some longitudinal studies undertook to show that the effects were extremely long-lasting. Huesmann (1986), for example, tested adult subjects who, at the age of 8, had watched a good deal of violent television. At the age of 30, he found a continuing association between this early violent viewing and subsequent criminal activity. Other work operating with a ‘direct effects’ model (Gerbner et al. 1979; Singer, Singer and Rapaczyniski 1984) showed that rather than becoming violent themselves, ‘heavy viewers’ of violent television developed a belief that their social world was a ‘mean and scary’ place, overestimating real-life violence and danger much more than those who were judged to be ‘light’ viewers.

While television violence and its causal link with actual behaviour has been the most heavily researched topic in this tradition, there has also been a history of research that looks at the development of gender stereotypes (e.g. Frueh and McGhee 1975; McGhee and Frueh 1980; Johnson and Ettema 1982) and racial stereotypes (e.g. Gom et al. 1976; Graves
1980). This kind of research tends to count up the numbers of stereotyped (or counter-stereotyped) portrayals the subjects have watched and then matches these with measures of their stereotyped attitudes. When high exposure corresponds to high attitudinal levels, the television portrayals are deemed to be responsible for the effects.

Continuing popularity of the 'direct effects' model

While the simple 'media effects' model had its hey day in the 1960s and 70s, the examples given at the beginning of this chapter indicate that it is still very much favoured by the general public when it seeks explanations for dramatic and violent ruptures in the social fabric. Even for less shocking and less-publicised events, it is still enormously attractive: at the time of writing, the director of Young Media Australia - a children's television lobby group - is featured in a local newspaper report commenting on the television ratings for young people aged 13 - 17. These ratings show that Terminator 2 was the second most popular programme (after the national football Grand Final) for teenagers in Adelaide during 1996. She recycles the 'media effects' rhetoric in warning that: '... if young people watch a diet of violent movies, they are more likely to become aggressive, more de-sensitised to violence and more likely to see the world as a threatening place.' (The Advertiser 19/10/96: 12). A rather more heavy-weight proponent of the same argument emerged during the 1996 American Presidential election in the form of candidate Bob Dole. He demanded, in his campaign advertisements, that 'Hollywood stop corrupting our children' and is reported saying on the Senate floor: 'Those who continue to deny that cultural messages can and do bore deep into the hearts and minds of our young people are deceiving themselves and ignoring reality.' (Rolling Stone 22/2/96: 39).

There is also evidence, that despite relentless criticism of the 'direct effects' model from cognitivist and cultural studies scholars, some investigators in the research community are still using this model to demonstrate television's negative effects. Williams (1986), for example, conducted research in a small Canadian town just before and two years after television reception became available in the community. Comparisons of the 'before and after' measures on a range of variables showed that primary school children's performance in reading fluency and creative thinking declined, their sex-stereotyped attitudes increased as did their verbal and physical aggression during spontaneous play.

Further evidence of the continuing currency of a simple 'direct effects' model is also in evidence in recent publications with such titles as Harvesting Children's Minds: How TV Commercials Control Kids (1996); The Effects of Media Violence on Children (1993), Television Violence: A Review of the Effects on Children of Different Ages (1995)\(^9\).

**Critique of this research model**

The 'direct effects' model is clearly inadequate for studying questions relating to children and television because it does not take account of the ways children interpret what they see. Experimental research conducted in laboratories runs the strong risk of producing artificial results that have no counterpart in everyday life. Field studies may reduce some of this artificiality and provide more ecological validity but they still fail to acknowledge that different kinds of television stimuli carry different kinds of modality and this will affect the way the viewer interprets what the stimulus means. Survey research that produces correlational results may lead people to assume a causal effect when no such link can be supported. The fact that children with strong sex-stereotyped attitudes watch a lot of television with sex-stereotyped portrayals does not prove that watching the portrayals caused the attitudes. A pre-existing sex-stereotyped way of viewing the world may lead such children to prefer television portrayals that confirm and reinforce this world view.

While research in this tradition appeared to offer (and, in some instances, is still trying to provide) firm evidence that children are affected in diverse negative ways by what they watch on television, research in the cognitive tradition subsequently seriously challenged this confidence by producing contradictory and/or less conclusive results.

The present study sets itself against research in this tradition by conceptualising the relationship between the viewer and the television stimulus as a complex and problematic process rather than a simple, easily discerned phenomenon. While the behaviourist/social learning tradition sees the viewer as a passive recipient of unambiguous television messages, the present study sees the child viewer as an active interpreter of ambiguous messages and asks what meanings he or she makes from television stimuli and how the lens of modality affects these meanings.

**Cognitive Developmental Psychology and the 'Active' Viewer**

Experience living or working with children suggests that, generally, the young appear to think about things and solve problems differently from adults. This is apparent across a wide range of studies, from a variety of academic disciplines that have researched children's understanding about such things as: school (Davies 1982; Goodnow and Burns 1985; Cullingford 1991); gender (Davies 1989); health and illness (Bibace and Walsh 1981; Banks 1985; Green and Bird 1986); work (Wrobleski and Huston 1987; Butorac 1989); death

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(Stambrook and Parker 1987; Vianello and Martin 1989; Goodwin and Davidson 1991) and politics (Connell 1971; Stevens 1982; Cullingford 1992).

Cognitive developmental psychology provides a number of ways of accounting for the differences observed in children’s ways of thinking and problem-solving at different ages. Piagetian theory, for example, sees children constructing universal logical structures through an individual process of hypothesis generation and experimentation, stimulated by and made possible through, interaction with the environment. Information processing theory and Neo-Piagetian theory explain children’s developing cognitive competence in terms of their increasingly sophisticated use of specific cognitive skills. This sophistication develops within optimal cognitive limits set by age. A third developmental theory that concerns itself with ways in which children’s thinking develops over time is Vygotsky’s socio-historical theory of cognitive development. Vygotskyan theory supports the idea of the active learner but, in contrast with the other theories, sees social support, rather than individual skills, playing the crucially important part in the way children learn the relevant knowledge and the characteristic ways of thinking of their culture. Broadly speaking, all of these approaches come under the umbrella of cognitive developmental theory and each will be examined below to show how insights from this tradition contribute to the this study’s theoretical framework.

**Research in this tradition**

In popular debate about children and television, the concept of the passive child viewer persisted, despite the fact that during the 1970’s, research increasingly showed that children are in fact active or interactive viewers who ‘... shape meanings rather than have meanings imposed on them.’ (Collins 1981:327). Cognitive developmental theory constructed the child viewer as an active meaning maker and the different approaches within this broad theoretical framework conducted research showing, in different ways, how this was the case.

The information processing and neo-Piagetian approaches focused on cognitive skills such as attention, perception and memory, and carried out investigations into such things as children’s retention of information from television (Wartella 1979); their perception of television’s formal features (Levin and Anderson 1976; Salomon 1979; Anderson and Lorch 1983; Wright and Huston 1983) and their use of schemas or scripts for understanding television content (Wartella 1979; Luke 1985; Dorr 1986). All this research has shown that children’s cognitive processing skills increase in sophistication as they grow older, enabling them to comprehend more complex television material (see Doubleday and Droge 1993 for a comprehensive summary).
As far as children’s television modality judgements were concerned, the research into ‘perceived reality’ was largely framed by cognitive theory insofar as the studies were based on the proposition that young viewers actively make sense of television stimuli. In the bulk of these studies, however, behaviourist assumptions were also evident in the emphasis on television effects (e.g. Dominick and Greenberg 1970; Greenberg and Reeves 1976; Donohue and Donohue 1977; Nikken and Peeters 1986; Sprafkin, Kelly and Gadow 1987). Some studies (e.g. Morison and Gardner 1978; Morison, McCarthy and Gardner 1979; Quarforth 1979; Dorr 1983) more straightforwardly focused on children’s cognitive processing of television stimuli in order to discriminate between fantasy and reality. Other studies in the ‘active’ viewer tradition adopted an explicitly Piagetian perspective for investigating children’s television reality judgements (e.g. Klapper 1976; Jaglom et al 1979; Brown, Sken and Osborn 1979; Jaglom and Gardner 1981; Flavell 1990; Fitch et al. 1993). In these studies, children’s judgements were elicited in various ways and were then related to and explained by Piaget’s stage theory of cognitive development. With the exception of Hodge and Tripp (1986) and Buckingham (1993a), no studies could be found suggesting that a Vygotskyan socio-historical theoretical framework might be valuable in understanding the ways children interpret what they see on television. All these studies will be reviewed in subsequent chapters.

Like the research in the cognitive developmental tradition, this thesis is interested in the sensible proposition that children’s modality judgements change, reasonably predictably, with age; it is interested in how judgements are different at different ages; how these judgements are best described; what accounts for the differences and the processes that enable them to occur. Mindful of the criticisms of research which focuses narrowly on cognitive processes, the challenges to Piaget’s stage theory and the necessity of viewing all human behaviour as inherently social, this thesis seeks to identify a theoretical space within which to investigate these questions. Through an examination of the critiques of the approaches in question, the theoretical model for the present study will be shown.

**Critique of the cognitive developmental model**

Criticisms of cognitive developmental theory seem to revolve around three principal objections. The use of a particular research methodology (and, thus, particular methods) has drawn much criticism. In relation to Piagetian theory, the proposition that children’s cognitive development proceeds in ‘stages’ is an area which has been challenged. Thirdly, cognitive developmental theory has been criticised for being too focused on the individual and insufficiently aware of the role social interaction plays in learning to think and solve problems in culturally appropriate ways. These criticisms will be discussed below.
Many researchers in the cognitive tradition, who investigated questions of children and television, adopted the research instruments of the dominant positivist\textsuperscript{10} empiricist tradition. These studies have either explicitly or implicitly seen ‘cognitive processing’ or ‘perceived reality’ as a mediating variable in a scientifically verifiable causal process linking television content and viewers’ subsequent behaviour, knowledge, beliefs and attitudes. The meanings viewers might attach to what they view has generally been ignored. The inappropriateness of research methods like these that treat human subjects as though they were objects, however, has been much canvassed since the 1960’s and 70’s and they continue to be challenged from both within and without the discipline (Bullivant 1978; Reason and Rowan 1981; Slee 1993), with some of the most trenchant criticism coming from sociology (e.g. James and Prout 1990) and social psychology (e.g. Harré 1979, 1986; Henriques et al. 1984).

In ‘perceived reality’ research, the ways in which reality and the communication process have been conceptualised have militated against the uncovering of meanings that television content might have for individuals or groups of viewers. Reality, for example, has been assumed to be both unitary and objectively knowable, thus, the adult researcher’s definition of it has been privileged and has often become the norm against which children’s interpretations have been measured. This normative construction of reality has been embedded in such survey/questionnaire/structured interview items as: \textit{The people I see on TV are just like people I know in real life.} Those participants who agreed with statements like this were judged to be negatively affected by television, their sense of social reality distorted by their viewing of fictional television content. Participants had few opportunities to explain what they understood the test questions to mean or what they intended their written responses (often indicated only by circling a number on a 5 point Lickert scale) to convey. While this research generally showed that many children were able to make increasingly ‘appropriate’ television modality judgements as they grew older, data relating to the nature and complexity of these judgements could neither be elicited nor examined using this type of research design.

The question of meaning was further compromised in this research by the view that television unproblematically consists of simple, unambiguous messages that are located in the text. While children might be seen as cognitively ‘active’ viewers, this activity was related to a decoding process. Meaning, here, is not constructed by children but is rather a pre-existing code to be cracked using whatever cognitive skills they have available.

\textsuperscript{10} The term positivism here is generally applied to the belief that empirical methodologies, modelled on those in the physical sciences, are the most effective way of gaining knowledge about the world.
As will be seen in the last section of this chapter, while the research questions for the present study are in some respects similar to those asked in previous work, the methods adopted are neither positivist nor empiricist - but they are empirical. In other words, the study will gather data from children about their experiences, but it is not setting out to yield proof, in probability terms, of a theory or an hypothesis: the approach is ideographic rather than nomothetic (Burns 1994: 3). In the present study, the research tasks and the form of the data have been designed to uncover and emphasise participants' subjective meanings as far as possible.

One feature of classic Piagetian theory, which was taken up with much enthusiasm by western educationists in the 1960's, was the proposition that children's cognitive development could best be described as progressing through a series of qualitatively different, predictable, age-related stages, each stage representing a step closer towards the abstract reasoning skills that Piaget saw as characteristic of adult ways of thinking and problem solving (Piaget 1952; 1955; 1970; Flavell 1963). Stages were claimed to be universal, sequentially invariant and to consist of sets of logical structures that developed at particular times as a consequence of the child's actions on the environment.

A considerable amount of research in the last 20 years has shown that these stages are, in fact, not as clearly marked as Piaget's early work suggested and, as a consequence, the underlying structuralism of the theory is called into question. It should be pointed out here, however, that step-like development that could be translated into rigid stages all but disappears in Piaget's later work (Piaget 1970); instead, the preparation, achievement, consolidation and superseding of stages flow into one another smoothly and cover a period of several years (Meadows 1993; Slie 1993). It is the concept of 'stage' characterised by his earlier work, however, that has been so fiercely debated.

In the debate over Piaget's work, one large volume of research offers evidence contradictory to predictions of stage theory, while another large volume tends to substantiate it. Taken together, the results suggest the challengers and the defenders are both partly right (Biddell and Fischer 1992; Halford 1989). In general, Piaget's later conceptualisation of large-scale, sequential developments flowing through what he termed 'pre-concrete' to 'concrete' and then to 'formal' or abstract thinking have been remarkably replicable, showing the order and the approximate age ranges that he reported (Siegler 1986; Biddell and Fischer 1992; Meadows 1993). However, there is a great deal more variation in cognitive development than Piaget's stage theory either predicts or explains. Not easily reconciled with the theory's underlying structuralist claims are data that show (i) the local success of many short-term training studies; (ii) the apparent unevenness of children's intellectual development when measured across different tasks, contexts or domains (iii)
individual differences in the order of task acquisition which gave rise to low correlations among tasks that were supposed to be dependent on the same underlying cognitive structure and (iv) cross-cultural evidence that not only suggests there are significant variations in rate of development but also questions whether later stages actually develop (Dasen 1977; Case 1992; Meadows 1993; McInerney and McInerney 1994).

The classic Piagetian tests have also been subjected to considerable critical review with many researchers considering the form of the tests, particularly the language used, the relevance of the questions to the child’s experience and the requirement that children justify their answers in the ‘correct’ way. Many studies have shown that children have earlier-than-predicted cognitive competence on a variety of modified Piagetian tasks (e.g. Shatz and Gelman 1973; McGarrigle and Donaldson 1974; Borke 1975; Donaldson 1978; Gelman 1979; Markman 1979; Gelman 1982; Gelman and Baillargeon 1983; Gardner 1983; Donaldson, Grieve and Pratt 1983; Maratos 1983; Siegal 1991). It is clear from studies like these that Piaget underestimated young children’s thinking and probably overestimated adolescent thinking (Sieglér 1986; Meadows 1993).

The present study rejects the model of rigid, step-like development for explaining children’s thinking at different points in time and instead uses the later more fluid model of broad sequences of cognitive change, proposed by Piaget (1970) and taken up by other scholars in the field of cognitive development (e.g. Flavell 1982). Piaget’s descriptions of the ways children think and solve problems, during this sequence of cognitive changes, provides useful guidelines when analysing children’s approaches to such tasks as making modality judgements.

The third area of critique that must be considered in relation to Piagetian, Neo-Piagetian and information processing approaches to understanding children’s thinking, concerns their assumption that cognitive development is a private and individual process, largely unaffected by social interaction, social context or social/cultural influences. Much of this debate revolves around the essential structuralism underlying much cognitive developmental psychology. It is here that Vygotsky’s theory provides a valuable way forward.

It is hard to deny that human thought, at least after infancy, is in some sense structured because it demonstrably has rules, legitimate procedures and hierarchies of concepts. Piagetian and the information processing models of development account for this structure by inferring internal and privately constructed psychological phenomena in human brains (e.g. logical structures, short-term/long-term memory). In Vygotskyan theory, however, these rules, procedures and concepts are determined and developed largely by social
phenomena - social relationships, social and cultural practices, language and so on (Vygotsky 1978; Beilin 1987; Bruner and Haste 1987; Wood 1988; Biddell and Fischer 1992; Valsiner 1992; Meadows 1993; Slee 1993; McInerney and McInerney 1994). The central idea in Vygotsky's theory is summarised thus:

... in the process of development, children begin to use the same forms of behaviour in relation to themselves that others initially used in relation to them. Children master the social forms of behaviour and transfer these forms to themselves ... Logical argumentation first appears among children and only later is united within the individual and internalized. Child logic develops only along with the growth of the child's social speech and whole experience ... it is through others that we develop into ourselves and ... this is true not only with regard to the individual but with regard to the history of every function ... Any higher mental function was external because it was social at some point before becoming an internal, truly mental functioning ... Any function in the child's cultural development appears twice, or on two planes. First it appears on the social plane, and then on the psychological plane. First it appears between people as an interspsychological category, and then within the child as an intrapsychological category.

(Vygotsky 1978: 162 - 3)

So, according to Vygotskyan theory, cognitive development is the internalisation, transformation and use of routines, ideas, skills, ways of solving problems, ways of perceiving and interpreting which are learned from, what are now termed in the literature, 'more competent others' with whom the child interacts socially. The skills required of the child in this enterprise are observation, imitation, generalisation and decontextualisation and even these are transmitted through social interaction. Instead of the 'lone scientist' of Piagetian theory, who, through activities like playing with pebbles or blocks, comes to understand such concepts as conservation and one-to-one correspondence, the Vygotskyan child is nudged and guided towards the discovery of these realisations through appropriately pitched demonstrations, and explanations by more competent others. The child adopts, and eventually internalises, this cognitive content and these processes and, thus, he or she is trained to behave in ways that the culture has discovered are cognitively useful.

The more competent others - adults, parents, teachers, peers - may exert their influence either directly in face-to-face interaction or through cultural artefacts and products, like books, the media and so on (Bruner and Haste 1987; Wood 1988). The more competent other modifies and adapts face-to-face communication to suit the child's level of understanding; in the case of cultural products, the child selects appropriately pitched communications from the diverse, multi-layered presentations that are typical of such things as television programmes (Fiske and Hartley 1978). These communications not only provide the content of thinking, they also have a dynamic structuring effect on learning and development. As Wood says:
When [the child] watches TV or examines pictures in books he is not merely experiencing another way of depicting things but is involved in medium-specific activities which, in time, generate mental 'operations' that become part of the fabric of his intellect.

(Wood 1988: 18)

The process of internalisation is crucial in Vygotskyan theory because it is this that transforms the social into the psychological. Vygotsky explains the relation between external and internal as being developmental, with cognitive processes external to the child being transformed to create internal processes:

All higher mental functions are internalised social relationships ... Their composition, genetic structure and means of action - in a word, their whole nature - is social. Even when we turn to mental processes, their nature remains quasi-social. In their own private sphere, human beings retain the functions of social interaction.

(Vygotsky 1981: 164)

It is clear that Vygotsky did not intend this process of interiorization to be seen as one of merely copying or incorporating existing social reality - a simple transfer of social and external properties to intrapsychological functioning (Beilin 1987). Rather, interiorization is conceptualised as a process of inner reconstruction that preserves some of the external properties but changes others (Martí 1996; Wertsch 1985). The problem is, however, that Vygotsky did not explain this reconstruction process in any precise way. Unlike Piaget, he provides no explicit model of individual functioning; no explanation of how individuals create new meanings; no indication how a child might transform the socially transmitted material; why some socially transmitted material is taken up and some other fails to make an impression; there is no explanation for the frequent 'errors' that children make in the process of appropriation (Bruner and Haste 1987; Martí 1996; Van der Veer 1996). The fundamental question of how experience is incorporated, represented, constructed and reconstructed in mind remains to be answered.

Clearly, development can and should be seen as an outcome of the interaction of both internal cognitive processes and external social processes (Damon 1981; Doise and Mugny 1984; Bruner and Haste 1987). Acknowledging the social origins of thought does not preclude the necessity for understanding what enables individuals to cognitively take up, make sense of, elaborate, reflect upon and consolidate the socially transmitted information in more or less useful and constructive ways. Indeed, the effectiveness of the transmission of knowledge is likely to depend on the extent to which it is matched to the level of cognitive growth of the individual (Vygotsky 1978; Butterworth 1982; Bruner and Haste 1987; Hoppe-Graff 1993).
In the present study, the social origins of thought are acknowledged. The participants are placed in small discussion groups in which they must negotiate their understanding of television reality in order to perform a task. The nature of television as a cultural artefact and a conveyor of multiple cultural meanings is also a crucial part of the research design.

A model of the processes of cognitive development
As has been demonstrated above, rigid stage theory is no longer an adequate way of conceptualising the cognitive development of children. Instead, stage-independent theories are necessary to provide a more generic, more open theoretical framework in which to locate an account of children's developing cognitive skills and capacities.

Piaget's theory has two major components: one, which has already been discussed above, identifies the sequence of cognitive change as children grow older, the other concerns the processes that drive human cognitive development. Piaget proposes that four main factors account for development: maturation or organic growth, experience, social transmission and equilibration (Horstead 1968: 135). Of these, equilibration is probably the most important because it offers an extremely useful account of cognitive development that is widely accepted in principle (Sigel and Cocking 1977; Wood 1986; Siegler 1986; Papert cited in Piaget 1985/1975; Meadows 1993; Biggs and Moore 1993).

For Piaget (1952), all organisms have an innate tendency to adapt to their environment and as human beings, our adaptation tends to be intellectual in nature (rather than, say, growing winter coats or developing protective colouring as many animals, insects, molluscs and reptiles do). Piaget claims the human learner's need for adaptation is expressed through a need for order; in his view people have an instinctive or innate need to find order, structure and predictability in their existence (Piaget 1952). The name Piaget gave to this drive for order is equilibration, a process that involves testing our understanding against the real world. When our understanding explains the events we observe, the world makes sense, and we have equilibrium. When we can't explain what we see, disequilibrium occurs and the search for new and better understanding begins. As Perret-Clermont (1980: 46) says: 'Cognitive conflict ... is the locus at which the power driving intellectual development is generated.' This drive for equilibrium is the cornerstone of Piaget's theory of cognitive development (Eggen and Kauchak 1994; Wadsworth 1984; Ginsburg and Opper 1979; Perret-Clermont 1980).

The process of equilibration begins by making sense of experience through organizing it into cognitive schemes (schema/schemata) which then become basic building blocks for thinking. The twin processes for creating, adding to and modifying these schemes are called assimilation and accommodation, while disequilibrium or cognitive conflict is the
process for activating the two. Assimilation occurs when people use their existing schema to understand experience or events in their world. It involves trying to understand something new by fitting it into a scheme representing what is already known (e.g. 'This is a game show. I've seen hundreds of game shows. This is just like them.'). Sometimes the new information may have to be distorted to fit it into the existing scheme and this may lead to over-assimilation (e.g. 'All TV characters who talk are real; Bugs Bunny talks, therefore he's real'). In both cases, assimilation can be seen to be conservative in that its primary function is to make the unfamiliar, familiar; to reduce the new to the old (Piaget 1952).

Sometimes schemes have to be adapted, modified or new ones created and this is a result of the other process: accommodation (e.g. 'These other men I've been calling 'Daddy' don't live with us, don't take me to child-care, don't read me a bedtime story, maybe I need a new name for these people.'). If a new experience cannot be fitted into any existing schemes then a new, more useful one must be created. Here, thinking is adjusted to fit the new experience rather than the new experience being adjusted to fit existing ways of thinking: '...accommodation is the source of changes and bends the organism to the successive constraints of the environment.' (Piaget 1952: 352). Disequilibrium occurs when assimilation no longer works; this produces intellectual discomfort, curiosity or confusion and motivates the search for a more satisfying solution through accommodation. In this way, thinking changes and becomes more complex. Thus, disequilibrium is seen as a kind of anomalous state rather than one in which major learning takes place - its value, for Piaget, lies in its capacity to provide the spur for accommodation.

While Vygotsky's 'zone of proximal development' can be seen as a companion state to Piaget's 'disequilibrium', Vygotsky sees this cognitive phase as being of crucial importance in its own right, rather than being the means to an end that seemed to be Piaget's construction. The 'zone of proximal development' is defined as the distance between the actual developmental level of a child as determined by independent problem-solving and the level of potential as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers (Vygotsky 1978: 86). In other words, Vygotsky saw children as being constantly on the verge of acquiring new learning in that crucial gap between existing knowledge and skills and the potential level of development beyond this. For Vygotsky, this process is collaborative. Social interaction hastens development by providing the content (what to go for) and by providing provisional support (how to get there) with 'scaffolding' and 'modelling' being common forms of support. This is not to suggest, however, that the child's level of potential development is arbitrary. Vygotsky argued that a child can operate '...only within certain limits that are strictly fixed by the state of the child's development and intellectual possibilities' (1934: 219 cited in Wertsch
and Kanner 1992). Hence, the 'zone of proximal development' is jointly fixed by the child's level of development and the form of instruction involved: 'Instruction is good only when it proceeds ahead of development, then it awakens and rouses to life an entire set of functions which are in the stage of maturing, which lie in the zone of proximal development.' (Vygotsky 1934: 222 cited in Wertsch and Kanner 1992)

Piaget's 'equilibration' provides an explanation for the internal aspects of cognitive development and concept formation that Vygotsky's 'interiorization' leaves unelaborated; Vygotsky's 'zone of proximal development', on the other hand, shows how cognitive advancement is principally socially mediated, rather than the product of logical structures developed in isolation, and how serious cognitive activity occurs in the phase that precedes accommodation. Both concepts are combined in this thesis to provide a more effective model for understanding what children are doing when they debate and discuss their television modality judgements.

Cognitive development theory and this thesis
Observations by parents, teachers, social workers and others who spend time with children clearly indicate that not all cognitive functions are present at birth and that some functions do appear in most children at a particular time in their development (Slee 1993: 29). Attacks on Piagetian theory have led to the situation, however, where there is a danger of arguing away developmental change in cognition rather than carefully analysing the extent and nature of the change (Meadows 1993: 210). As this thesis is interested in the question of if and how children's modality judgements change over time, it is, therefore, important to arrive at some means of conceptualising and explaining developmental change that is less contested than early Piagetian stage theory. It is here that Vygotsky's theory is most useful.

If one rejects structural implications and acknowledges the role of social interaction, it is still legitimate to ask how and in what ways aspects of cognitive functioning develop over time. A further question is 'What develops?' and here we return to Piaget. His careful, sensitive and painstaking observations of the everyday behaviour of his own three children still form the basis for generally accepted descriptions of the broad sequences of change in children's cognitive development (Flavell 1982; Siegler 1986; Biddell and Fischer 1992; Meadows 1993; Biggs and Moore 1993). Flavell (1982) argues for this more dynamic, less tightly knit concept of sequence (as opposed to 'stage') because he finds it difficult to accept the notion that the child's cognitive acquisitions are so completely variable across tasks and situations as to have no coherence and unique identity. Bruner (1964) suggests that the sequences are best characterised by the level of abstraction in which thought is presented.
From this point of view, then, sequences are seen as extended periods of related developmental changes where certain competencies require a long, rather than a short, time to be achieved. Typical behaviours appear in a fairly constant order and while young children can learn to solve problems and show understandings associated with older children, they often do not do so as readily, as easily or as confidently as do older children (Siegler 1986). Sequences begin in simple, unsophisticated, inconsistent demonstrations of the cognitive skill, usually in situations that, in Donaldson's terms, make 'human sense' (Donaldson 1978). These skills become refined, complex and automatic as the sequence becomes more established. Rate of progress through sequences seems to vary somewhat between individuals and the rate also varies between cultures, with degree of schooling being an important variable (Meadows 1993).

Siegler (1986) suggests that a branch of science known as 'catastrophe theory' (which examines situations such as the collapse of bridges) provides justification for viewing development in this way. The forces that lead to a bridge collapse often build slowly over time while the visible collapse is very sudden. Analogously, despite the seeming abruptness of cognitive development at times (e.g. when a child solves a problem one week that she could not solve the week before), the progress may be based on years of gradually accumulating experiences. In the child, as in the bridge, the change can be viewed as both continuous and discontinuous.

A critical question of this thesis, then, concerns investigating the possibility that children's cognitive judgements about television reality may change in identifiable ways at different ages. It adopts the view that while the origins of knowledge about television reality are undoubtedly social, it is likely that the ways in which individuals take up this knowledge, reflect on it, transform it, consolidate it and express it will be, to a certain extent, dependent on different levels of developed cognitive skill. The processes of 'equilibration' and the 'zone of proximal development' help conceptualise this individual/social collaboration in cognitive development. While it is acknowledged that cognitive considerations are probably not the only ones involved in children's television modality judgements, they will form the chief focus for this thesis and Bruner's proposition (Bruner 1964) that thought becomes more abstract during development will be a guiding principle.

Cultural Studies, Television Texts and the Subject
The third area of research which relates to television texts and the multiplicity of interpretations associated with them is a collection of approaches that can be grouped under the rubric of Cultural Studies. Central to this orientation is the problematic concept of reality and, as such, it would appear to offer powerful insights for the current study.
Some leading theorists within cultural studies maintain that although reality does indeed exist independently 'out there', it can only be subjectively apprehended and socially constructed through discourse (e.g. Hall 1980c). Within this theoretical framework, people construct their versions of social reality, their subjectivities (see Davies 1991; Weedon 1987), from the discourses and materials available in their socio-cultural-political environments and to the extent that these understandings are intersubjectively shared, so the illusion of a common, apprehensible, objective reality is created (Berger and Luckman 1967).

In this tradition, the numerous social texts with which we regularly come in contact - such things as books, films, magazines, newspapers, comics, radio, advertisements and television - are seen, inevitably, as vehicles for socio-cultural-political discourses and consequently the study of texts has been central to cultural studies theorists and researchers. In fact, much more time has been devoted to the study of social texts (and how it is possible to generate different, divergent and often contradictory readings from them) than has been devoted to the ways in which people actually use them to construct their own subjectivities. So, while this tradition has produced a rich literature in the area of textual analysis, there remains a lack of empirical research to ascertain the way different readings of texts are taken up by different audiences. In terms of the present study and its focus on children's readings of television, there are very few studies which address its empirical questions from a cultural studies standpoint.

*Cultural studies, audiences and the 'dominant cultural ideology'*

According to Hall et al. (1980), 'cultural studies' (in a specific institutional context) originated at the Centre for Cultural Studies (CCS) at the University of Birmingham in 1964. Located originally in the English Department, the aim was to 'inaugurate research in the area of contemporary culture and society: cultural forms, practices and institutions, their relation to society and social change ... More or less conterminous with [the Centre's] growth - though by no means as the exclusive effect of its work - programmes of study under the general rubric of 'Cultural Studies' have been widely initiated in other sectors of education.' (Hall et al. 1980: 7). Initially there was a growth in Communication Studies and Cultural Studies degree courses in British polytechnics with a subsequent proliferation of cultural studies approaches in university courses and curricula and in English, Media and Social Studies in further education and schools.

Early cultural studies work in relation to media broke with previous U.S. influenced mass communications research in four particular ways. First, it rejected the behaviourist, stimulus-response model of media influences. Instead, it adopted a framework which drew on the media's ideological role. Here, for example, television news or popular
programming was seen as a ‘major cultural and ideological force, standing in a dominant position with respect to the way in which social relations and political problems were defined and the production and transformation of popular ideologies in the audiences addressed’ (Hall 1980b: 117). Second, cultural studies work challenged the notion of media texts being transparent bearers of meaning and instead attention was paid to the ways messages were linguistically and ideologically structured. Third, audiences were conceptualised as groups of active readers or decoders of media texts rather than the passive and undifferentiated ‘mass’ of previous mass communications research (although differences of class, gender and ethnicity were staples in standard sociological research). Fourth, this work became concerned with the role the media played in the promulgation and justification of dominant ideologies through selective definitions and representations. Thus, in this new approach, the media’s construction of reality was assumed to reflect the dominant culture, either through offering an ideological definition of reality that served dominant interests or of misrepresenting events in ways that promoted false consciousness (see Gitlin 1982 for an example of this particular position).

At the same time (the 1970’s), what became know as ‘Screen theory’ began developing some challenging hypotheses about the relationship between language, ideology and ‘the subject’. This work drew on a wide range of contemporary French theoretical writing including film theory and the critique of realism; Althusser’s theory of ideology; Lacanian-influenced writing about psychoanalysis and the work of writers like Kristeva and Foucault on language and discourse. Textual strategies employed in visual texts were dissected to expose how the audience was ‘sutured’ into ‘subject’ positions - positions that encouraged certain audience reactions and involvements. As Curran (1996) points out, the general thrust of this research was to show how professional communicators were able to use compelling visual and narrative techniques to manipulate audiences into accepting dominant, ideological definitions of reality. Both the economic/political theoretical framework adopted by the Centre for Cultural Studies and the psychoanalytic theoretical framework of ‘Screen theory’ were basically structuralist in nature.

Audiences, it is clear, were a subject of theoretical, but little empirical, interest in this early cultural studies work. Hall (1980c), for example, suggested that media messages are encoded with meanings and ideas that constitute and reflect the interests of the dominant cultural order. As far as the reception of these messages was concerned, Hall hypothesised three positions from which decoding of televisual discourse might be constructed: (i) the dominant-hegemonic position - where the viewer decodes television content in terms of the reference code in which it was encoded; (ii) the negotiated position - decoding adopts a number of contradictory stances both supportive of and oppositional to hegemonic meanings; and (iii) the oppositional position - here the viewer ‘detotalizes the message in the
preferred code in order to retotalize the message within some alternative framework of reference.' (Hall 1980c: 138). With the exception of Morley's work, (Morley 1980) reviewed below, these hypotheses were not empirically tested on actual audience groups.

Drawing on the work of Hall and Barthes (1967; 1972), Fiske and Hartley (1978) also examined the culturally-generated meanings and conventions encoded in television texts. They saw these texts as having what they call a 'bardic' function. That is, like the folk tales and myths of earlier or traditional societies, TV communicates to members '... the main lines of the established cultural consensus about the nature of reality...' (Fiske and Hartley 1978: 88). Television's representations then, are seen as a reflection of the deeply held social values and myths of the culture's dominant social groups.

According to this view, television's representations reinforce the 'naturalness' of the dominant groups' versions of social reality while simultaneously having an hegemonic effect on those who do not belong to those groups. Many saw this in terms of ideological oppression and domination. Gitlin (1982), for example, suggests that TV's dominating social purpose is to provide mythic images denying social cleavage and formulating a collective identity for a fragmented society. This is a view to which Kellner (1981) also subscribes - for both writers, television is a major producer and transmitter of hegemonic ideology. Again, these readings of television texts were not tested out on real viewers.

A milder version of television's 'bardic' function, still exclusively text-based, is promoted by others (e.g. Riesman 1961; Goodlad 1971; Luke 1990) who argue that not only does television have an expressive function, communicating common cultural values and beliefs, but it also has an instrumental one, teaching how members of a culture, especially the young, should behave and respond in life situations. Riesman (1961:149), for example, says: 'The child must look early to his mass-media tutors for instruction in the techniques of getting direction for one's life as well as for specific tricks of the trade.' Luke (1990) emphasises the story-telling function of television and the role this plays in passing on to successive generations the social lessons encoded in the culture's stories, fables and songs - social lessons that teach us 'how to', teach us 'that', and teach us contemporary values and morals. Goodlad (1971), in his study of British popular drama, draws conclusions that he claims are equally valid for television. He maintains that the content of popular drama functions in the same way as myth, ritual and folk-lore: it performs a cognitive function in informing the members of a culture about social structure and about the behaviour expected of members of the culture if the social structure is to be preserved. The unstated assumptions about 'reality' and modality contained in this work concern the fact that, unlike myths and folktales which are always modally distanced ('Once upon a time ...') the 'social lessons'
(or the dominant ideologies) being presented have an unquestioned high modality for most consumers of this popular drama.

**Cultural studies, audiences and ‘semiotic democracy’**

Support for the early class-conflict-based approach to cultural studies gradually diminished due to disenchantment both with this model of society and with the structuralist roots of the theories that framed it. The work of Foucault was very important in hastening this disenchantment (Foucault 1977; 1980). Foucault offered a model of power that could not be explained in terms of binary oppositions, like class or gender. Instead, power was conceptualised as being constantly in play in different relationships in different situations and through different discourses. Thus, one's sense of reality is determined by how one is situated in relation to, for example, discourses of gender, race, class, age and (dis)ability. Fiske (1987) defines discourse as:

> ... a socially produced way of talking or thinking about a topic. It is defined by reference to the area of social experience that it makes sense of, to the social location from which that sense is made, and to the linguistic or signifying system by which that sense is both made and circulated. (Fiske 1987: 268)

Thus, a television text is mobilised in terms of the discourses it takes up and readers respond to the text through the discourses they use to make sense of social, cultural, institutional experience. Such a view is usually described as post-structuralist.

This new approach has led, in part, to a decentring of cultural and media research. In much work, the role of the media has been reduced to a succession of reader-text encounters which, according to Curran (1996: 259), are in ‘... the context of a society which is analytically disaggregated into a series of discrete instances ... or in which power external to discourse is wholly evacuated.’ He points to work, like Fiske's, where it is assumed that power is widely diffused in a kind of ‘semiotic democracy’. Fiske (1989: 63) argues that there is no such thing as a television audience defined as an empirically accessible object. Rather, he sees people constructing their own meanings within an autonomous cultural economy. An insistence on the complete polysemy of media products and ‘...an undocumented presumption that forms of interpretative resistance are more widespread than subordination or the reproduction of dominant meanings’ (Morley 1992: 20), has led to media texts being seen as equally open to any and all interpretations which viewers wish to make of them. In this view, it is not the media that manipulate people but people who manipulate the media through contrary, resistant and subversive decoding practices. As Budd, Entman and Steinman (1990: 170) argue: ‘Media domination is weak and ineffectual, since the people make their own meanings and pleasures.’
For some (e.g. Corner 1991; Morley 1980), this position is unacceptable because it represents an underestimation of the force of textual determinacy in the construction of meaning; a romanticisation of the role of the reader; a complacent relativism and a neglect of the evidence suggesting that there is a widespread system of signification which at some levels is fairly unambiguous. As Morley (1996: 286) points out, there are strong tendencies within post-structuralism to regress to a form of methodological individualism; his own work, described below, represents a modified post-structuralist position which he calls 'structured polysemy'.

Cultural studies and audience research

The concerns of those in the cultural studies tradition about empirical research methods and their preferences for text-based analysis, then, has produced the situation where the responses of actual audience groups have been neglected. With some notable exceptions (e.g. Morley 1980; Ang 1985), few studies actually attempt to discover whether the readings and interpretations uncovered by the researcher are actually held by the audience too.

Morley's research on the television current affairs programme Nationwide (Morley 1980) probably represented the first attempt to conduct an empirical audience study in this tradition. This work set out to test Hall's hypotheses about the three decoding positions available to viewers: the dominant-hegemonic, the negotiated and the oppositional. Morley showed the programme, which he had previously subjected to detailed cultural analysis, to groups of people who were then invited to discuss their reactions and the meanings it had for them. Group members were selected on the basis of class membership because class was, in Hall's theory, the major producer of social difference and therefore of different readings of texts. What Morley found was that Hall had over-emphasised the role of class in the ways people may understand and make meaning of texts and he had under-emphasised the sheer variety of readings that could be made.

Morley (1980) replaced Hall's model with one derived from post-structuralist theory, which emphasised the role of discourse. Here, reading a television text is conceptualised as consisting of the moment when the discourses of the reader meet the discourses of the text. The meaning of the text for an individual viewer then, is a process of negotiation between the social sense inscribed in the text and the discursive ways in which the viewer habitually makes sense of social experience. In this way, media texts are not wholly open, but take the form of what Morley (1980) calls 'structured polysemy'; that is, texts denote, to a greater or lesser extent, certain preferred audience understandings (although these may be rejected). In addition, audiences do not have an unlimited range of discourses to draw on in interpreting television meanings; their place in the social structure will tend to determine which discourses are open to them and these will influence the readings that they will
make from the programme material. According to Ang (1989: 99) Morley's work opened up '... a space in which watching television can begin to be understood as a complex cultural practice full of dialogical negotiations and contestations, rather than as a singular occurrence whose meaning can be determined once and for all in the abstract."

The Nationwide study demonstrated the possibility and the importance of engaging in empirical audience research and indeed, work of this kind followed although it was interested primarily in adults and the meanings they make from television (e.g. Ang 1985; Richardson and Corner 1986). Such studies have demonstrated the fruitfulness of a dialectic between theory and empirically based research: the latter contests and enriches theory and has the capacity to propose new lines of empirical investigation. This dialectic is an essential feature of the present study.

Cultural studies, children and television.
In the main, publications within a cultural studies theoretical context which have explored children's use, interpretation and enjoyment of various forms of popular culture have tended to use the traditional text-based analysis and have focussed both on television and other media created for children such as films and video games (e.g. Kinder 1991; Seiter 1993; Bazalgette and Buckingham 1995). Work which has focussed on teenagers has looked at their experiences of both popular culture and media education curricula (e.g. Buckingham and Sefton-Greene 1994; Buckingham 1993b; Buckingham 1990); girls' relationships with such forms of popular culture as magazines (e.g. Frazer 1987; McRobbie 1991), fashion and dance (e.g. McRobbie 1989; 1994) and romance novels (e.g. Radway 1984; Moss 1989; Moss 1993). For older boys, a good deal of the literature has focussed on their use of computer and arcade games (Kaplan 1983; Skirrow 1986; Haddon 1988).

In relation to television, two ground-breaking cross-disciplinary empirical studies by Hodge and Tripp (1986) and Buckingham (1993a) both adopted a broadly cultural studies framework to investigate questions concerning children and television. In both works, only one chapter in each focuses specifically on questions of modality.

In order to explore how television carries meanings, how children interpret and use these meanings and how these meanings get enacted in everyday life, Hodge and Tripp (1986) drew on a wide range of disciplines and theories including semiotics, psychology and social and political theory. By synthesising insights into children's cognitive development, the strategies their participants used to make sense of multi-layered, ambiguous television messages and the social contexts and relationships in which these judgements and interpretations were taking place, this work produced a picture of children as active meaning makers in relation to television.
Conclusions, made ‘more plausible’ by their work, are an important aspect of Hodge and Tripp’s study. Couched in the form of 10 propositions or theses, they maintain that: children have the capacity to be active and powerful decoders of television; children’s cognitive and semiotic systems develop at least until the age of 12; children’s television carries dominant ideological forms but also a range of oppositional meanings; television’s perceived relation to the real world depends on age, experience and social conditions and depends to a large extent on children’s experience of television itself; for the purposes of developing modality discriminations, all children need some fantasy programmes and some programmes which deal more closely with their reality; media violence is qualitatively different from real violence; meanings gained from television are renegotiated and altered in the process of discourse; general ideological forms have an overall determining effect on interpretations of television; the family is active in determining what television meanings will be and the school is a site where television should be thoroughly understood and drawn into the curriculum in a variety of positive ways (Hodge and Tripp 1986: 213-218).

Hodge and Tripp’s work has been extremely important to the field for a number of reasons. First, it drew attention, for the first time, to the semiotic or meaning making relationship between children and television; this was not the ‘perceived reality’ of the previous psychological research but a more complex, dynamic, two-way and socially-grounded process. Second, this work showed how it was possible - indeed desirable - to break out of the straight-jackets of traditional, often antithetical, disciplines in order to explore complex human questions. Third, while not claiming status as absolute truth, this work provides practical guidance for people who are concerned about television and real children, students, patients, clients - it provides what all good theory should provide - our ‘best guess’ at this point in time.

Despite its value for those who are seriously interested in the question of television in the lives of children and young people, this work has not been accepted uncritically. Rudd (1992), for example, basically chides Hodge and Tripp for not producing proper cultural studies work because, in breaking down traditional disciplinary barriers, not only do they allow individual cognitive perspectives to play a role, they also pay insufficient attention to the ‘inherently social nature both of children’s development and of their television viewing.’ (Rudd 1992: 319 original emphasis). From his concluding remarks it is clear, however, that Rudd is not really interested in the Hodge and Tripp agenda; he argues that a more ‘contextually sensitive reading would form the basis of a more integrated theory of consumption, one which also recognised the negotiability of ideology in young viewers’ actual readings of broadcast programmes.’ (Rudd 1992: 319). It is hard to see how such a project would be able to provide the guidance in relation to real children that Hodge and Tripp’s work produces; it seems much more likely that the approach advocated by Rudd
would result in a series of discrete, momentary reader/text encounters, which, fascinating as they might be, would not lend themselves to formulations applicable to larger audience groups.

Where Hodge and Tripp draw on cognitive developmental theory, they rely on the earlier version of Piagetian stage theory rather than the later descriptions of broad sequences of change (described above). They see as being rather more important than the stages, however, the Piagetian model of learning and concept formation, pointing out how much Piaget was concerned with the evolution and transformation of children’s syntagmatic structures (Hodge and Tripp 1986: 82). In their own work here, they tend, like Piaget, to see the transformational period (disequilibrium) as an anomalous state rather that one in which major learning is going on. Their approach also suggests a reliance on Piaget’s structuralism and a concept of the child as a ‘lone scientist’ figuring out the relationships between words, material reality and television representations. Although Vygotsky is alluded to, the importance of his work in identifying the social origins of thought is largely ignored.

Buckingham’s work (1993a) is also multi-disciplinary. The disciplines on which he draws include ‘discourse analysis and critical linguistics, structuralist cinema theory and semiotics, post-structuralist and neomarxian social theory and social psychology.’ (1993a: xiii). His use of this theoretical framework has both strengths and weaknesses.

The post-structuralist practice of discourse analysis, where the participants’ actual speech forms the basic data for analysis, is a major strength in Buckingham’s work. Such a technique allows exploration of the ways in which the contexts of talk and the power discourses available to children influence their relationships with others and their constructions of reality. The insight that making judgements about television, particularly about television reality, are discursively reflexive statements about ‘self’ in relation to ‘others’, is an important one and reminds the researcher that one cannot unproblematically ‘read off’ what children really think from what they say. Buckingham demonstrates in his interpretations of children’s talk how this activity must proceed with understanding of the social context, attention to the detail of what is said and caution about how findings are generalised.

A weakness of the theoretical position that Buckingham adopts, however, is his apparent ambivalence about the question of cognitive development. It seems somewhat partial to suggest that discourse analysis can reveal children’s diverse discursive allegiances and subject positionings but refuse to allow that similar analysis of children’s talk can reveal
basic cognitive strategies that perhaps relate to the broader subject positionings of age and developmental achievement. As Messenger-Davies (1995: audio-tape) has suggested:

In terms of identity, being a child is possibly a more important fact about you than what culture you belong to. Development has many cross-cultural characteristics and is a powerful engine for change. I would suggest there is such a thing as a universal culture of childhood which cuts across other cultural differences, and is in many ways a counter-culture.

Biggs and Moore (1993: 33) also claim that if one considers the following human life stages: infant, toddler, preschooler, primary school-aged child, pre-adolescent, adolescent, young adult, middle-aged adult and retiree, '... at each of those stages [the] person is cognitively, physically, and emotionally more like other people of the same age than like himself or herself 20 years past or 20 years hence.'

Buckingham (1993a) does not deny that many of the judgements children make in relation to television are cognitive in nature but he seems reluctant to use cognitive developmental explanations for the patterns that appear in his data. In relation to television modality, for example, he sees the strategies that children use to make judgements as higher order media literacy competencies but he goes on to say that 'television literacy should not be seen as a set of cognitive 'skills' which children either do or do not possess.' (1993a: 133 - 134). In relation to the work on genre; re-telling television narratives; understanding television characters as well as modality judgements, he shows how his participants progressively acquire skills in relation to all these dimensions, but he is reluctant to see these as evidence of cognitive understandings when they clearly can be seen in this way.

Examples like these suggest that in Buckingham's view, 'cognitive development' is too strongly associated with structuralist, individualistic, insufficiently social ways of viewing human behaviour to be useful. Clearly, a model of cognitive development that involves both social and individual perspectives, like the one adopted by this thesis, is preferable and would sit more comfortably with the other disciplines on which this study draws. The insights Buckingham offers in relation to the social, discursive activities of his participants indicate the complex processes woven into the task of understanding how children make sense of television and how this relates to their constructions of social reality. One thread, however - that of cognitive development - is omitted and needs to be included for a more complete picture to be achieved.

One final point needs to be raised in relation to Buckingham's work. Privileging the importance of social context and social relations in interpreting children's talk about television reduces one's ability to make generalisations and thus, recommendations. Buckingham himself warns of the danger of a cultural studies approach in this regard when he says '... in an attempt to do justice to the complexity of the process, we may reach a point
at which any meaningful generalizations are simply untenable.‘ (Buckingham 1993a: 59).
He also points out that if one wishes to do work that may change broadcasting policy or the
professional practices of broadcasters, then the broadly exploratory kind of audience
research associated with the cultural studies approach is not the best place to start (1993a:
19). In his concluding chapter, Buckingham makes general recommendations about the
direction that media studies should take; but specific statements about how younger
children make sense of television in general, however, are absent. He acknowledges the
difficulty of making generalisations, but seems to rule out of order other approaches to
knowing about children and television which would be useful in this regard.

The cultural studies tradition and this thesis
Post-structuralist cultural studies work has valuably drawn attention to and made
problematic constructions of ‘the real’. What is real - people’s constructions of social
reality - are inevitably bound up with the discourses that are available to them and these
will provide specific lenses through which material reality, including television texts,
may be viewed and interpreted. Because these discourses are many and varied and combine
in different ways, in different people, in different social contexts, at different historical
moments, some recent cultural studies work tends to be very fine-grained and exploratory
and this leads, in some cases, to a reluctance to generalise, an emphasis on individual
reader/text encounters and the highlighting of differences at the expense of commonalities
(see Curran 1996).

Foucault, a significant figure in cultural studies, provides a useful overall framework for
this study when he talks about ‘regimes of truth’:

Each society has its regime of truth, its ‘general politics’ of truth; that is, the
types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the
mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false
statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and
procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who
are charged with saying what counts as true.’

(Foucault 1980: 131)

In many ways, modality, or the way the real is interpreted in children’s worlds, can be seen
as one of these ‘regimes of truth’. In order to enable everyday commerce between individual
members of a society, there has to be some generally acknowledged and agreed upon sense of
the real. Sounding much like Vygotsky, Foucault shows how the ‘general politics’ of truth
are socially agreed upon means of managing everyday life - they are ‘mechanisms’,
‘techniques’ and ‘procedures’ into which, presumably, the young must be inducted. In just
the same way, Vygotsky claims the young are inducted into the society’s ways of thinking
and problem-solving. This induction can occur deliberately through the intervention of
more capable others (viz. parents telling children that costume characters on television are not real but people 'dressed up'; parents showing children how puzzles are solved by demonstrating and 'scaffolding') or it can occur through children gaining access to information at a level appropriate for them from multi-layered, ambiguous, cultural artefacts like books and television. In the former case, the more competent others deliberately shape the information about social reality according to their sense of the cognitive abilities of the child; in the latter case, children take from the complex layers of the television text, the messages that make sense to them at this point in their development.

The present study draws on the strengths of the most recent work described above, in that it is qualitative, empirical and pays close attention to children's and young people's talk about how real they judge television to be. The television texts that form the traditional focus for cultural studies research are not neglected in the present study but they do not form the major focus of the work. Examples of different kinds of texts have been studied in some detail in order to help elucidate the modality judgements that the children and young people made.

More than Buckingham (1993a), and like Hodge and Tripp (1986), this study acknowledges the usefulness of a cognitive developmental perspective in considering children's modality judgements. In this study, the social origins of children's thought about television reality are acknowledged while accepting that broad patterns of change, evident in other areas of human development, may well affect the ways in which children take up and appropriate different 'regimes of truth' about reality at different times in their lives.

**RESEARCH METHODS AND APPROACHES**

**Qualitative Research**

The quantitative research methods that were developed for investigating phenomena in the physical, natural world were, for many years, considered equally appropriate for investigating aspects of the human/social world. Ways of measuring, testing and comparing natural phenomena were adapted for use in investigating aspects of human life, despite the fact that few characteristics of human behaviour, other than the superficial, lent themselves to the precise measurements required by the traditional scientific method. One might, for example, be able to measure quite precisely how many people watched a particular television programme, but it is much more difficult to understand why they watched it in the first place or what meanings they took from it, using these techniques. In order to study questions like these and render them measurable, disciplines like psychology
created new human constructs/concepts (e.g. self concept, achievement motivation, reality perception) along with new ways of measuring them (e.g. self concept inventories, achievement orientation tests, perceived reality scales). Thus, complex human phenomena were measured, rated and reduced to numbers and scores which were then compared, statistically manipulated, tested for significance and 'objectively' interpreted.

During the late 1960's and the 1970's, concern grew that although so-called positivist methods might serve the natural sciences well, they were frequently inadequate for investigating the complexity of human behaviour (Burns 1994). More radical criticism came from scholars who maintained that positivist social science perniciously worked against the interests of ordinary people. They argued that a system that claimed to prove that human behaviour was subject to generalized laws enabled those in power to predict and thus control the behaviour of those who were powerless (see Habermas 1972; Feyerabend 1975).

During this period, researchers investigating human affairs, increasingly turned away from positivist scientific/experimental methods towards those that were described as more humanistic (Maslow 1966), naturalistic (Denzin 1971; Guba 1978) or critical emancipatory (Carr and Kemmis 1986). One of the best descriptions of this kind of research, which became generally known as 'qualitative', was provided by the psychologist, Abraham Maslow, who said: 'By far the best way to learn what people are like is to get them, one way or another, to tell us, whether directly by question and answer ... to which we simply listen, or indirectly by covert communications, paintings, dreams, stories, gestures etc. which we can interpret.' (Maslow 1966: 12).

Qualitative research assumes that there is an external reality 'out there' and that it can only be apprehended individually and subjectively. Thus, how and what meanings people generate in their everyday lives from ordinary phenomena - their individual constructions of social reality - form the focus of this kind of research. Qualitative data are gathered in primarily naturalistic ways (e.g. ethnography, case studies, participant observation, individual interviews, group discussions) and are textual in nature. Analysis is designed to elucidate subjective understandings - an awareness of the meanings that events and other phenomena have for individual human beings. The possibility of achieving disinterested objectivity in such research is rejected on the grounds that the investigator is part of the research situation and is never a neutral observer. Despite these caveats, however,

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11. The term 'positivist' was first used by Comte (c 1830) and came to be used fairly synonymously with 'scientific'. Now it is used in a largely pejorative way to refer to a naïve objectivity (Williams 1990).
socially useful findings that can result in cautious generalizations can come from qualitative research.

According to Miles and Huberman (1994:1), qualitative research methods have always predominated in some fields of social science (viz: anthropology, political science), and it has been the preferred method for many individual social scientists. Even in the field of psychology, which was generally heavily committed to scientific method, there have always been those who preferred more interpretive techniques. As Tesch (1990: 2) points out, in the development of their theories about aspects of human behaviour, neither Freud nor Piaget engaged in experimental hypothesis-testing with large cohorts of subjects, nor did they apply statistical analysis to their findings. Rather, as Maslow later recommended, these researchers observed, listened, asked questions and tried to make sense of what they saw and heard. The emphasis here was on interpretation rather than measurement.

Children and Television Research
As has been shown thus far, and as will be demonstrated in greater detail in subsequent chapters, most previous research in the area of children and television has used quantitative methods. These studies tended to provide participants with research instruments with pre-ordained choice categories and non-verbal means of responding (e.g. circling numbers, ticking boxes, marking Lickert scales) so, with very few exceptions (e.g. Jaglom et al. 1979; Kelly 1981) children’s voices were never heard - their responses had been anticipated and they were required to choose from a range of forced choices. In general, these studies showed that children did indeed see the world differently from the adult researchers and this difference was frequently seen in terms of deficit (if not pathology).

Key qualitative studies of children’s responses to television (Buckingham 1993a; Hodge and Tripp 1986) have shown that allowing children to discuss television in their own way, using their own language, successfully produces far more positive and detailed accounts of their perceptions of both television and their social worlds than was possible with previous quantitative research. Indeed, Ang (1989: 96) says ‘... qualitative empirical research usually carried out in the form of in-depth interviews with a small number of people (and at times supplemented with some form of participant observation), is now recognized by many as one of the most adequate ways to learn about the differentiated subtleties of people’s engagements with television and other media.’
The Present Study

Qualitative, empirical research methods have been employed in the present research for three chief reasons. First, the methods have proved successful in other research (e.g. Hodge and Tripp 1986; Buckingham 1993a) and are well-supported by other scholars in the field (e.g. Ang 1989). Second, this study set out to explore the actual responses of children and young people as they strived to make sense of a particular aspect of television; the intention was to provide so-called ‘thick’ descriptions of their strategies (Geertz 1973). Third, it was considered important to retain for analysis the actual language that the children and young people used, rather than transforming that language into linguistic or numerical codes. Messy as these data inevitably are, they permit the research technique of fine-grained, sentence by sentence analysis. Through this, it was hoped to develop understandings that were initially individual but which, together, would also reveal patterns, and therefore insights into the responses of broader groupings of children and young people.

The core method, adapted from ones initially used by Hodge and Tripp (1986) and Buckingham (1993a), was a combination of cognitive developmental and cultural studies strategies. The cognitive developmental strategies consisted of testing situations where small groups of children could demonstrate the categories and strategies they used to solve problems at the limits of their capacities. The cultural studies method of discourse analysis seemed most appropriate in that talk is the major behaviour and data that such empirical situations directly provide.

The status of the data

While this qualitative empirical approach was judged to be very appropriate for studying children’s judgements about television modality, it nevertheless does not represent some ‘natural’ situation in which the collection of ‘pure’ data is made more possible. There are many aspects of the research situation, for example, that may have an influence on the kind of data elicited.

In general terms, there is ‘... no way in which the adult participant observer who attempts to understand a children’s culture can pass unnoticed as a member of that group.’ (Glasser and Fine 1979: 153). In the present study, as an adult, who is a lot taller than average, there was certainly no way in which this researcher could pass unnoticed in the primary and preschools where the group discussions took place. I explained to the participants that I was not a teacher but was interested in finding out what they thought about some television programmes, emphasising that this was not a test and that there were no right or wrong answers.
While the children may have been suspicious initially about these claims, it became clear from the programmes I had chosen that this was 'stuff' that they knew a lot about and was certainly different from the things that adults usually ask children to talk about in school. While this may have induced them to feel more relaxed about the research process, it also produced the phenomenon, recognised by others (e.g. Buckingham 1993a), of children telling the adult what they think the adult wants to hear - certainly the 'TV is bad for you' discourse was mobilised frequently - but it was always bad for 'others'. This type of response is discussed in subsequent chapters as an example of children using talk about television to create social identities for themselves not only in relation to the adult researcher but also in relation to each other.

Attention has been drawn, and rightly so, to the indelible imprint the researcher makes on the practice of research - what is referred to as self-reflexivity (Willis 1980). Clearly the bundle of meanings that the researcher brings to the process of data gathering and to the process of analysis and interpretation is crucial. The results are, after all, just one person's reading of a set of data. For these reasons it is important for the researcher to disclose the bases upon which interpretations are made, to be honest about preconceptions or hidden theories; it is important to try and be 'surprised' by one's data and to reach '... knowledge not prefigured in one's starting paradigm.' (Willis 1980: 90). Some researchers have taken this personal reflection and disclosure to the point where the research process and the participants become almost secondary. One can learn, for example, an immense amount about the researcher's childhood, class origins, family relationships, intellectual and spiritual journeys (see Walkerdine 1985; 1996) and sometimes one merely learns how egocentric the researcher is (see Seiter 1990), however, such a detailed identification of the sources of researcher power does not make the research process power-neutral.

Talk, itself, is not unproblematic as data. As in all interpretive research, one cannot expect that children's talk, despite being a record of their own authentic words, is necessarily an accurate reflection of what the participants really think - they may, for example, be unable to articulate what they know. Certainly, with the preschool participants, there was a sense that some of the children simply did not have the language yet to explain what they understood about the reality of television programmes - a question which, of course, involved abstract concepts.

In addition, children and adolescents use language to perform a variety of functions in the context of specific social interactions in the same way that adults do (Potter and Wetherell 1987). In the present study, the social context of the discussions, the pre-existing relationships between participants and the kinds of discourses suggested by various
television texts under consideration seemed to lead, in some instances, to the situation
described by Hodge and Tripp (1986) where 'television meanings' were swamped by 'non-
television meanings'. In order to identify these episodes, it was important, when analysing
the text, to be sensitive to occasions where there was overt dispute or tension; where the
participants appeared to be too conscious of the 'status' of an adult researcher in a school
setting; where the class, ethnicity or gender status of the participants meshed with the
content of particular television programmes being discussed and so on. Often, these episodes
were cued by non-verbal behaviour - laughter, facial expressions, body language, pauses -
which could either be detected in the audio-tape and/or had been recorded in field notes at
the time of the discussion. Identifying occasions when talk is being used in this way is
problematic insofar as an element of subjectivity is necessarily involved and there is
potential for reading the participants' motivations incorrectly. For these reasons, when
the participants appeared to be using talk about television to position themselves socially
- to appear older, wiser, more competent, superior in either ethnic, racial or gender terms -
the transcripts of this talk are provided for independent scrutiny.

Certainly, in this researcher's experience, children appeared to be less self-conscious than
most adults about the way their television talk reflected back on them and they were
openly enthusiastic about all sorts of programmes, irrespective of how 'dumb' some of their
peers might find the same shows. Naturally, in the same way that some adults have to
find excuses for watching, say, Melrose Place, children engaged in 'impression management'
in relation to their television preferences. The technique of using group discussions,
however, was a useful hedge against wild self-promotion or self-construction because the
children were able to contradict and challenge each other. Only among the adolescents,
who completed individual surveys, was there no opportunity for this kind of group brake on
claims and here, as will be discussed later, there were many uses of the programme in
question to support constructions of self that seemed designed to create very particular
impressions.

As with all interpretive research, it was necessary to analyse and interpret the data the
children and young people provided about their modality judgements; it is not sufficient to
merely describe or assemble the participants' talk in interesting ways. One of the great
advantages of interpretive research and its reporting is that one may present the actual
data to support one's analysis and interpretation. The researcher can make the process of
interpretation as transparent as possible which then permits others to agree or disagree
with the analysis. Few other research approaches allow for this degree of openness in the
presentation of findings; implicit in this reporting process is the fact that this is, after all,
just one person's reading of a set of data and other readings are not only possible but invited.
The research methods

There were three separate, but related approaches used for gathering data for this project. The first involved tape-recording the small group discussions of 73, 3-10 year old children as they debated the deceptively simple problem of how real they thought various television programmes were. The second took the form of a written survey about the teen series Heartbreak High, which was completed by 132, 13-17 year olds. The final method was an extensive investigation and analysis of all the television texts that were mentioned by the children and young people in the study.

The first task was modelled on ones successfully used by Buckingham (1993a) and Kelly (1981). Small groups of the 5-10 year old children were given a set of cards bearing the names of television programmes with which they were familiar and they were asked to find some way of showing which programmes they thought were more 'real' or 'true-to-life' and those that they thought were less so. The task needed to be modified for the very young children who were not yet able to read and, here, coloured pictures of TV characters replaced the cards with programme names written on them. These younger children were asked whether each character was real and how they could tell. In this way, the task presented a problem that they could solve while producing data comparable with that from the older children. In both age groups the children were talking about reality.

All children accepted that this was a problem to be solved collaboratively, however, as a problem it was deceptive because the apparent task was a 'virtual' one. The research focus was not on the order in which the children sorted or classified programmes. Rather, the real purpose was to discover how they did the task, how they justified their decisions, how they negotiated concepts of the real with their peers. This was a method designed to generate talk about modality, not to gather data about children's classifications of television programmes.

Given that the aim of this method was to produce a rich corpus of children's talk, it proved to be highly successful in both the quality and the quantity of the talk produced. Despite the apparent simplicity of the task, it had the effect of constantly challenging children's existing modality schemes in ways that were highly revealing. Essentially, when discussing and justifying how real they thought television programmes were, the children provided insights into the ways in which they organized their worlds, the ways they constructed their social realities, the ways they connected the issue of modality with other issues of social power. In terms of sheer quantity, the task produced 18 hours of tape-recorded talk, each hour of which took up to 8 hours to transcribe (and considerably longer
with the preschoolers' tapes). The transcriptions ran to more than 200 pages, containing in excess of 96,000 words.

The second data-gathering technique was different for several reasons. First, the greater sophistication of the adolescents demanded a less superficially simple research task. The task that was too difficult for the very young children proved to be far too easy to generate the requisite complexity of talk for these teenagers. Second, one of the research questions to be investigated with this age group concerned whether television modality was in fact as salient an issue for them as it was for the younger participants. Third, at the time of planning this phase of the study, a new teenage series called Heartbreak High was about to be launched and its chief claim was that it was to be extremely authentic in terms of its depictions of Australian adolescents' lives, issues, problems and experiences. In order to generate talk that revealed adolescent thinking about modality - indeed to see whether modality was a salient issue at all - a survey was prepared using Heartbreak High as the focus. Questions were framed broadly without using the words 'real' or 'realistic' and without obviously cueing modality in other ways - for all questions there were different ways in which the adolescent participants could frame their answers, if they chose to do so. The survey technique allowed a greater number of participants to contribute their views, which were as varied as those produced by the younger children. Of course, the cost of adopting this technique meant it was not possible to see directly their use of modality as social action.

Once again, this technique proved to be a highly successful means of gathering data. Survey sheets provided ample space below each question for participants to record their thoughts and from 132 surveys, 96 pages of transcript and in excess of 25,000 written words were generated. In their responses, the adolescent participants, like the others, showed how salient modality issues were for them and, in their reflections on different aspects of Heartbreak High, they provided insights into their constructions of social reality. The modality discourses which they adopted, without prompting, once again enabled the young participants to connect with those issues of social power that most concern them at this point in their lives.

The final data-gathering technique complemented the investigation by providing an extensive viewing of children's television. The researcher attempted to view at least some examples of every programme referred to by the children, supplemented by reference to audience surveys, where available, in order to have access to the field of reference of the children's comments. This was onerous and time-consuming: hundreds of hours of television were viewed over the period (1991 - 5) but it proved invaluable on many occasions in
allowing the researcher to fill out and understand what children meant in cases where it was not obvious from the words they were saying or where questions were raised (e.g. Do the Bananas in Pyjamas have moving mouths? What colour is Captain Planet's hair? Can you see a zip up Daffy Duck's back? Do the trees move outside the windows of the houses in Neighbours?)

The research procedure

For each group a preliminary survey was conducted to establish which programmes the children watched and enjoyed on a regular basis. From these, a number were selected representing different genres and modalities - soap operas, cartoons, family shows, dramas, situation comedies, quiz shows, news programmes, 'infotainment' programmes and so on - and their titles were written on cards for the 5 - 10 year olds. With the 3 - 4 year olds, pictures of the main characters in their favourite programmes were obtained and mounted on cards. The specific programmes used for each age category are listed in Appendix 1. These preliminary surveys also gathered personal and family details about the children taking part in the study. With the adolescent participants, a preliminary survey established who had been watching Heartbreak High on a regular basis as well as gathering personal and family details.

The 3 - 10 year olds were randomly assigned to groups of three or four; occasionally this meant that groups were of the same sex, but most often they were combinations of boys and girls. The very young children were presented with one picture card at a time and they were asked 'Is [the character] real' with a follow-up question 'How do you know?' or 'How can you tell?' Each group of 5 - 10 year old children was given sets of cards, each of which bore a programme name, and they were asked to find some way of showing which programmes they thought were more 'real' or 'true-to-life' and those that they thought were less so. The children found a range of ways of doing the task. Some of the older ones (8 - 10 year olds) chose to put the programme cards in a continuum from 'most real' to 'least real'; others created piles for gradations of 'real'. The younger children (5 - 7 year olds) often chose to establish two piles of cards - one for the 'real' programmes and one for the 'not so real'. Some of these groups created a third pile in the middle for programmes that were considered 'a little bit real and a little bit not real'. The children were left to debate which programmes they thought were realistic and those that they thought were not until they had negotiated a classification for all the programmes. At this point the researcher asked clarifying questions such as 'Why is [programme name] not realistic?', 'Why is this programme more realistic than that one?'. All sessions were tape-recorded and additional field notes were taken at the time of the group discussion.
The adolescents were asked by their usual home-room teachers to fill out the survey during home-room time at the beginning of the week after 6 or 7 episodes of Heartbreak High had gone to air. The questions used in the Heartbreak High survey can be found in Chapter 5.

The participants

The participants were aged from 3 to 17 years of age and were recruited from preschool, junior primary, primary and secondary schools. One group of 14 children came from a London primary school, the rest came from schools in Australia. With the 3 - 10 year olds, the initial survey established which children watched television on a regular basis and 73 (37 boys and 36 girls) were selected to take part in the study. The initial survey among the 13 - 17 year olds established who had been watching Heartbreak High on a regular basis and 132 (69 girls and 63 boys) were also selected to take part in the study.

Of the 205 participants, 105 were girls and 100 were boys. The number in each age category is presented in the table below.

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<td>105</td>
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<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
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In the initial survey, all participants were asked whether they or either of their parents had been born in another country. Amongst the participants, a very wide range of countries of origin was represented. In addition to those who were Aborigines or Anglo-Australians, participants and/or their parents were born in the following countries: New Zealand, England, Scotland, Ireland, Wales, Germany, Holland, Poland, Hungary, Croatia, Serbia, Malta, Greece, Italy, Spain, Cyprus, Lebanon, Turkey, Egypt, Iran, Malaysia, Korea, Philippines, Indonesia, India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Mauritius, Seychelles, USA and the West Indies.

In relation to class origins, survey information about parents' occupation(s) and subsequent teachers' judgements were used to locate participants in two broad social class categories. Of the total group, 59 per cent were allocated to a middle class and 41 per cent to a working class category.
The analysis

Each session with the 3 - 10 year olds was tape-recorded and was subsequently transcribed for analysis. Survey responses from the 13 - 17 year olds were collated. As discussed above, the primary data produced by the research methods used was transcribed speech - far too much to be easily handled by any simple method of analysis. To assist in the process of analysing this huge bulk of transcribed talk, two approaches were adopted. First, unlike some qualitative research where the task of analysis is approached free from preconceived theoretical frameworks, it was thought desirable, in this instance, to employ some theoretical constructs to assist with the preliminary categorization of the data. Secondly, in order to investigate the complexity of what the children and young people had said, the innovative software tool for text analysis, NUD•IST (Qualitative Solutions and Research 1990), was used to manage and interrogate the data.

A thorough search of the literature on children and television suggested a set of broad, general modality-related constructs to begin the analysis. Clearly the work of Hawkins (1977) had informed the analysis of both Hodge and Tripp (1986) and Buckingham (1993a) in terms of what the latter called internal and external criteria. Internal criteria include understandings that television is a constructed medium, while external criteria show the extent to which children see television as having some reference to real life as they know it; both criteria needed development and further elucidation but were adopted initially to structure the analysis.

In addition, a cultural studies theoretical frame enabled modality judgements to be seen as social acts. From this perspective, the group discussion could be considered as a representative piece of social action in which particular episodes could be interpreted accordingly. Here, examples of 'non-television meanings' swamping 'television meanings' (Hodge and Tripp 1986) became very evident in a number of ways with meanings that related to age, race/ethnicity, gender (and, possibly, social class) all evident. These categories were therefore included in the analytical framework from the outset.

It would be untrue to say that the research was embarked upon without a hunch that developmental differences might be found in the ways children judged modality at different ages - judgements are, after all, at least, partly cognitive - and it was for this reason that such a wide age range was employed. The later Piagetian theory provided guidelines about the ways judgements might be formed at different ages and Vygotskyan theory provided insights into the social nature of thought, knowledge and 'regimes of truth' about reality. The question 'How do you know?' was an invitation to children to not only explain how they were dealing with this understanding but also to indicate its social provenance. These considerations also guided the preliminary analysis of the data.
The task of managing and analysing such large quantities of data was assisted enormously by NUD•IST, a software tool for dealing with qualitative data. Many software programmes enable the researcher to store and retrieve data, the essential difference with NUD•IST is that not only are you able to store and retrieve unlimited amounts of data, but the data remains in its original form - as text. There is no necessity with NUD•IST to convert data into codes or numbers, one simply stores sections of text in categories or ‘nodes’ that one believes best expresses emerging themes. The retrieval process involves retrieving all the sections of text stored in selected nodes. Original transcripts, or ‘documents’, can have in ‘headers’ as much or as little identifying information as is needed; thus one might indicate the names, ages, sex (or any other important details) of the participants in the group discussion; the date, time and location where it took place; known details about the pre-existing relationships between the group members or any other information of importance. This information appears whenever sections of text from that document are retrieved.

The system for storing the nodes - the ‘index system’ - is hierarchical and enables broad, general nodes to be divided into sub-nodes and sub-sub-nodes to any depth, thus allowing the development of quite refined and nuanced conceptual categories. The programme is flexible enough to allow the index system to be reshaped at any time. Misplaced categories can be shifted to more suitable locations, categories can be deleted or combined with others and any alterations that are made are logged so that an historical record of one’s theorising is maintained. At any one time, then, the index system can provide a snapshot of current ways of thinking about the data and a record of the intellectual journey that has been undertaken before arriving at that point.

At the outset of the present study, the transcript of each group discussion and each individual survey sheet was treated as a document and these were entered into NUD•IST. The initial coarse-grained analysis was done in two ways. First, the text was categorised according to key criteria that had emerged from the review of the literature and by those that were going to shape later theoretical questions; thus all text generated by female participants was stored in one node; all text by males in another; the same was done for age, country of origin and class. Text commenting about different television programmes was stored in individual programme nodes and for the Heartbreak High surveys, all answers to each question were stored in separate nodes. Secondly, all references to real/reality/true/etc. were found with a ‘search text’ function and after careful scrutiny, decisions about some broad general categories emerging from this data were made. General nodes were created for reality judgements about, for example, types of programme, people/characters, animals, things, locations, events. All text referring to these things was stored in the appropriate nodes in the index system.
The second phase of categorisation (or indexing) was much more fine-grained, very time-consuming and very thorough. Each document was examined, line by line and decisions about what was going on in the text were made in relation to the existing nodes. Through this process, the large nodes were broken down as it became clear, for example, that reality judgements about people/characters took a number of forms (see Appendix 2 for a sample list of index categories). Thus, sub-nodes were created and the appropriate text was stored in them. In addition, other things going on in the text were picked up and new categories created. In this way, insights relating to the influence of interpersonal relationships and the importance of affective responses emerged as significant conceptual categories for this study and the text referring to these things was collected and stored together.

Where I was ‘surprised’ by the data, in the fashion that Willis (1990) encourages, was in relation to text that, at the time, seemed puzzling, not very useful or not able to be fitted into existing categories. Such text generally concerned episodes where children seemed to be confused, lost for words, where they engaged in ‘distraction technique’ or seemed to be making wild guesses. This text was stored in a couple of general ‘hold-all’ categories until, quite late in the project, it was carefully re-examined (for what was expected to be the last time). It was at this point that these episodes suddenly made sense when seen as examples of cognitive disequilibrium. Like Piaget (passim) and Hodge and Tripp (1986), I had not previously considered cognitive disequilibrium to be of any great interest, except as a negligible hiccup on the way to accommodation. Careful examination of the text in question, however, showed that the state of disequilibrium is more significant than this and a whole new line of analysis was opened up.

The two-phased approach to indexing, described above, ensures that the researcher becomes intimately familiar with the text. As a consequence, insights begin to emerge, hunches begin to form, questions begin to develop and this is when the other, more powerful half of NUD•IST becomes important. By using operators derived from Boolean logic, nodes can be combined in various ways to answer questions and test hunches and emerging theories. Nodes can be compared (e.g. Do 5 - 7 year olds say the same sorts of things about Neighbours as the 8 - 10 year olds?); combinations of nodes can be created and compared with other combinations (e.g. What do 10 year old, Greek, middle class, boys say when making reality judgements about news programmes and how does this compare with what 10 year old, Greek, middle class, girls say?); similarities and differences between nodes can be sought (e.g. Are the same sorts of judgements made about all soap operas? How does what Anglo-Australians say about the depiction of racist attitudes on television differ from what non-Anglo-Australians say?), and so on. The results of these kinds of searches can then be returned to the index system as a new node, providing system closure.
The preliminary questions for this study were about the characteristics of participants who made particular sorts of reality judgements. In order to answer these questions, all references to modality were retrieved and were then intersected with theory-driven subcategories (sex, age, social class, country of origin etc.). Questions about programmes emerged: how did judgements vary when programmes with mixed modality (e.g. Sesame Street) were being considered; who thought programmes like The Simpsons were real and for what reasons; who was most interested in questions of how effects were achieved; what judgements were not made by particular categories of participant? In this way, emerging theories could be challenged or supported by the data. This highly interactive, constructive process of theory generation is one of the distinguishing features of interpretive research: 'The researcher actively explores, sifts, reviews, displays, sorts, synthesises and models the data to construct a series of explanations - theories - to make sense of the data.' (Johnson 1995: 118)

Interpretive research does not employ the tests of reliability and validity used by other empirical approaches, however, NUD•IST is particularly helpful in establishing the trustworthiness of interpretive research claims. First, it enables the retrieval of the original text from the transcripts which can then be used to support research conclusions. In this way, others are able to compare their reading of the text with the researcher's. Secondly, by using NUD•IST search functions, claims can be tested for trustworthiness through exhaustive searches for contradictory evidence. In these ways, interpretive research findings can be shown to be just as 'valid' and 'reliable' and are generally more open and transparent than those produced by other approaches to research.

THE THESIS

The behaviourist tradition is still dominant in public debate about television 'effects' although few academic researchers now consider this theoretical model to be at all adequate for conceptualising such a complex process. The cognitive tradition has appeal for parents, teachers and policy-makers because it acknowledges that children's ways of making sense of things change and grow more sophisticated as they grow older. Commonalities and patterns apparent in children's responses at different points in their development need to be explained and, for this reason, cognitive theory can still provide useful guidance. Research methods which have been heavily used within this tradition, however, are now considered to reveal more about the researcher's perceptions of social reality than those of the child subject. While saying little, specifically, about television and children, themes within cultural studies have illuminated the diverse readings of which any one social text is capable and have emphasised the importance of available discourses in constructing individual subjectivities. Moreover, this orientation has
demonstrated how different methodologies, such as discourse analysis, can yield insights into the data which are richer and less contrived than those permitted by other research methods.

This thesis, then, occupies the viable, but uneasy, space between these traditions. By acknowledging their strengths and weaknesses, it attempts to mediate and adjudicate between them to arrive at some less contested generalisations about children's modality judgements. In order to do this, it sets up a multi-disciplinary, cross-paradigm, empirical study which tests hypotheses drawn from both cognitive development and cultural studies traditions but which uses research methods drawn principally from recent cross-disciplinary studies (Hodge and Tripp 1986; Buckingham 1993a). It investigates the question of modality: how real do children and young people judge television to be? In addition, it asks whether children interpret television meanings differently at different points in development; how these meanings are constructed and how they connect with everyday life. The question of how and in what ways children's television modality judgements might influence subsequent attitudes, behaviour and beliefs is still very unclear. This study recognises, however, that it is an important question and aims to provide more data and insights to assist in coming to some less contested conclusions.

By analysing the children's and teenagers' talk about television modality, this thesis charts and explores the development and use of modality judgements in greater detail than has been attempted before. Not only does it include children from a wider age-range than has been studied previously, it also provides an exhaustive analysis of the talk produced to provide a more highly textured and complete picture of the way modality judgements change and develop as children grow older.

The present study is built on and extends the work done by Hodge and Tripp (1986) and Buckingham (1993a) and advances understanding about the ways in which children judge the reality of what they see on television in several ways. First, this thesis develops a dialectic between theories of development and emerging schemes of modality, in which each can illuminate the other. What is going on in modality needs to be understood in the light of current understandings of development, but also the reverse pertains. This thesis contributes to theories of cognitive development in ways that previous work either could not do or did not wish to do. It is, for example, quite clear from the kinds of modality judgements that predominate at different ages that:

- children's thinking does indeed become more abstract as they grow older;
- sophisticated cognitive skills appear in very simple forms at first and then progressively become more complex and automatic;
children’s gaze moves outwards in ever-broadening circles from considerations of what is real in simple, personal and concrete terms to complex, nuanced, abstract judgements about the reality of the social world in which they live;

cognitive conflict or disequilibrium is a period where creative, active speculation takes place in the search for more satisfying ways of making sense of the world;

‘zones of proximal development’, signalled by cognitive disequilibrium, present ‘teachable moments’ for children in which the advancement of their modality schemes will have significance beyond their understanding about television’s representations of the material world.

Second, the combination of the size of the corpus (i.e. 123,000 words), the methods of analysis (NUDIST) and the scope of the material (i.e. 3 - 17 year olds) means that the study can do more justice to the sheer variety of responses than has ever been possible before. The methodological techniques of generating a large and diverse amount of empirical data, coupled with fine-grained analysis, enables a new methodological synthesis of the different traditions (cognitive and cultural studies) that have hitherto focused on questions of children’s modality. Like Morley (1980), this study generates a more complex object of analysis which is closer to the full set of concrete readings that make up social practice than is generally found in cultural studies work. Many theorists in this tradition tend to rely on constructions of a practice which they label ‘social’ but which remains empirically untested.

Third, the breadth and depth of material in the present thesis joins with the work of Hodge and Tripp (1986) and Buckingham (1993a) in advancing beyond narrow empiricist studies. In the bulk of ‘perceived reality’ research the methods employed actually removed the ‘social’ by, for example, ignoring social context considerations and avoiding situations involving social interaction. These studies also standardised responses in ways that obscured the diversity and originality of respondents’ understandings. In the present study, the social perspective is restored in the research design, the data gathering technique and in the analysis of the young people’s talk.

Fourth, through its more extensive and multiperspectved focus on the category of modality, this thesis argues simultaneously for the importance of modality (in ways not always recognised before); it also demonstrates the inexhaustibly diverse and changing manifestations of this category.

Fifth, by keying into participants’ programme choices and preferences, this thesis brings together another element of the total modality picture. In its continuing focus on what people see as well as how they see it, this thesis shows how a further dialectic exists
between television modality judgements and the social reality issues important to children and teenagers at different times. The programmes the participants prefer reflect the social reality issues of importance to them, which in turn are illuminated by the television representations and which then reflexively feed back into greater understanding about modality.

Chapters 2, 3, 4 and 5 that follow, concern the data for the different age ranges addressed by this thesis. In view of the fact that each age range has largely developed a distinct research literature, it was thought helpful to review the appropriate studies at the beginning of each chapter. In each chapter, the analysis relating to both the cognitive developmental and the cultural studies-derived theoretical constructs are clearly indicated by sub-headings. The final chapter concludes the research project and indicates implications for further research.
CHAPTER 2

'Bananas can't talk'

The Modality Judgements of Three and Four Year Old Children

In this chapter, the television modality judgements of 3 and 4 year old children will be considered. At the outset, previous studies that have focused on young children will be reviewed and it will be seen that, in addition to being a very under-researched age group, this research presents methodological or theoretical difficulties. The present study, which was designed to avoid the problems associated with previous research, will then be introduced and the analysis of the children's talk about how real they thought various television characters were, will be presented. From the analysis, some new insights are gained into how children cognitively make sense of the world on television and the world around them. Human and animal attributes and questions of size are clear themes that emerge in their cognitive judgements and appear to be major social reality issues which are also reflected in their favourite programmes. In addition, the discussion group setting provoked situations where the children's responses to television had to be negotiated and here they can be seen actually in the act of thinking. The social interaction that takes place in the small discussion groups also demonstrates the children's emerging awareness of the sources of social power and their willingness to align themselves in ways that they consider are to their advantage.

The ubiquity of television sets in private homes and in public places makes it likely that most children, in developed countries at least, have their first experience of television shortly after birth. Quite what the newborn make of this experience is hard to imagine especially in view of the fact that babies' visual acuity is not properly developed until 7 or 8 months of age (Haith 1990). Williams (1981), however, found infants as young as 6 months were attending to television images and by 18 months Nelson (1973) found some children were spending an average of 1.1 hours per day watching television. Luke (1990a) claims that by the age of 2 most children have a regular viewing schedule of their favourite programmes.

It seems safe to assume that television is just one more phenomenon in the rich and diverse experience of young children and like everything else, sense has to be made of it. It is also likely, if one tries to put oneself in the position of a very young viewer, that a large part of that sense must revolve around questions of modality. How is it that television is populated by people who are very small but in all other respects look and act like ordinary
people? Can these people see me? What about the characters that don't look like people or animals I know? Why does the sequence of events often seem disrupted?

Until children begin to talk, around the age of 2, one can only observe how they respond to what they watch and then make inferences. However, once language begins to develop we can also listen to what children spontaneously say about television (e.g. Jaglom et al. 1979; Jaglom and Gardner 1981) and we can ask them questions about it (e.g. Lyle and Hoffman 1972; Hawkins 1977; Nikken and Peeters 1988; Flavell et al. 1990). Although young children's articulations about television do not provide transparent access to their thinking, they can be a rich source of data allowing us to explore how they are constructing their realities and what mental maps and theories they are using to make sense of their worlds.

By comparison with other audience groups, preschool viewers' modality judgements have not been extensively studied. In the work that has been done, the richest and most illuminating data have come from studies in the Piagetian tradition (e.g. Jaglom et al. 1979; Jaglom and Gardner 1981; Flavell et al. 1990). This research takes a respectful stance towards children's thoughts and perceptions. Indeed, it recognises these perceptions as being interesting in their own right, rather than being of interest only insofar as they illustrate some presumed deficiency when compared with adult norms. Far less useful are those studies that automatically assume a normative definition of reality and require children to answer preset questions in relation to it (Lyle and Hoffman 1972; Hawkins 1977; Nikken and Peeters 1988). As noted in the previous chapter, such work ignores the question of how viewers interpret what they view and does not consider what meanings different television programmes might have for young viewers. Instead, researchers seem only interested in demonstrating how far little children have got to go before they reach adult levels of 'normality'. The interesting ways in which very young children do make sense of their worlds, the skills they possess and the remarkable power of the human cognitive system to create sense and order out of moving images are entirely overlooked in studies like these.

The study by Jaglom et al. (1979) was a longitudinal, naturalistic study which followed the spontaneous television responses of three children from the age of 2 to 5 years. The children's mothers were used as participant observers. This study suggests that preschoolers, regardless of age, consistently use lived experience as the background against which television is compared and that there are three stages in their beliefs about the status of television. When they are very small (between 2 and 3 years) children appear to see little separating their world and that of television. As Jaglom et al. (1979) say, it is almost as though there is a permeable membrane between the two; for example, when
seeing an egg fall to the floor and break on television, one 2 year old child rushed to get a cloth to mop it up. Between 3 and 4, children perceive the two worlds to be distinct, but they recognise there are some things they see on television that have parallels in their own lives and there are other things that do not; the membrane separating the real world and the television world is now, in Jaglom et al.'s terms 'semi-permeable'. Between the ages of 4 and 5 there emerges a more complex understanding about the relationship between television and daily experience but, contradictorily, children this age tend to overgeneralize with a rule that 'nothing on television is real' irrespective of the ways in which what is viewed might parallel real life. Jaglom et al. (1979) say this stage is characterized by an 'impermeable membrane' between the world of television and the child's world.

Notwithstanding its innovative research method and the insights it offers into young children's judgements about television reality, the study by Jaglom et al. (1979) has its limitations. The empirical base of three cases is rather slight and while the developmental model it sets up is potentially useful, it needs replicating. This study contributes to a clarification of the Jaglom model insofar as the results challenge the validity of one of its elements.

An experimental study, again in the Piagetian tradition (Flavell et al. 1990), is also characterised by respect for young children's thinking. Here the researchers frame their experiment in ways that are sensitive to the perspectives of the young participants. The findings throw light, not only on how preschool children think, but also on the ways they make sense of television.

The study by Flavell et al. (1990) investigated whether 3 and 4 year olds interpret television images as pictorial representations of things or as real, physically present objects. The 4 year olds and most of the 3 year olds gave clear evidence that they did not believe the objects they saw on television were physically inside the set; they indicated that what they saw on the screen were pictures rather than real objects. However, a sizeable minority of 3 year olds claimed that the images they saw on the television had the properties of real objects (e.g. cereal would fall out of the packet if the television set was turned upside down). Flavell et al. (1990) suggest that these errors are due to the young child's difficulty in thinking of the stimulus as both an image/picture and as the referent object it depicts. They argue that the referent is more salient than the image and therefore becomes the object of thought. This study concludes by proposing a four-step developmental sequence in the understanding of television reality. In Step 1, children believe that the things they see on television are real, tangible objects. In Step 2, they learn that television images are not physically real objects but they haven't yet learnt that they are pictorial
representations. In Step 3, children gradually understand that television images represent outside referents and in Step 4 they understand what television content is real or realistic and what is not.

Studies that did not use a Piagetian developmental context invariably found their respondents to be considerably less skilled in judging television modality than did Jaglom et al. (1979) and Flavell et al. (1990). Indeed, the findings of such studies (e.g. Lyle and Hoffman 1972; Hawkins 1977; Nikken and Peeters 1988) mostly suggest that young children’s understanding about television modality is rudimentary, at best. The use of research methods that rely on ‘perceived reality’ items which privilege adult normative definitions of ‘reality’ and ignore the nuances and complexities of young children’s thinking are largely to blame.

Using ‘perceived reality’ questions, Lyle and Hoffman (1972), for example, found that children younger than 3 do not understand the nature of television itself. Even though the researchers say there is an increase in ‘television reality’ comprehension between the ages of 3 and 4, they still claim that 5 year olds cannot give a ‘reasonable’ answer to the question Where do the people go when the television is turned off? How the children interpreted the question, what the researchers called a ‘reasonable’ answer and the difficulties some young children have in framing articulate answers when put on the spot by strange researchers, all seem to be overlooked by this research.

Although the study by Hawkins (1977) is ostensibly located within the cognitive psychology tradition, its recognition of ‘perceived reality’ as an intervening variable in an effects process indicates a fundamentally behaviourist model of learning. The purpose of this study was to investigate whether ‘perceived reality’ was a unitary concept and for this purpose, Hawkins proposed two major dimensions to children’s conception of television reality. The first he termed the ‘magic window’ dimension which he described as a ‘... continuum of reality ranging from perceiving television content as dramatic to seeing it as a ‘magic window’ through which one can look at ongoing life’ (Hawkins 1977: 303) 12. The second dimension he termed ‘social expectations’ which he claimed ‘... might deal with children’s expectations about life and the world around them, ranging from not fitting with their expectations to fitting very well with expectations’ (Hawkins 1977: 304).

Using a ‘perceived reality’ questionnaire (delivered verbally) and with a simplified 5-point Lickert scale for responses, Hawkins’ youngest respondents were 4 years old.

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12 There is considerable anecdotal evidence regarding very young children believing television to be a ‘magic window’. Aimée Dorr (Dorr 1986), for example, reported that her 3 year old son became annoyed when, having recognised her on a TV programme, he was unable to attract her
Responding to ‘magic window’ dimension questions like: After The Waltons is over and you’re not watching any more, the family on the show is still a family, these young children were more likely to respond in ways that indicated they believed that the people and events that they saw on television actually existed. On the ‘social expectations’ dimension, Hawkins found the 4 year olds were sceptical about the parallels between television content and real life experience. Such results are called into doubt, however, when the kinds of question used to test this ‘social expectations’ dimension are examined. Questions like: What happens on police shows on TV are things that could happen in a police department that’s not on TV or Richie on Happy Days is like teenagers in real life represent an adult, normative view of social reality. The relevance of these, often quite complex, questions to 4 year olds, let alone whether they had the requisite knowledge or experience to answer, is doubtful.

Fifty four, 4 year old children were some of the subjects studied by Nikken and Peeters (1988). After viewing segments of Sesame Street they were asked questions relating to how real they thought these segments were (e.g. If you knock on the television, can Pinó and Tommie hear you?). They concluded that younger children (a grouping into which they collapsed all children between the ages of 4 and 6) were more apt to believe that Sesame Street, as a place, really exists, that television characters can see and hear them and that what they saw was in the television set. Apart from collapsing together children between the ages of 4 and 6, when previous research has suggested that significant changes occur in children’s modality judgements almost on a yearly basis at these ages, the ‘perceived reality’ questions are so ambiguous as to be almost worthless. What, one might ask, is a child to make of the following: Can Pinó talk by himself?, If you wrote a letter to Esther, where would you send it to?, If you draw a butterfly can it fly away?, Can Tommie draw a butterfly that can fly away?

As the summary of research findings suggests (see page 60), throughout the preschool years children are actively and consistently engaged in making sense of television by dealing with modality questions. The research, however, has tended to focus on the question of the nature of television as a medium and there are contradictory findings in this regard. Some research suggests that children very quickly work out the representational nature of television images (Jaglom et al. 1979; Jaglom and Gardner 1981; Flavell et al. 1990) and move on to resolving other modality questions between the ages of 3 and 4. Other research (Lyle and Hoffman 1972; Hawkins 1977; Nikken and Peeters 1988) claims that children, 4 years old and older, are still struggling with the status of television images and, for the
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Research</th>
<th>2 years</th>
<th>3 years</th>
<th>4 years</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Lyle and Hoffman (1972)</strong></td>
<td>No understanding about the nature of television.</td>
<td>Major (but unspecified) increase in children's understanding about television, but even 5 year olds do not give a realistic answer to the question <em>Where do the people go when the television is turned off?</em></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Structured interviews/</td>
<td></td>
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<td>People and events seen on television actually exist. Sceptical about television's relationship to real life.</td>
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<td><em>perceived reality</em> items</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Hawkins (1977)</strong></td>
<td>n/a</td>
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<td>Perceived reality questionnaire</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Jaglom et al. (1979)</strong></td>
<td>A 'permeable membrane' exists between television and real life. There is no differentiation between people and events on television and in the real world.</td>
<td>A 'semi-permeable membrane exists' between television and real life. Children realise that there are parallels between real life and television content. There is also a realisation that some things that happen on television don't happen in the real world.</td>
<td>There appears to be an 'impermeable membrane' between television and real life. New understandings exist but there is a tendency to over- generalize with the rule: 'nothing on television is real.'</td>
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<td>Observational Study</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Nikken and Peeters (1988)</strong></td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Television characters can see and hear us. What you see is in the television set. Places on television really exist.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Structured interviews/</td>
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<td><em>perceived reality</em> items</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Flavell et al. (1990)</strong></td>
<td>Children believe what they see on television to be real and tangible objects.</td>
<td>Most children believe things seen on television are not inside the set. They experience difficulty in talking about the image rather than the referent.</td>
<td>Children believe things seen on television are not physically inside the set. They are easily able to distinguish between image and referent.</td>
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<td>Experimental design</td>
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</table>
most part, still believe that they can see ongoing life through the television screen - a
screen through which they can also be seen by television characters.

Irrespective of whether the research methods are naturalistic observation (Jaglom et al.
1979; Jaglom and Gardner 1981); structured interviews or questionnaires using ‘perceived
reality’ items (Lyle and Hoffman 1972; Hawkins 1977; Nikken and Peeters 1988); or
experimental testing (Flavell et al. 1990), the children’s original responses are seldom
presented as raw data. For the most part, responses have been reduced to scores or
generalizations and thus children’s actual responses and the researchers interpretations of
them cannot be scrutinised.

In relation to ‘perceived reality’ questionnaires, an adult, normative conception of ‘reality’
has generally shaped the questions and determined how answers shall be scored.
Furthermore, items like Families on TV shows are like families in real life or Police
officers on TV are like police officers you could meet’ (Hawkins 1977), ignore the questions’
inherent ambiguities and children’s answers will not reveal what they have interpreted
these questions to mean. Such research design cannot demonstrate how children wrestle
with the nuances of modality nor does it reveal the criteria children use to arrive at their
judgements.

The present study sets out to explore young children’s thoughts about television modality
and in the process throw light, not only on how young children make sense of television, but
also how they construct their versions of social reality. Unlike the study by Jaglom et al.
(1979) which waited for children to make spontaneous comments, the present study puts the
children into a slightly structured, collaborative situation designed to encourage discussion
and debate about television modality.

The most serious limitation of the cognitivist/behaviourist research, reviewed above,
centered the adult normative definitions of ‘reality’ that were imposed on the young
respondents. In the present study, simply asking children to discuss which television
characters were ‘real’ and ‘true to life’ and ‘not real’ and ‘not true to life’ (without further
definition from the researcher) ensured that the participants were able to use their own
interpretations of the terms. Then, by analysing the talk that was produced, rather than
statistically manipulating scores, the thoughtful, complex and nuanced deliberations of the
children could be revealed. In addition, modality cues and markers that children this age
use could be identified and the links between television modality and important social
reality issues were also able to be seen.
THE PRESENT STUDY

Twelve 3 and 4 year olds, in groups of two or three, were presented with coloured pictures of characters from a variety of television programmes with which they were familiar. Some were cartoon characters (e.g. those from The Simpsons, The Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, The Bugs Bunny Show); some were puppets (e.g. Bert and Ernie from Sesame Street, the Book Worm from The Book Place); some were costume characters (e.g. the Bananas from Bananas in Pyjamas, Big Bird from Sesame Street); some were human (e.g. presenters of the Channel Nine News, presenters of The Book Place) and some were toys (Jemima and Big Ted from Play School). The children were given the pictures to examine, one at a time, and a simple question was used to focus their attention on modality issues - they were asked 'Is [the character] real?' and when a response was given, 'How can you tell?'.

Analysis of the resulting discussions is organized under three broad headings. The first relates to the cognitive judgements the children made; here the broad categories of 'Knowledge of television as a constructed medium' and 'The relationship of television to real life' (the 'internal' and 'external' criteria established by previous research with older children), were used as a starting point. Secondly, the link between modality issues and children's programme preferences is discussed and finally, the way questions of modality are used by participants to position themselves socially is presented and explored.

COGNITIVE JUDGEMENTS

Knowledge about the Constructed Nature of Television
As outlined above, the findings of previous research are contradictory when it comes to whether 3 and 4 year old children have developed some understandings about television as a constructed medium. In the present study, analysis of the children's talk about how real they thought different characters were, clearly shows that, for the most part, there were firm understandings that television's images were representational in nature. Only one category of response might be interpreted to mean that children believed that they were seeing ongoing life through the television screen and, as will be shown below, this talk could be explained in other ways. The following analysis traces, through the children's talk, the evidence that they see television as a constructed medium and the strategies they use to arrive at this judgement.

'Technical' language
In their talk, more than half of the children used 'technical language' relating specifically to television as a medium of representation. Damien (3), Barbara (4) Jimmy (4) and Tim (4),
for example, all accurately refer to certain programmes as 'cartoons' although subsequent judgements indicate that their understanding of what makes these a separate type of programme is very incomplete. Jimmy claims that 'Tin Tin's not on any more' suggesting a rudimentary understanding of broadcasting schedules. Damien makes reference to other programmes, like One Foot in the Grave, by title, indicating an awareness that television is divided up into separate programmes rather than being a version of seamless reality. Chrissy (4) and Damien (3) make reference to 'movies' they have seen on television which suggests some differentiation in their minds about types of television material. Nancy (4) and Carl (4) both recognize the Channel Nine news presenters. On seeing the picture of the presenters, Nancy says: 'They do the News.' and Carl says the programme's slogan: 'Nine Nightly News' both clearly indicating they are aware of news programmes as a separate category of television material. Jimmy is aware of this too and he also knows that different programmes are broadcast simultaneously. He recounts how he hides the remote control to ensure his Aunt cannot watch the News when he wants to watch cartoons:

Jimmy: No, cos we, we don't always like it [the News] cos, cos you know, when I, when I have the main control and the News were going on I just pressed 4 and, and there was cartoons made and Lea-Lynne, Aunt Lilibet she said 'Turn it on the News, I don't want to watch cartoons.' But I'll just leave it on cartoons and I hide it [the remote control] from Lea-Lynne but she couldn't guess where it was.

'Because I watch it on TV'

Some of the children's talk provides other, potentially contradictory, insights into their thinking about television as a constructed medium. For example Chrissy (4), Damien (3), Jimmy (4), Nancy (4) and Carl (4) all make reference to something being real 'Because I watch it on TV.' Nancy, however, also judges something to be unreal because it's on TV. Of all the children in the study, these and one 5 year old from the Junior Primary group were the only ones to use this criterion. In these two types of judgement, the central dilemma of modality in relation to the medium of television is neatly illustrated.

The judgement that something is real because it can be watched on television might be an example of the 'permeable membrane' (Jaglom et al. 1979) or 'magic window' concept (Hawkins 1977) indicating that these children believe that what they are viewing is ongoing life. If everything on television and in real life is considered equally real then 'Because I watch it on TV' is a perfectly satisfactory response to a question seeking justification for such a judgement. Chrissy (4) uses this explanation frequently. The doll Jemima is real 'Because I watch her on TV real.' and Bugs Bunny is real
'Because I watch him on TV when he's real.' So are the Bananas from Bananas in Pyjamas 'Cos I watch them on TV real too.' and the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles are real 'Cos I watch him on the telly.' The characters on Sesame Street are real 'Cos I seen them real on TV.' An interesting feature of Chrissy's extensive use of this form of response is her inclusion of the word 'real' in all but one instance. 'Real', here, is clearly an attribute of the characters in question although what it might describe, she never articulates. However, given the emphasis all of the children later put on human and animal attributes as modality markers, it is possible that Chrissy's use of 'real' here is referring to the quality of animateness.

All of the children, including Chrissy, use other kinds of criteria in making modality judgements which indicate they are aware of the representational nature of television's images so, either this understanding is somewhat unstable or, and this seems more likely, their 'Because I watch it on TV' responses can be explained in other ways. It may be, for example, an example of self-referential thinking or egocentricity, a characteristic which Piaget claimed was typical of preschool children's thought (Piaget 1952).

'Because I watch it on TV' is a bit Cartesian - *Spectatio ergo existet* - if I watch something on television, then it is part of my real experience and the character/object's reality is linked to my subjective experience of it. These children mostly use the verbs 'watch' or 'see' in their judgements, implying their agency - *they* are the ones doing the watching or seeing, *they* are the ones who had the experience of watching or seeing these characters; the primary justification for their judgements therefore seems to come from the evidence of their senses and may well be a form of Piagetian self-referential thinking.

Jimmy (4) uses 'Because I watch it on TV' in this way. Towards the end of a reasonably lengthy discussion where Tim and Jimmy both agree that Bugs Bunny is real because he talks and because he's not a person dressed up in a rabbit suit, the following dialogue takes place:

Interviewer: No, no. So Bugs Bunny's a real rabbit.
Jimmy: He's real.
Tim: Yes.
Interviewer: And how do you know he's a real rabbit?
Jimmy: BECAUSE I WATCHED HIM!

The interviewer's question, coming after the reasons they've given for Bugs Bunny being real, seems to be interpreted to mean 'How do you know all these things are true?' Jimmy's shouted response indicates his frustration at what he sees as a very stupid question - how else would you know these things unless you had watched Bugs Bunny with your own eyes?
Unlike Chrissy who frequently uses this justification, Jimmy only resorts to it when he's exhausted all the others.

Only one child used 'Because I watch it on TV' as a reason for judging a programme or character unreal. Nancy (4) makes her judgements in relation to The Simpsons:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewer:</th>
<th>That, that's baby Maggie. Are the Simpsons real?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nancy:</td>
<td>No.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewer:</td>
<td>Why not? How can you tell?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nancy:</td>
<td>Because they're on television.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

and Book Worm from The Book Place:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Interviewer:</th>
<th>He's in the photo. Any other reasons? What do you think Nancy?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nancy:</td>
<td>[Big sigh] He isn't real.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewer:</td>
<td>He's not real.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nancy:</td>
<td>And he goes on television.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Jaglom et al. (1979) found that the 4 year olds in their study often tended to be over-rigid about the unreality of television, judging the bulk of televised material as unreal. Of the eight, 4 year old children in this study, only Nancy explicitly makes this judgement. The other children maintain the flexible approach to judging modality which Jaglom et al. say is often masked by this tendency to over-generalize (Jaglom et al. 1979).

'People dressed up'
The relevance of the concept of disequilibrium becomes apparent when one looks closely at the children's talk. This is particularly evident, for example, in the way the 3 and 4 year olds grapple with questions concerning whether characters like Big Bird or the Bananas are 'real' or 'people dressed up'. In part, these are questions to do with how television produces its illusions, signalling the first appearance of curiosity in 'how it's done' - a criterion for judging the constructed nature of television that emerges very strongly among older children. Implicit in these questions is also the possibility that some characters on television are people playing roles, which is further evidence of the belief in television's representational nature. In arriving at answers to these questions, children look for links with real life and compare features of these characters with those of animals and human beings (a modality strategy that will be discussed in greater detail in the next section).
Several television programmes for young children feature costume characters - Sesame Street has, for example, Big Bird and the Snuffleupagus; Bananas in Pyjamas has two people dressed in banana suits and several others dressed as teddy bears; the film version of The Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles (which many young children have seen on video) features people cleverly costumed to look the same as the cartoon Turtles. The most extensive discussion on whether characters were 'real' or 'people dressed up' occurred between two 4 year old boys, Jimmy and Tim. They were initially shown a picture of the two Bananas in Pyjamas characters and here the interviewer seeks to clarify what she thinks is a claim that the Bananas are real:

Interviewer: O.K. Are they real bananas?
Tim: Naaah!
Interviewer: Why aren't they real bananas? What's the difference?
Jimmy: Because I wrote them but they couldn't talk, can't even...bananas can't talk.
Interviewer: Bananas can't talk?
Jimmy: No.
Interviewer: Are you sure about this?
Jimmy: Only there's, there's only a man inside there but the man's talking...inside the banana.
Interviewer: Sorry, what's inside there? What's inside there? Did you say?
Jimmy: A man.
Interviewer: A man inside there.
Jimmy: Yeah but, but, but the man just tells all them, them that, but not the them, only the men tells them story, all them.
Interviewer: I see. So there's a man inside the banana...
Jimmy: Yeah and all the others.
Interviewer: And all the others. And, and how does he talk then?
Jimmy: He's a man.
Interviewer: He's a man inside the banana and he talks. Is that right?
Jimmy: Yeah

Jimmy and Tim's scheme for 'bananas' does not include talking - as Jimmy says: 'bananas can't talk' so there must be another explanation for the fact that these two bananas do. Either the boys have worked out for themselves, or someone has told them, that these characters are 'not real' but people dressed up in banana suits, so the talking comes from the 'man inside there'. But this accommodatory scheme does not appear to work equally well for Big Bird from Sesame Street. Here, this huge yellow bird is judged real. Jimmy, it's true, momentarily doubts this judgement and hesitates - but then he returns to the fact that this character talks. No-one is inside Big Bird because: 'He can talk real.' and as Tim says: 'Only real ones can talk, eh'.
Interviewer: O.K. O.K. What about Big Bird. Is there a man inside Big Bird?

Jimmy: Nah. He, he can talk.

Interviewer: He can talk.

Jimmy: He can talk real. But, but it's not real. He t...he talk...

Tim: He's a real one.

Interviewer: He's real? Tim, you think he's real?

Jimmy: Yeah, cos he, cos he, cos he, because he can talk real, he can talk real not, there's no man inside.

Interviewer: No man inside.

Tim: Only real ones can talk, eh.

Interviewer: Sorry, Tim? What did you say?

Tim: Real ones can talk eh.

Jimmy: No, cos the man's not inside his body.

Interviewer: He's not inside the body. So how does Big Bird talk?

Jimmy: With that there [gesturing beak] that mouth.

Interviewer: Through his beak.

Jimmy: Mm?

Interviewer: Through his beak, like this, through here.

Jimmy: Through your mouth there.

Interviewer: Through your mouth. So Big Bird can talk to the other people in Sesame Street.

Jimmy: Yes.

The boys appear to be rather confused here. On the one hand, the Bananas are judged to be people dressed up in banana suits because bananas can't talk. On the other hand, a huge yellow bird is judged real because it can talk. One explanation for this contradiction is to be gained from Jimmy's focus on the mouths of the characters in question (and it is important to know here that the Bananas' fibreglass suits have unmoving mouths while Big Bird has a beak that moves up and down while it 'speaks'). For Jimmy and Tim, one of the signifiers for this scheme of 'real' television characters appears to involve talking through a moving mouth. Further evidence comes from the boys' consideration of Bugs Bunny who, of course, is a cartoon not a costume character:

Interviewer: Is Bugs Bunny real?

Jimmy: But he eats carrots.

Interviewer: What do you think? Do you think he is?

Jimmy: Yes cos he can talk with that mouth there [points to the picture of Bugs whose open mouth makes it look as though he is talking].

Tim: Cos there's, cos there's no man inside him.

Jimmy: But not the man inside his body no.

Interviewer: No, no man inside this one.
So, the ability to talk through a moving mouth is an important signifier of 'realness' in the case of Big Bird and Bugs Bunny - it appears, however, to lead Jimmy and Tim into a difficult situation over the characters in The Simpsons:

Interviewer: Are the Simpsons real?
Jimmy: No, they just show em on the TV, they, but they can talk, they can talk, they can talk.
Interviewer: They can talk, and they talk with their mouths don't they? So, does that mean that they're real?
Jimmy: No, [pointing to the characters in the picture] he can talk, she can talk...um she can talk and he can talk and he can talk and she can talk.
Interviewer: Sure, they can all talk. So does that make them real?
Jimmy: Yep.

Jimmy is in trouble here. He wants to claim that the Simpsons characters are not real, but they talk with moving mouths. The problem is, his scheme for real characters includes moving mouths. The discussion that follows about these characters (not quoted here) is unusually desultory for Jimmy, who tends to engage in what can only be described as 'distraction technique' (e.g. pointing out interesting little details in the picture before him, commenting on my spectacles and so on).

Cognitively speaking, these discussions between Tim and Jimmy vividly illustrate what happens when children are trying to make sense of the world of television. For both boys, part of their concept of a 'real' character means they must be able to talk. The Bananas challenge the integrity of this scheme because, as Jimmy says, real bananas don't talk but these two do. Either through being told by more competent others or by working it out themselves, the boys deal with this anomaly by accommodating - by creating a new scheme of 'people dressed up' and the Bananas fit comfortably into this. The talking signifier works unproblematically for the boys when considering Big Bird and Bugs Bunny, but falls apart in the case of the Simpsons characters, whom the boys wish to classify as 'unreal'. Cognitive disequilibrium is the result and it appears to be an uncomfortable - even an embarrassing - state. The schemes that have worked well in making sense of the world up to now, are suddenly exposed as flawed. This new experience cannot be assimilated into the old scheme - it clearly doesn't fit - so all Jimmy can do is stall for time in order to try and figure out, in Piagetian terms, how to accommodate.

The question of whether a television character is 'real' or a person in a costume is problematic and the children sometimes, from an adult point of view, make mistakes - but
maybe these are not mistakes. Some children have a lot of pleasure invested in fantasy characters like Big Bird and Bugs Bunny and sometimes their belief in them is strengthened by meeting these costume characters in real life. Fat Cat, Humphrey B. Bear and Bugs-type characters often frequent shopping centres or make appearances at public festivals which children attend with their parents. In the transcripts, Chrissy, Nancy, Kerry and Sally (all aged 4) and four of the junior primary children (aged 5/6) confuse Bugs Bunny with the Easter Bunny - Bugs-type characters whom they met at shopping centres and who gave them Easter eggs. The primacy of lived experience overrides any consideration of representation here - Bugs (aka the Easter Bunny) is unquestionably 'real' for all these children.

In the distinctions that Jimmy and Tim are making between costume characters and 'real' characters it is clear that television is seen as a constructed medium and that they have developed a scheme to explain how one of its illusions (talking bananas) is done. The fact that they do not draw a distinction between the animated Bugs Bunny and the live Big Bird is an indication that at four years of age, knowledge of production processes and of genre is, understandably, still very limited.

The Relationship of Television to Real Life

The second type of modality consideration that children make concerns the extent to which television's images match their concepts of what constitutes social reality. Given their relatively limited experience in the world, these concepts develop around things that are personal and familiar and for several of the children in this study, the acid test of what's real comes back to themselves. Chrissy (4), for example, explains (with emphasis) '...when they real they're LIKE ME.' 'Real' here is to be alive and living bodies have particular attributes.

In addition to the references to human attributes in their discussions about costume characters, a large proportion of the children's other judgements are based on what they know about the bodies and activities of animals and humans.

Body parts

Human and animal body parts are often mentioned when making modality judgements. Chrissy (4) bases her judgement about the Book Worm (from The Book Place) being not real on her real-life experience of finding and examining worms on the nearby beach. She focuses on the size of real worms and the fact that they don't have eyes. The Book Worm is a puppet, coloured brown with very large eyes and feelers.

Chrissy: He was... when you find a little worm at the beach that was about that little [gestures how small the beach worm is].

Interviewer: A little worm at the beach. Aah. And was it the same worm as is on The Book Place?

Chrissy: It.. the little worm don't have any eyes.

Interviewer: Right. So is this a real one?

Chrissy: Oh no. Cos that one has eyes.

Chrissy draws attention to the fact that real worms, like the ones she finds in the sand at the beach, are little and they don't have eyes. Lived experience is the yardstick against which television images are measured here and, as Book Worm has eyes, he is judged not real.

One might expect young children to experience difficulty faced with the task of determining how real the disembodied face from Mulligrubs is; it is, after all, a set of human features with the rest of the face chromakeyed out. Nancy (4) and Sally (4) believe the character is not real because it's missing a lot of body parts that make up a human being:

Interviewer: O.K. O.K. Let's have a look at... what about the Mulligrub face? Is that real?

Nancy: Oooh [laughs] No.

Interviewer: Not real? Why not?

Nancy: Cos she hasn't got a head..

Interviewer: No head?

Nancy: ... or no arms or..

Interviewer: She's got eyes though like you've got eyes?

Nancy: Yea... h

Sally: She's got those eyes.

Interviewer: And she's got a mouth like you've got a mouth.

Nancy: Yes.

Sally: Wrong colour.

Interviewer: Why isn't she real?

Nancy: She ain't got a nose.

Sally: She hasn't got a nose like us.

Nancy: Cos she hasn't no arms or...

Many of the 3 and 4 year olds are aware that real people and animals have blood inside them. When asked whether the news presenters are real or whether, as Jimmy and Tim have suggested about other characters, they are people 'dressed up', the boys indicate that real people have blood inside them so there couldn't be anyone in there:

Jimmy: They got blood. They got blood. Cos peoples can't go, be in blood!
Interviewer: Oh, but these two people don't get blood on them do they?
Jimmy: Yeah, no. Blood is inside them.
Interviewer: Oh, blood is inside them, right. So, so are they real people?
Jimmy: But, but look, blood is not where... right inside your body there.
Tim: Blood is in your nose too, Jimmy.
Interviewer: So, are they real like... Jimmy? Are they real like the Ninja Turtles?
Tim: Blood's in your nose too, Jimmy.
Jimmy: Yeah but blood's in your nose cos, cos, cos when someone punch your nose really hard, blood comes out of your nose.

Interestingly, human-like characters like the Simpsons are also judged to have blood inside them but other characters, previously judged real, like the Turtles (although Jimmy seems unsure about this now) and Big Bird, don't; they have bones. Teddies also don't have blood inside them. The children, here, are making a distinction between human and non-human characters, but there is no recognition of the fact that the Simpsons belong to a different category of human - cartoon human - although at the outset, both boys identify The Simpsons as a cartoon. This shows once again that they may have learnt the correct terminology (cartoon) but they have not yet worked out precisely what this means:

Interviewer: [...] What about inside the Simpsons, is there blood inside the Simpsons?
Jimmy: Yes.
Interviewer: There's blood inside the Simpsons.
Jimmy: But not Turtles.
Tim: [undecipherable].
Interviewer: Not the turtles.
Jimmy: No, cos they [undecipherable] of the Turtles.
Interviewer: Why isn't there blood inside the Turtles?
Jimmy: Because they're not real, that's why they're...
Interviewer: They're not real, O.K.
Tim: They are real, Jimmy.
Interviewer: They are real, but there's no blood inside them, is that what you're saying? O.K. Well is there blood inside Big Ted?
Jimmy: Nooo. They're only ted... no they're only teddies so that's why there's no blood.
Interviewer: They're only teddies.
Jimmy: If there's real persons they got blood, but that is, but that's not.
Interviewer: What about Big Bird? Has Big Bird got blood inside it?
Jimmy: No, cos, cos....
Tim: Nah, oh yes ur...
Interviewer: Cos you said there was a man inside Big Bird. No, you said there wasn't a man inside Big Bird didn't you, you said that Big Bird was real. So what's inside Big Bird if Big
Part of the exaggerated cartoon style of *The Simpsons* involves a yellow skin colour which Nancy (4) and Sally (4) pick up as evidence that they are not real:

Interviewer: How are [The Simpsons] different from real people?
Nancy: Cos they've got different skin.
Interviewer: Different skin? What, what way is it different?
Sally: That stuff's yellow. That why.

The theory that different coloured skin discriminates the real from the not real works again for these girls when considering the character Book Worm from *The Book Place* (he's not real because 'he's brown') but it becomes problematic as a signifier when Bert and Ernie from *Sesame Street* are considered. These characters are judged real because one's got yellow skin and the other has got orange skin. I then point out that they have already judged the Simpsons to be unreal because they have yellow skin. This causes cognitive disequilibrium for these girls and they appear to deal with it in the same way that Jimmy did in the last section:

Interviewer: O.K. Do you, do you think they're real?
Kerry: I reckon they're really real.
Interviewer: You reckon they're real, Kerry? Why do you think they're real?
Kerry: Cos.
Interviewer: Cos why?
Kerry: Cos one's got yellow skin.
Nancy: And one's got orange skin.
Interviewer: And one's got orange skin.
Kerry: And one's got orange skin.
Interviewer: ..and that makes them real?
Nancy: Yep.
Interviewer: O.K. Does that make them..does that make them like the Simpsons then, cos they've got yellow skin haven't they.
Nancy: Yeah.
Interviewer: But you said the Simpsons weren't very real.
Sally: They got all of what's lots of skin.
Interviewer: Say that again.
Sally: What?
Interviewer: What did you say? They've got all..
Sally: They got all skin, all together.
Interviewer: Right. But they're, they're not real, you said, but these two are real, is that right?
Sally: Yes.
Interviewer: Why are these two real and these not real?
Sally: Look he's talking [pointing to picture of
Bert with his mouth open 'talking' to Ernie], look.

Interviewer: He's talking? What about these [The Simpsons]?
Sally: They're talking.
Kerry: Yes they talking.
Interviewer: They talk too. O.K. But you still think that The Simpsons are not real..and Bert and Ernie are real..yes?
Kerry: [pointing to Bart] And he's got a slingshot.
Interviewer: He's got a slingshot, that's right.
Nancy: Slingshot..I didn't recognise that.

Once the contradiction has been pointed out, Nancy and Kerry fall silent, leaving it to Sally (4) to try, unsuccessfully, to explain what appears to be an anomaly. With the two pictures in front of her, Sally maintains that the Simpsons characters are not real but Bert and Ernie are. The 'talking' signifier is raised, but that cannot help in assimilating Bert and Ernie into the real television characters scheme because the Simpson characters also talk. Once again, the episode illustrates what happens when assimilation no longer works and disequilibrium takes over. The girls are caught in a contradiction because it is clear that Bert and Ernie cannot be assimilated into the scheme of 'real television character' using the same criterion they have used to disqualify others. When they are probed a bit more, the girls, like Jimmy, seem to engage in 'distraction technique', pointing out interesting features of the pictures that do not appear to be very relevant to the problem at hand - a perfectly understandable response to contradiction and disequilibrium.

Talking and moving

Not only are body parts (eyes, skin, blood and bones) used to assess how real television characters might be, human attributes are also important with such things as the ability to talk and move being adduced as evidence of 'realness'. As already shown, the ability to talk is an important indicator of 'realness' for young children. It is for this reason that Damien (3) claims Book Worm is real:

Damien: He's real on telly.
Interviewer: He's real on telly.
Barbara: Bigger, bigger, bigger than you.
Interviewer: He's real on telly. O.K.
Damien: Yeah and he talks.

Nancy (4) judges Big Bird to be real 'Because he talks on television.' and the news presenters are also real for the same reason. [jemima, the doll from Play School, however is not real because she does not talk and walk:
Interviewer: That's good. What about Jemima then, from Play School?
Sally: She's not...
Interviewer: Is she real?
Nancy: She's not real.
Interviewer: Not real. How can you tell.
Nancy: Cos she can't talk.
Interviewer: She can't talk. Can Big Ted talk?
Nancy: No.
[...]
Interviewer: Alright, so Jemima's not real because she can't talk...any other reasons why she's not real?
Nancy: Because, she doesn't move.
Interviewer: She doesn't move.
Nancy: She doesn't walk.

Carl (4) believes Big Bird is real because he talks:

Carl: And this Big Birdie.
Interviewer: What does he do?
Carl: He talks.
Interviewer: He talks?
Rebecca: [pointing to the picture] He done, he done got red eyes.
Carl: No he's a real bird.
Interviewer: One minute, say that again Carl.
Carl: He's a real bird.

And so does Nancy (4):

Interviewer: What do you think? Do you think Big Bird's real, Nancy?
Nancy: Because...he's on television.}
Sally: What is that for?}
Interviewer: Those are the little red lights that show me that your voices are recording. Nancy, you were telling me...why do you think Big Bird is real?
Nancy: Because he talks on television.

Toys
Although toys are often used in fantasy play as though they had human attributes, several young children used the concept of 'toy as an inanimate object' when making a judgement about the realness of television characters. Chrissy (4) and Damien (3) both own Simpsons dolls. For Chrissy, Bart Simpson is just a toy whether she plays with him at home or whether he is on television. Damien, however, is clear that his Bart Simpson doll is just a toy, but Bart's not a toy on television - the distinguishing feature is that he talks on television.
Interviewer: You've got Bart at home as well. Right.
Damien: Yeah, but...
Interviewer: Is he a toy, or is he real?
Damien: No he's just a toy.
Interviewer: He's just a toy. What about on the television?
Damien: I used to play with him.
Interviewer: Yeah. What about on the television? Is he just a toy on the television?
Damien: No.
Interviewer: What is he on the television?
Damien: He, he's just a toy that it's true, and he used to have star of him.
Interviewer: Right.
Damien: ...up on a, up on a door.
Interviewer: Oh, I see. And when he's on the TV, when Bart's on the TV is he real or is he just a toy?
Chrissy: Just a toy.
Damien: When he's a...he talks on television and he, when he's, when he's a toy he don't talk it, when he's a toy.

For Jimmy (4) and Tim (4), Jemima and Big Ted from Play School are not real because
'They're only teddies':

Interviewer: O.K. Is Jemima real?
Jimmy: Nah.
Interviewer: How do you..
Jimmy: It's only a teddy.
Interviewer: Only a teddy. Oh, well maybe you need to see..this one as well [shows picture of Big Ted].
Jimmy: Oh, right.
Interviewer: Who's this?
Jimmy: That's only a teddy too.
Interviewer: That's teddy. That's Big Ted. O.K. is there somebody inside Big Ted talking?
Tim: No.
Jimmy: No, he can't talk cos, cos...
Interviewer: He can't talk?
Jimmy: Cos, he's only a teddy too.
Interviewer: Cos he's only a teddy.
Tim: Teddies can't talk.
Interviewer: Teddies can't talk?
Jimmy: Nah, teddies can't.
Interviewer: Why can't they talk?
Jimmy: Bec..because they're TEDDIES! That's why they can't talk.
Interviewer: Because they're teddies. And what about Jemima, can she talk?
Jimmy: Nah.
Interviewer: Why can't she talk?
Jimmy: BECAUSE TEDDIES CAN'T TALK!
Interviewer: O.K! O.K! O.K! So teddies can't talk,
right, so they're just...what are they if they're not, if they're not real?

Jimmy: Teddies.
Interviewer: Teddies
Jimmy: They not, they weren't real though.

For both boys it is pretty obvious that these toys are not real because 'Teddies can't talk.', underlining, again, the importance of talking as a signifier of realness.

For Chrissy (4), Bert and Ernie (puppets on Sesame Street) are real because they are not toys. Toys for Chrissy are inanimate because '...toys aren't like me.' Bert and Ernie of course 'talk' and appear to move unaided and Chrissy sees this as evidence of them being real like her.

Interviewer: Is Bert real?
Chrissy: Yeah.
Interviewer: Bert and Ernie...How do you know?
Chrissy: Cos.
Interviewer: How can you tell they're real?
Chrissy: Cos I, I, I know they're real.
Interviewer: You know they're real.
Chrissy: Yeah.
Interviewer: What...
Chrissy: They're not toys.
Interviewer: They're not toys.
[...]
Interviewer: What sorts of things say to you these are not toys, these are real. What sorts of things do they do that toys don't do?
Chrissy: Um, also toys aren't like me.
Interviewer: [Thinking she said 'toys don't like me'] Sorry, toys..
Chrissy: Lots of toys....
Interviewer: Don't like you?
Chrissy: Yeah, they're like me (with emphasis) but when they real they're LIKE ME.

The ability to recognize that some television characters are toys is a useful modality marker which is present amongst this study's youngest participants. Only three of the 12 preschoolers claimed that Jemima and Big Ted were real. For the majority, the concept of 'toy' seems to include the attribute of 'inanimate' (irrespective of the fantasy uses to which the toy can be put) and Jemima and Big Ted are easily assimilated into this real-life scheme. Any signs of animation (e.g. Bart Simpson or Bert and Ernie talking) mean that the character cannot be assimilated into this scheme. The scheme for 'real' that emerges here is not to do with authenticity (Jemima and Big Ted are after all real toys), but rather to do with identifiably human attributes. Those children who claimed that the characters were not real because they were toys often relied on arguments that compared inanimate toys
with real people and thus the lack of various human attributes, principally the ability to talk and the 'self moving' criterion (Dolgin and Behrend 1984)\(^{13}\), were crucial in their justifications. The comparison with real-life experience once again emerges as a major means of determining modality.

The children in the present study exhibit many of the characteristics that previous research identified, however there are many differences too. Certainly, as Jaglom et al. (1979) point out, the bulk of modality judgements are made through a process of comparing real-life experiences with television content. In terms of the 'Television as a constructed medium' dimension, the findings of the present study generally support those of Jaglom et al. (1979) and Flavell et al. (1990) and contradict those of Lyle and Hoffman (1972), Hawkins (1977) and Nikken and Peeters (1988). The 3 and 4 year old children in the present study clearly understand that the characters they see on television are representations rather than 'real' in the sense of existing inside the television set. Even Chrissy (4), who is the most frequent user of 'Because I watch it on TV' as a reason for judging a character real, uses other criteria that demonstrate her understanding in this regard. The 'technical' language used incidentally when talking about television; the discussions concerning whether a character is real or 'someone dressed up' are all clear indications that even young children understand that the images of television are created, that illusions are contrived and that different types of image may carry a different modality status.

In Jaglom et al.'s terms, the children have (and according to them, they should have) moved beyond the belief in the 'permeable membrane' between the real world and the world of television and are now in the second stage where the 'semi-permeable membrane' is in operation (Jaglom et al. 1979). In the model proposed by Flavell et al. (1990), the children are in Steps 2 and 3 where they believe what they see on television is not physically inside the set and display varying degrees of facility in discussing these understandings. The 'impermeable membrane' that Jaglom et al. (1979) identify as dominating judgements in their 4 year olds is not in evidence among the 4 year olds in this study. With the possible exception of Nancy, there is no blanket rejection of the 'reality' of the television characters being considered by these children.

In terms of the 'relationship to real life' dimension, Hawkins (1977) claims that 4 year olds are sceptical about the plausibility of television content (mirroring Jaglom et al.'s 'impermeable membrane' state) but, again with the exception of Nancy, there is little

\(^{13}\) Dolgin and Behrend (1984) found that self movement is a crucial characteristic for preschoolers in their animistic judgements.
evidence of this in the present study - rather a willingness to consider each character on its merits seems to be the preferred strategy and these merits concern personal (sometimes idiosyncratic) judgements about what constitutes being human or animate. Things associated with human bodies (e.g. natural skin colour, bones, blood, eyes) or human attributes (e.g. talking, moving) are identified or inferred and these help form a scheme for 'realness' which the children use to judge the television characters they are considering. Conversely, objects like toys, which real-life experience has shown are not 'real like me' help to develop the scheme for discriminating 'unreal' television characters.

From a cognitive point of view, the data presented here provide an interesting picture of the processes of assimilation, accommodation and disequilibrium in action. Before schemes break down as useful ways of making sense of the world, they are often over-assimilated - so, for example, the criterion of 'talking' as a key modality indicator leads some children to claim that all characters who talk are real. All programmes also seem to be assimilated into one large scheme, hence there appears to be no recognition of the differences between characters who are in fact cartoons and others who are live. Sooner or later, these over-large schemes will prove to be dysfunctional and attempts to assimilate will fail, causing disequilibrium.

The discussions between Nancy, Sally and Kerry regarding Bert and Ernie from Sesame Street (p. 72 - 3 above) and Tim and Jimmy about The Simpsons (p. 68 above) seem classic cases of discovering a scheme to be no longer functional. The petering out of the discussion into a sharing of 'irrelevant' observations about the image before them are good examples of the confusion and perhaps embarrassment that occurs when one's working theories, (ones that have worked quite well up to now), suddenly fail. The strong motivating force of this transitional state is clear: the only way out of this disequilibrium is to accommodate - rethink the original scheme, modify and adapt it or create a new one to make sense of the data.

In their problem-solving, the children focus on visually salient elements of television images - what the characters look like, what they can and cannot do, and so on - and this is, according to Piagetian developmental theory, a characteristic of the thinking associated with preschool children. As indicated above, the 'Because I watch it on TV' response may also be an example of self-referential thinking or egocentricity and certainly there are examples of the transductive reasoning that Piaget claimed was typical of young children\(^\text{14}\). However, in line with much recent work examining children's

\(^{14}\) However, while statements like 'It's real because it's big' may look like examples of transductive reasoning, the next section will show that such judgements can be interpreted
cognitive development (e.g. Donaldson 1978; Case 1985; Meadows 1993), the present study finds evidence that young children are capable of thinking in more sophisticated ways when they are considering familiar, socially sensible things. Chrissy, for example, clearly shows deductive reasoning skills in her discussion about Book Worm: real worms have no eyes, Book Worm has eyes, therefore Book Worm can’t be real. Jimmy and Tim reason that toys are not real, teddies are toys, therefore Big Ted is not real. Although sometimes these children may start from the wrong premise they are nevertheless using the processes of logical reasoning that are generally more commonly used by older children.

The kinds of concepts that the children have been using to make their judgements would seem to fall into what Vygotsky (1962) has called the category of 'spontaneous', self-generated concepts as opposed to 'scientific' ones passed on from more competent others. There is not much evidence that the children have been taught the modality markers they are using. It is possible that parents may have introduced children like Jimmy to the notion of 'people dressed up' but this seems counter-intuitive - most adults are keen to prevent their children from having their fantasy beliefs shattered and go to great lengths to shield them from the truth about the real identity of, say, Father Christmas or the Easter Bunny. Tim and Jimmy would have been introduced to the term 'cartoon' but their inability to use it effectively suggests that no explanation accompanied the introduction of the term. Given that many cartoon programmes have the term in their titles (e.g. Aggro's Cartoon Connection) it's likely that this is the boys' source and they have yet to do the hard intellectual work of figuring out, from careful observation and accommodation, precisely what the characteristics of this scheme are.

MODALITY ISSUES AND CHILDREN'S PROGRAMME PREFERENCES

The programmes that young children first discriminate from the mass of visual stimuli on television are animated ones (Schramm et al. 1961; Jaglom et al. 1979; Jaglom and Gardner 1981) and young viewers' preferences are for programmes, like Sesame Street, which contain animation, puppets, toys and animals (Schramm et al. 1961; Clermont 1990). In the preparatory survey, conducted (verbally) with the preschool children and (in written form) with their parents and guardians, these preferences were reiterated, although a surprising array of television programmes were cited as ones that preschoolers watched from time to time. The children's favourite programmes included Sesame Street, Play School, Mulligrubs and The Book Place (all preschool programmes) which were watched in the

differently.

15 Damien (3), for example, had evidently watched and enjoyed One Foot in the Grave - a British situation comedy characterised by mordant wit and satire.
mornings at home or at preschool with other children. After school, The Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, The Bugs Bunny Show (cartoons) and Bananas in Pyjamas (preschool programme) emerged as favourites and The Simpsons (a cartoon shown at 6:30 p.m.) was also very popular.

Few ratings organisations consider it worthwhile to monitor the tastes of preschool viewers, however, statistics from Nielsen Media (1995) indicate that, nation-wide, the most watched programmes for 1 - 4 year olds in the month of March 1995, included: Captain Planet, The Simpsons, Disney’s Winnie the Pooh and Blinky Bill (cartoons), Lift Off, Play School, Sesame Street (preschool programmes), Australia’s Funniest Home Videos and The Very Best Worst Drivers! Again, cartoons and preschool programmes emerge as favourites along with adult programmes that feature absurdity and slapstick, knockabout humour.\(^\text{16}\)

Young children’s favourite television programmes, then, are unlike any others on television in that they feature combinations of animation, puppets, people ‘dressed up’, inanimate toys and human presenters. This unique content, it is argued here, enables young children to explore modality and social reality issues that are of enormous importance to them. As can be seen from the previous section, humans, puppets, costume characters and toys are particularly useful in helping children explore questions to do with what it means to be human or ‘...like me’ and what the characteristics are that separate the animate and the inanimate.

In addition, issues of size and power can be explored through programmes which often feature characters that are wildly disparate in terms of size. The Bananas from Bananas in Pyjamas are outsize, Big Bird from Sesame Street towers over the other inhabitants (including the human ones), the Turtles from The Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles are the same size as the ‘human’ characters and the Book Worm from The Book Place is more like a small boa constrictor. These characters often interact with human presenters and child actors, allowing some very interesting size comparisons to be made. Some programme like Mulligrubs and Sesame Street also feature live film footage of children, adults and animals in normal everyday settings.

That little children are fascinated by questions of size and power should come as no surprise. By comparison with the rest of the population, children are in fact very small and whether one will grow to be ‘big and strong’ like everyone else is a well known anxiety of

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\(^{16}\) Indeed the two programmes listed here are not unlike cartoons in that they feature what are funny, but often quite violent, physical episodes.
the young. The 3 and 4 year olds in this study devoted a good deal of time to exploring things which were, for them, 'Big' and 'Little'. Most often, when these terms are used in the older children's transcripts, they are used simply as adjectives and although the preschoolers sometimes use the terms in this way (e.g. '...my big sister', '...when you find a little worm at the beach'), it is clear that 'Big', in particular, often has a function that is more than merely a description of a character. 'Big', for example, is often used reflexively, with many children using the term to talk about their own height. For Bridget (3), discussion about Bugs Bunny's size becomes a statement about her own:

**Interviewer:** What about Bugs Bunny, is he real?

**Bridget:** Yes.

**Interviewer:** He is. Why is he real? [Bridget play acts 'big' by standing on tiptoes and reaching up high] Cos he's big? What else?

**Bridget:** Me a big girl.

Another reason why children are so interested in exploring issues of size is, perhaps, because the terms 'Big' and 'Little' are problematic. As Walkerdine (1988) has pointed out, children are described within the context of the family as both big and little - you're a big girl now', you can't carry that because you're only a little girl' - the relativity of size can thus lead to confusions and contradictions in children's minds; how can one be both big and little at the same time? Moreover, Walkerdine suggests that the terms 'Big' and 'Little', in the family context, are associated with power differentials. Generally speaking, the 'Big' people in the family - mummy and daddy - are the ones with the power, while the 'Little' people - the children - have little power.

On several occasions, the question about the reality of a television character was linked by the child to his or her own size or the size of family members. Rebecca (3) for example, refers to her own size when she's asked how real she thinks The Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles are:

**Interviewer:** How real do you think the Turtles are?

**Rebecca:** They is bigger than me.

Chrissy (4), having raised the notion that she herself is 'real' responds by referring to her size when asked for an example of something that makes her so. She then goes on to refer to her mother's height.

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17 An anxiety well understood by the advertisers of breakfast foods, Vegemite, milk drinks and other products aimed at the young.
Chrissy: Yeah, they're like me but when they real they're LIKE ME.
Interviewer: When they're real they're like you.
Chrissy: Yep.
Interviewer: And what sorts of things do you do that make you real?
Chrissy: I'm, I'm 'bout that big [gestures her height].
Interviewer: You're about that big, yes.
Chrissy: Yeah, and Mummy's about that big [gestures taller].
Interviewer: She's taller than you.
Damien: Mine about this big [gestures taller].

Tim (4) and Jimmy (4) believe the Turtles are 'real' and 'big' - creatures by comparison with whom they are 'only little boys'.

Interviewer: I see. And what's, what's inside the Turtle then? What's inside it?
Jimmy: Nothing, just the bones makes him talk.
Interviewer: Just bones and things, right, O.K. And, and if, if you met a turtle, how big would be? How big would the turtle be?
Jimmy: Big, big, big, big, big.
Interviewer: Very big.
Tim: Up to, up to here [gesturing high].
Interviewer: Higher, taller than you? Taller than you?
Jimmy: No, no, yeah they're taller cos, cos they be, cos I only little boy.
Tim: Big, big, big, big, big.
Interviewer: Cos you're just a little boy. Big, big, big. O.K.
Tim: BIGGER.
Interviewer: O.K. and...
Tim: Yeah, that one's bigger than us, hey?
Jimmy: Big, big, big.
Interviewer: So Tim you reckon they're real?
Jimmy: YEAH, THEY'RE REAL, THEY'RE REAL, THEY'RE REAL, THEY'RE REAL.

For Damien (3), 'real' and 'big' are also linked concepts:

Interviewer: They just are? What about Big Bird then, is he real?
Damien: Yeah, I've got that on tel...I watch that on telly.
Interviewer: You watch that on telly? Is he real?
Damien: I think he is.
Interviewer: Why do you think he is?
Damien: Cos he's big.

'Realness' appears, in some way, to be calibrated against 'bigness' and for many of the children, the criterion of size with which they are most familiar is their own. Thus, for
Rebecca the Turtles are real because they are bigger than her; for Chrissy, a factor that makes her real is her size; for Tim and Jimmy, the Turtles are real because they are very big and much bigger than them. Talk about modality here is clearly providing an opportunity for children to explore the social links between size and power and it enables them to reflect upon their location within this framework.

The way the term ‘Little’ is used by the preschoolers is much more conventional and less ambiguous than the way ‘big’ is used. ‘Little’ is used simply and directly to compare people or objects on television with those the child has experienced in real life. Thus for Chrissy and Damien, the Turtles and Book Worm are not real because real worms and turtles are smaller than the television characters.

Questions of human realness and issues of size and power are of functional importance to the young as they make sense of the world around them. The television programmes that they like to watch allow them to explore these matters, not through any deliberate or didactic ‘messages’ in scripts or plots but through the style or genre of the programme (animation v live) and through the choice of puppets, people ‘dressed up’, animations, live animals, human adults and children as key characters.

MODALITY JUDGEMENTS AS SOCIAL ACTS

Not only does talking about modality enable young viewers to explore issues that are strategically important in their constructions of social reality, it also enables them to negotiate that social reality in the here and now. Even these young children use the modality discourse to position themselves socially in terms of age, status, gender, class and race.

The 3 and 4 year old children, for example, frequently used talk about modality to undermine the research situation and thus the researcher’s ‘power’ and ‘status’. In addition, in their discovery of shared versions of social reality, they often forged bonds with each other which, in instances like the one below, manifested themselves as expressions of group solidarity. When Kerry (4), Nancy (4) and Sally (4) felt they had contributed enough, they quickly brought the session to an end through facetious subversion. The researcher here is pushing her luck by probing a prior response where the girls said that there was ‘nothing’ inside Jemima, the doll from Play School, except ‘...all puff’. The girls’ strategy works and the researcher is left to salvage what dignity she can from the situation:
Interviewer: What's inside Bert and Ernie?
Kerry: Bananas! [Laughs]
Interviewer: What's inside there?
Nancy: Nothing.
Kerry: Nanas!
Interviewer: You think bananas are inside Bert and Ernie, do you? And is there anybody inside Big Bird?
Nancy: No.
Kerry: Bananas!
Interviewer: What's inside Big Bird?
ALL: Bananas! [Laughs]
Interviewer: [Laughs] What's inside Big Bird do you think?
ALL: Bananas!
Interviewer: Alright. And what about...
Sally: Bananas!
Kerry: Bananas.
Nancy: Bananas in pyjamas.
Interviewer: O.K. You've done very well, thank you all very much.

At other times, participants made it very clear that they were doing the researcher a favour and this gave them power over an adult that such little children do not often enjoy. In the following example, Jimmy (4) and Tim (4) refuse to be probed any more on whether The Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles are real and Jimmy makes his frustration well felt in his shouted response:

Interviewer: So Tom you reckon they're real?
Jimmy: YEAH, THEY'RE REAL, THEY'RE REAL, THEY'RE REAL, THEY'RE REAL.

When her group discusses how 'real' various characters are, Barbara (4), who is a very small but lively child, uses the discussion to create a 'powerful' role for herself vis a vis the only boy in the group and the researcher. Her contributions begin when the group discusses Big Bird from Sesame Street:

Barbara: That's Big Bird!
Interviewer: Big Bird, yes?
Barbara: Big Bird.
Interviewer: Is Big Bird real? (Barbara nods) How do you know Big Bird's real?
Barbara: Big, big up to the sky.

Then Bugs Bunny:

Interviewer: How do you know he's real?
Barbara: Bigger, bigger.
Interviewer: Bigger?
Barbara: And he's bigger than you.
Interviewer: Bigger than me? Bugs Bunny's bigger than me?

Then Jemima the doll and Big Ted:

Interviewer: Is this real? Is this Jemima real? [Barbara nods] How do you know?
Barbara: Bigger! Bigger than you!
Interviewer: Bigger, bigger, alright. Here's Big Ted. Is Big Ted real?
Barbara: Teddy bear.
Interviewer: Is Big Ted real?
Barbara: Big one than you.

Then the Turtles and the Simpsons:

Interviewer: The Turtles. Do you think, do you think the Turtles are real? [Barbara nods] Why?
Barbara: Because he bigger than you.
Damien: Yeah, he's much more bigger than me as well.
Interviewer: Much bigger than you? What else is, what, how else is he different?
Barbara: I bigger than him.
Interviewer: You're bigger than him?
Chrissy: I'm bigger than him too.
Interviewer: Alright. What about, what about the Simpsons?
Barbara: I bigger than the Simpsons.
Interviewer: Bigger than the Simpsons. Damien, what do you think?
Barbara: I'm bigger than them.

And Book Worm:

Damien: He's real on telly.
Barbara: He's bigger than you.
Interviewer: [Laughs]
Damien: He's real on telly.
Interviewer: He's real on telly.
Barbara: Bigger, bigger, bigger than you.

Barbara's statements are definite and forceful, often on the verge of being shouted and yet they are made with an amused tone and a mischievous facial expression. 'He's bigger than you.', which she uses a good deal, is a cheeky challenge to an adult—it serves to render her both daring and successful in metaphorically reducing adult size (and thus power). Interestingly, in the group discussion about the Turtles and the Simpsons, Barbara changes her 'He's bigger than you.' response to 'I bigger than him.' after Damien claims the Turtles are much bigger than him too. This is another bid for power and
status from a very little girl; the statement makes her bigger than the pictured Turtle and
by implication bigger than both a boy and an adult. The link between size and power and
its importance for young children is illustrated once again.

Barbara is not alone in using this strategy, Willy (3), too, takes a question directed at
another member of the group as an invitation to make a power/status bid of his own:

Interviewer: [To Carl] Are you real?
Willy: I'm bigger than my Dad.

In the following extract, Damien (3), a middle class, Anglo-Australian boy plays on-
upmanship with Chrissy (4), a working class, Aboriginal girl. By claiming to have seen
the Turtles' movie (which he has, although not 'last night'), Damien presents himself
as being infinitely superior to someone who only has the resources to watch these characters
on television:

Interviewer: How do you know the Turtles are real?
Chrissy: Cos I watch him on the telly.
Damien: I watched that on the movies last night.

Later, Damien not only manages to construct himself as superior to Bridget (4 and a working
class, Aboriginal girl) because of her mispronunciation of a word, he also manages to use a
'rude' word in front of the adult interviewer. Such a 'liberty' tests and reduces the power
differential between adult interviewer and child participant:

Interviewer: What about...what about...do you know...what
about these people? Do you know them? Who
is it? Who's that? Who are you pointing to
there?
Chrissy: That's Book Worm.
Bridget: Book Worm [sounds like 'Poppom'].
Interviewer: It's Book Worm. Is Book Worm a real thing?
Bridget: Book Worm [sounds like 'Poppom'].
Damien: She said, she said, she thinks it's a bit poo

Family loyalty cannot be relied upon to protect you from others' desire to position
themselves as older and wiser. Here, Carl (4) takes the opportunity to pull rank on his
younger sister, Rebecca (3):

Interviewer: Do you think Jemima's real?
Rebecca: [nods]
Interviewer: She's real.
Carl: [Scornfully] No she's not. She's a doll,
Rebecca.
Some Summarising Comments

The work presented in this chapter extends the work done with older children (Hodge and Tripp 1986; Buckingham 1993a) by showing that even the very young actively make meanings from the television programmes that they watch.

The dialectic between theories of development and emerging schemes of modality is demonstrated in the cognitive judgements that the children make. Here, it is clear that there is new knowledge to be gained from investigating young children’s responses to television. Their sense of the real is intimately tied up with their own real selves and, what they are beginning to work out are the characteristics of other real human beings and animals. Realness and size are also intimately linked, with ‘bigger’ signifying ‘more real’ for those still only very small. The children’s judgements show that they can use deductive reasoning skills to think through concrete modality dilemmas but these skills are used neither consistently nor automatically.

The semi-structured discussions about modality required the children to collaborate in order to deal with the research task and in doing so they can be seen ‘thinking out loud’. Individual children’s ideas are challenged in discussion with others or by the researcher’s requests for clarification or justification of their judgements and often this produces striking moments of rupture or cognitive disequilibrium where one sees the collapse of working modality schemes and the confusion or discomfort this produces. The children’s responses to this here are to engage in ‘distraction technique’ which seems to be a surprisingly sophisticated face-saving response in ones so young. In the next chapter, with the 5 - 7 year olds, there appears to be less discomfort associated with disequilibrium and instead we see children in the process of thinking their way out of difficulty.

The social setting of the small group discussions restores what the empiricist studies went to great lengths to remove - the dynamics of social interaction. Here, it is clear that the social context plays an important role in what children say and the ways in which they say it. This study shows that even 3 and 4 year olds are able to identify sources of social power and use appropriate strategies of subversion or appropriation to their own advantage. Whether it was undermining an overly persistent researcher or constructing oneself as ‘bigger’ or superior to others, these children are skilled at using the modality discourse for social purposes.

This study shows that young children are not passive viewers. They enjoy television and, unlike older children, they particularly enjoy programmes made just for them (see Palmer 1986). The judicious mix of the familiar and the novel in programmes like Play School clearly serve the developing modality schemes of the young very well. The children in this
study also demonstrate that they do not believe the television screen is a 'magic window' onto ongoing reality. It is clear from their responses that they are well aware television's images are representations that have varying degrees of relationship to the real world. Working out what these degrees of relationship are involves intellectual work for which they are cognitively well-equipped. The transition from assimilation to accommodation, however, is rarely smooth and indeed, from evidence here, it is often distinctly uncomfortable; even the irrepressible Jimmy (4) sometimes finds it so:

Interviewer: Do you think they're real? Um, you don't think they're real? Why not.
Jimmy: Cos um, cos I, we both don't know.
Interviewer: You don't know? Why do you think they're real, not real?
Jimmy: Aaaaaaaaaagh!
CHAPTER 3

'Real bunnies don't stand on two legs'

The Modality Judgements of Five, Six and Seven Year Old Children

In the previous chapter, the preschoolers were seen developing and testing theories about the reality of television. In their discussions about familiar television characters, they were clearly exploring ways of understanding television as a constructed medium and indeed knew much more about it than some previous research had suggested (e.g. Hawkins 1977; Nikken and Peeters 1988). In terms of developing an understanding about television’s relationship with real life, the modality strategies the children used supported Jaglom et al.’s (1979) claim that real life is the paradigm against which television phenomena are compared. The preschoolers were constantly comparing television and real-life people, animals and things and were making their modality judgements on the basis of the accuracy of the match. The kinds of things on which the children focused were very personal and familiar - size, body parts, human and animal attributes. In addition, the programmes popular with preschoolers enabled them to explore issues of great importance in their constructions of social reality - issues of human realness, what distinguishes the animate from the inanimate and questions concerning the relationship between size and power.

In this chapter, the modality judgements of 5 - 7 year olds will be examined in order to continue the process of delineating the cognitive strategies that children develop for dealing with questions of television reality. The ways in which children’s programme preferences mesh with modality issues of importance to them will then be explored and, finally, their use of the modality discourse, to position themselves socially will be presented.

At the age of 5, children begin formal schooling in Australia and their weekday activities between 9.00 am and 3.30 pm are unlikely to include watching television for entertainment. Outside school hours, however, television watching is still a popular activity: American sources claim that children between the ages of 2 and 5 watch, on average, 3.5 hours of television a day, while 6 - 11 year olds watch 2.8 hours (Nielsen Television Services 1994); in Britain, Gunter and McAleer (1990) report the British Audience Research Board’s figure of 2.8 hours per day for 4 - 7 year olds and, in Australia, the figure provided by Nielsen Media (1995) for 5 - 12 year olds is 2.65 hours per day.

89
Programmes aimed at young audiences are scheduled around school hours with cartoons, repeats of C programmes (those judged suitable for 5 - 8 year old children) and some P programmes (those judged suitable for preschoolers) available before 9.00 am. After school, most channels schedule C and P programmes, cartoons, game shows, repeats of old situation comedies like Hogan's Heroes and The Cosby Show until the evening news broadcasts. At weekends, the same mix of programmes with the addition of video clip shows is scheduled for Saturday and early Sunday mornings. The weekend evening schedules, however, do not at present include programming intended exclusively for children. Five, 6, and 7 year olds, of course, do not confine themselves to programmes intended just for them; the children in the present study were familiar with many programmes such as Beverly Hills 90210 (targeted at older children and adolescents), Burke's Back Yard, Hey Dad! and Australia's Funniest Home Video Show - all of which fall into the 'family viewing' category.

Perhaps, because the 5 - 7 year olds are ranging more widely through general television programming than the preschoolers, there is more anxiety about the potential effects that programmes, not made exclusively for children, might have on young viewers. Whatever the reason, it is certainly the case that the television modality judgements of 5 - 7 year olds have been studied more widely than those of preschoolers. Some studies, introduced in the last chapter (e.g. Lyle and Hoffman 1972; Hawkins 1977; Nikken and Peeters 1988), continue their investigations with this older age group and others are designed with 5 year olds as the youngest participants. In all these studies, limited behaviourist and cognitivist research methods (e.g. 'perceived reality' questionnaires) produce contradictory or inconclusive findings. Adult values, perceptions and assumptions are also often deeply embedded in the research process and, thus, the conclusions about children's ways of judging television reality are compromised.

'Perceived reality' questionnaires\(^\text{18}\) are used by many studies as the principal data gathering technique. As already noted in Chapter 1, this method generally imposes on young participants an adult version of social reality in the form of pre-set questions, pre-judged video clips and predetermined categories for responding. Sometimes, the questionnaires are based on children's general viewing experience (e.g. Lyle and Hoffman 1972; Hawkins 1977; Dorr, Kovacic and Doubleday 1990) and sometimes selected video clips are used as stimulus material before a standardised 'perceived reality' interview or questionnaire is administered (e.g. Brown, Skeen and Osborn 1979; Nikken and Peeters 1988; Condry and Freund 1989; Wright et al. 1994). Although, in some studies, the specificity of certain questions produces some useful insights into what children know about television as a medium, this research generally produces contradictory findings and throws little

\(^{18}\) Or highly structured interviews as another means of delivering such questionnaires.
reliable light on children’s modality judgements. More often than not, children’s perceptions are shown, once again, to be not so much different as deficient.

In relation to the question concerning children’s perceptions of similarities between television and real life, Lyle and Hoffman (1972) found that the 6 year olds (along with the older children in the survey) ‘... expressed considerable skepticism about the realism of what they saw on television’ (Lyle and Hoffman 1972:136). Hawkins (1977), on the other hand, found that children between 6 and 8 not only saw a fair amount of similarity between television’s characters/events and their expectations about the real world but they also saw television as a useful source of information about life. A much later study by Dorr, Kovaric and Doubleday (1990), found that 6 year old children judged family series, classified by the researchers as ‘having more traditional family structures’ and ‘less traditional family structures’, equally realistic (and were thus, in the researchers’ terms, not making effective ‘real life/television’ modality discriminations in relation to this particular kind of content). The ambiguity of questions (e.g. How many real-life families in our country have the same kind of feelings as [the television family]); simplistic or confusing response formats (e.g. the Dorr et al. study required children to circle percentage figures to indicate degrees of similarity); and the adult assumptions that pervade this kind of research (definitions of, for example, what constitutes ‘traditional’ and ‘non-traditional’ families), all contribute to the production of findings that are inconclusive or contradictory.

As far as children’s knowledge about television as a constructed medium is concerned, the ‘perceived reality’ questionnaire studies again produce contradictory findings. Hawkins (1977) found that the 6 year olds were more aware of the fictional nature of television than the 4 year olds. This latter finding was repeated in a study by Brown, Skeen and Osborn (1979) where most of the 6/7 year old children judged a live ‘Star Trek’ episode to be more ‘real’ than a cartoon episode. Nikken and Peeters (1988), however, found that 4, 5 and 6 year old children held quite primitive views about television (i.e. people are in the set; they can see and hear the viewer etc). The aberrant findings from this latter study are largely due to ambiguous and confusing questions and an unwillingness to differentiate between 4, 5 and 6 year olds as separate categories of viewer.

Less influenced by the behaviourist tradition than the previous research, two studies using ‘perceived reality’ questionnaires produced some useful findings about children’s understanding of the genre. This was achieved through the use of specific questions about a previously viewed set of video clips. Condry and Freud (1989), for example, found 7 year olds were accurate in their judgements about the fictional status of programmes containing
animation, puppets or impossible feats and about the non-fiction status of news and documentaries, but they were less accurate about live action dramas and situation comedies. The study by Wright et al. (1994) found most of the 5 - 7 year old participants understood that their favourite programmes were not slices of real life. The younger children, however, were less sure than the older ones about whether characters retain their occupations/roles off-screen and whether actors rehearse before making a programme. They recognized that the news and documentary clips represented real events and were not ‘just pretend’ and they were quite sure that the fictional clips were ‘just for TV’ but less certain whether they were ‘pretend’. Confidence in these latter findings is reduced, however, by the vagueness of questions like: Was [the video segment] about something that happened in real life or just on TV? and Was [the video segment] pretend stuff? Wright et al. (1994), nevertheless, claim that children’s reality perceptions are embedded in their emerging concepts of television genres:

> It appears that, during their many hours of exposure to television, children differentiate classes or subsets of programming that are marked by both form and content. They then expand their knowledge of a marked class or genre by learning its label, its factuality, its purpose, whether it is scripted and rehearsed, its intended audience, its typical forms and formats, and its typical content.

(Wright et al. 1994: 237)

Less restrictive research methods, such as interviews, sorting, matching and discrimination tasks, have been used by other studies located in the general field of cognitive psychology (e.g. Morison and Gardner 1978; Morison, McCarthy and Gardner 1979; Quarforth 1979; Kelly 1981; Klapper 1981; Dorr 1983). These techniques have produced data that are more useful than those generated through ‘perceived reality’ questionnaires because they allow children to demonstrate their understanding through task performance or through their own spoken language. Much richer data and far greater interpretive opportunities are thus produced, but unfortunately they are not always exploited. The language of the participants, for example, has frequently been coded according to predetermined categories and/or reduced to scores. Moreover, this approach still generally assumes that television stimuli are unambiguous and unitary, that the quality of ‘realness’ is objectively definable and that adult perceptions and definitions of these things represent a universally accurate account of them.

Specific beliefs and skills in relation to judging television modality were tested in various ways (Morison and Gardner 1978; Morison, McCarthy and Gardner 1979; Quarforth 1979; Kelly 1981). In a study with 5 - 11 year old participants, Morison and Gardner (1978), for example, studied the children’s ability to distinguish between reality and fantasy as part of their developing classification skills. They found all the participants were able to sort
pictures of fantasy and non-fantasy characters very accurately. Fantasy, however, was not a salient category for the 5-7 year olds when they were asked to make pairs, based either on fantasy or some other criterion, from 3-card selections. They were only likely to make pairs on the basis of fantasy if this was cued by what the researchers called ‘potency’ - that is, the characters were known to have magic or special powers. A related study, investigating children’s reality-fantasy distinctions, was conducted by Morison, McCarthy and Gardner (1979). Children from a wide age range (6 - 11 years) were interviewed after viewing video clips. The results indicated that sophistication with both reality-fantasy distinctions and understanding of television as a medium correlated with age, with the 6 year olds performing significantly less well than the 8 or 11 year olds. The authors concluded that one of the components necessary for a competent understanding of reality-fantasy distinctions is a certain amount of technical knowledge about television.

Quarforth (1979) used a somewhat harder sorting task than the one used by Morison and Gardner (1978). Instead of the simple categories of fantasy/non-fantasy for sorting characters, the children in Quarforth’s study were required to group pictures of television characters into human, animated and puppet categories. They were also required to discriminate those characters who ‘are alive’ and those who could ‘walk and talk by themselves’. On the grouping task, only 48 per cent of the 5 year olds organized the pictures into discrete groups of human, animated and puppet characters (52 per cent chose other systems of categorization, such as characters being on the same show). For the second task, the majority of 5-7 year old children did not seem to realise that being alive and having the ability to move autonomously were (at least, according to the researcher) characteristic only of human and not of animated or puppet characters. This finding is probably due to the strange and ambiguous wording of the distinction the children were being required to make - cartoon characters, for example, certainly appear to ‘be alive’ (compared with a cartoon rock) and they certainly appear to ‘walk and talk by themselves’ as opposed to puppets, where one can often see the strings or the puppeteer.

In a methodologically quite simple but very useful study, Kelly (1981) asked 7 year old children to distinguish the ‘more real’ television show from pairs ranging from easy distinctions (judged by the researcher) to more difficult ones. The children’s responses were categorised according to a descriptive scoring system which consisted of two key dimensions: medium/real life comparisons and medium specific comparisons. Analysis of the responses showed that 7 year olds’ judgements on the medium/real life dimension were dominated by considerations of what looked real, whether real-world equivalents could be identified in the show and whether questions of possibility or impossibility were involved. Impossible feats or physical impossibilities (people flying or using magic powers, animals talking) were cues that signalled fantasy. Having recognized these violations of physical
reality, this study found that children’s *medium specific* considerations involved explaining television’s techniques of deception (e.g. stunts, camera tricks, make-up etc).

Interviews were used by both Klapper (1981) and Dorr (1983) in their investigations. In the study by Klapper (1981), which included 7 year old children as the youngest participants, there were some findings that coincided with those of Kelly (1981). The children were individually asked various questions testing their perceptions about the relationship of television content to real life. The results indicated that the large majority of children did not perceive televised fiction as being inherently or consistently realistic or unrealistic. Children cited concrete, literal things as examples of what was ‘a lot like real life’ and the 7 year olds, in particular, most often commented on physical appearance or simple behaviours of characters rather than motives, values, goals or interpersonal relations. When asked about the basis for their beliefs about the ‘reality of television’, the children cited real-life sources which included personal experience, being told by family members, newspapers and radio/television news. Klapper (1981) did not specifically ask her subjects whether particular programmes and characters were fictional, however, 38 per cent of the 7 year olds spontaneously commented on the fictional nature of television referring, often quite knowledgeably, to actors, scripts, plot structure and so on.

A number of studies which Dorr conducted in the 1970’s, all of which involved the use of interviews with participants aged from 5 through to adulthood, were reviewed (Dorr 1983). Three possible meanings of the judgement that something on television is real are identified. First, there is a concrete definition, where saying that something on television is real means that it is exactly as it is without a television. Secondly, reality means a fabricated experience in which characters, actions, messages, themes somehow conform to real life. Thirdly, within this latter dimension, Dorr also identifies two possible types of judgement: something can be judged real if it is deemed possible. On the other hand, something can also be judged real if it is deemed probable or representative. Both of these judgements require extensive references to one’s general knowledge of physical and social reality.

In some respects, Dorr’s participants seem less advanced than those of, say, Kelly (1981) or Klapper (1981). Dorr claims the 5 year olds, for example, did not know what they meant when they said something on television was real, while 7 year olds tended to give synonyms for ‘real’ or an idiosyncratic response. This performance, however, is likely to be an artefact of the question: *What do you mean when you say something on television is ‘real’?* which 5 - 7 year olds might well find linguistically and cognitively challenging. When using different data, Dorr shows that the incidence of using contextual or formal feature cues to judge the reality of a programme increased markedly between the ages of 5
and 8 years. All the 5 year old children in the study judged cartoons as fantasy, while news and crime drama programmes were judged real. The basis on which these judgements were made appeared to be the way the programmes looked - the distinctive styles of cartoons and fantasies compared with the visual realism of crime drama shows. This finding, which is congruent with those of Condry and Freund (1989) and Wright et al. (1994), reinforces the importance of genre and indicates that 5-7 year olds are far more skilled in making modality judgements than they are in giving definitions of 'real' that will satisfy an adult researcher.

The most illuminating study for this age group (Hodge and Tripp 1986) used sorting and discrimination tasks like many others, however, this study is cross-disciplinary in nature. It draws on linguistics and semiotics as well as psychology and sociology to create its theoretical framework; it conceptualises television programmes as bundles of potential meanings and children as interpreters of them. Through various tasks, the dimensions of 'television/real life comparisons' and 'television as a constructed medium' are again shown to be the principal means by which television modality is judged. In one task, the 6-8 year olds showed not only the ability to distinguish between cartoon characters, those in dramas and 'television stars' (i.e. well-known personalities) but they also demonstrated how salient 'unreal' characters were for this age group. The importance of 'television/real life comparisons' was demonstrated in another task where 80 per cent of the 6-8 year olds made discriminations that indicated they believed life was more real than television (a finding Jaglom et al. (1979) also claim for the preschoolers in their study). Knowledge about television production was also an important criterion for the children in this study with the 6 year olds being able to recognize some of the processes of media production - acting, pretending, fake blood and so on.

As can be seen from the summary of research on pages 96-99, despite the reliance of some studies on flawed research methods, the usefulness of a model of modality judgements, conceptualised along two main dimensions, is generally strengthened. In terms of the relationship between television and real life, several studies indicate that 6-8 year old children find much on television that is realistic or like real life (Hawkins 1977; Klapper 1981; Kelly 1981; Dorr 1983). The claim made by Jaglom et al. (1979), in the previous chapter, that real life is the paradigm against which television images and events are compared, is also supported (e.g. Klapper 1981; Hodge and Tripp 1986). In addition, the children's modality judgements are dominated by what looks real, whether there are concrete real-life equivalents and whether things are physically possible (Morison and Gardner 1978; Kelly 1981; Dorr 1983).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research</th>
<th>Findings</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lyle and Hoffman (1972)</strong></td>
<td>Six year olds found child TV characters 'like themselves' but TV grownups less like the ones they knew.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Structured interviews using 'perceived reality' items</td>
<td>Six year olds 'sceptical' about TV realism. This, claim the authors, is the start of the process of differentiating between life as portrayed on TV and real life.</td>
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<td>274 x 6 year old children</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Hawkins (1977)</strong></td>
<td>Six year olds more likely than 4 year olds to have developed understandings about TV's fictional nature. 6-8 year olds see a large degree of similarity between TV and their expectations of the real world. TV seen as a useful source of information about life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'Perceived reality' item questionnaires</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51 x 6 year old children</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Brown, Skeen and Osborn (1979)</strong></td>
<td>Most 6 and 7 year olds judged cartoon 'Star Trek' to be less real than a live episode. Conservers have a higher degree of 'perceived reality' than non-conservers. Presence of live actors is claimed to be the determining factor in making reality judgements.</td>
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<tr>
<td>'Perceived reality' item questionnaire</td>
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<td>64 x 6 and 7 year old children</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Nikken and Peeters (1988)</strong></td>
<td>Five and 6 year old children believe Sesame Street actually exists; TV characters can see and hear viewers; what you see is in the TV set.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Structured interviews using 'perceived reality' items</td>
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<td>96 x 5 - 7 year old children</td>
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<td>Condry and Freund (1989)</td>
<td>Seven year olds are accurate about the fictional status of programmes containing animation, puppets and impossible feats and about the real status of news and documentaries. They were less accurate about TV sit. coms. and realistic fiction.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Viewing of selected segments followed by semi-structured interviews</td>
<td>20 x 7 year old children</td>
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<td>Dorr, Kovaric and Doubleday (1990)</td>
<td>Questionnaires using 'perceived reality' items</td>
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<td>Wright et al. (1994)</td>
<td>Viewing of selected segments followed by interviews using 'perceived reality' items.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Morison and Gardner (1978)</td>
<td>Sorting and matching tasks</td>
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<td>Morison, McCarthy and Gardner (1979)</td>
<td>Six year olds less good at making reality-fantasy distinctions than older children. Ability to make reality-fantasy distinctions and understanding TV as a medium increases with age. Development of sophistication in these understandings may be affected by things other than age. Technical knowledge about TV is necessary for competent reality-fantasy distinctions. Child’s familiarity with TV or the amount watched are not correlated with reality perceptions.</td>
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<td>Viewing of selected video segments followed by semi-structured interviews</td>
<td>12 x 6 year old children</td>
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| Quarforth (1979) | Forty eight per cent of 5 year olds correctly sorted human, animated and cartoon TV characters. Majority of 5-7 year olds did not realise that autonomous movement and being ‘alive’ are characteristic only of human characters. Only 15% of 5 year olds could correctly explain how humans differ from cartoons and puppets but with specific questions 60% of 5 year olds could make accurate judgements. Twenty per cent of 5 year olds thought TV characters could see them/were little people actually in the set. Fifty per cent did not think this but could not explain the characters’ status. Twenty five per cent of 7 year olds say cartoon characters are ‘people dressed up’. The ability to categorise human, animated and puppet characters increases as children grow older. Five to seven year olds have an incomplete understanding of the reality status of puppet and cartoon characters and they do not know how cartoons are made or work. Those who do know have been taught at school or by TV itself. |
| Sorting and discrimination tasks and questionnaire | 64 x 5, 6 and 7 year old children |

| Kelly (1981) | Seven year olds’ reality judgements dominated by what looks real and whether there are real-life equivalents. Impossible feats or physical impossibilities are cues that signal fantasy. Seven year olds very keen to explain and detect how TV achieves its effects (camera tricks, stunts etc.). The 7 year olds’ approach to judging reality is absolute and does not recognize that reality is a relative and multi-faceted concept. |
| Discrimination task | 18 x 7 year old children |

<p>| Klapper (1981) | More than 80 per cent 7-10 year olds thought some aspects of TV fiction were unrealistic and some realistic. Concrete, literal things cited as examples of things on TV that are/are not like real life. Seven year olds comment on physical appearance, simple behaviours. Thirty eight per cent of 7 year olds spontaneously referred to the constructed nature of TV by mentioning ‘actors’, ‘playing parts’, ‘scripts’. Seven year olds use real-life sources as basis for beliefs in reality/unreality of TV fiction. Seven year olds no more likely than 10 year olds to rate programmes as being like real-life. Large majority of 7-10 year olds don’t see TV fiction as being inherently or consistently realistic or unrealistic. |
| Structured interviews | 88 x 7 year olds |</p>
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Authors (Year)</th>
<th>Methodology</th>
<th>Findings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dorr (1983)</td>
<td>Structured and semi-structured interviews 5 year olds - adults</td>
<td>Five year olds cannot explain what they mean when they say 'X on TV is real'; 7 year olds give synonyms for 'real' or idiosyncratic answers. Between 5 and 8 years, the use of contextual cues and formal features for judging reality increases markedly. All 5 year olds judged cartoons to be fantasy, witches/genres to be 'pretend' and drama to be real. The basis for judgement was the way the programme looked (cartoon style v drama's visual realism). 'Probability' is a much more important basis for judging TV's reality for adolescents and adults than it is for children. Children younger than 8 have little knowledge of TV production or economics. The number of children using contextual cues and the number of cues increases with age.</td>
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<td>Hodge and Tripp (1986)</td>
<td>Sorting and discrimination tasks 17 x 6 - 12 year olds</td>
<td>From 3-card TV character selections, 76% of 6-8 year olds paired cartoon characters; 13% chose drama characters; 11 per cent chose 'stars'. The 'television/real-life' construct is a most important one for 6-8 year olds who used it 46% of the time in sorting 3-card selections of TV and real-life characters. Eighty per cent of 6-8 year olds used sorting categories that indicated they believed real-life was more real than TV and 20 per cent used categories indicating a belief that TV and real-life were equally real. The responses of 6-8 year olds were often contradictory, nonsensical or inconsistent. Fifty seven per cent of 6 year olds use media-related criteria to specify reality (e.g. dressing up; acting). Forty three per cent use familiarity (e.g. here/known). Even 6 year olds use some understanding of media production to distinguish between TV fantasy and reality. Popularity of programmes for 6-8 year olds is directly the opposite of the order of reality going from the most unrealistic (cartoon characters) to the most realistic (real-life characters). Younger children may be employing a wider range of features that specify reality than can be integrated into a coherent conceptual system. Younger children use fewer features that specify reality than do older children. Measuring television against reality is a major concern for 6-12 year old children. Simple TV/reality distinctions drop in importance as children grow older and develop more complex bases for judgement.</td>
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In relation to knowledge about television as a constructed medium, the 5 - 7 year old children appear to share with the preschoolers in this study, the understanding that television is not a window onto a real world where the characters can see and hear them (Hawkins 1977; Quarforth 1979; Wright et al. 1994). The work of Nikken and Peeters (1988) stands out strikingly in contradiction, however, it seems most likely that these results are very strongly influenced by a highly normative scoring system and 'perceived reality' questions that were extremely ambiguous. Children between the ages of 5 and 7 years also appear to become increasingly accurate when discriminating between and/or sorting television, fantasy and real characters (Morison and Gardner 1978; Quarforth 1979; Hodge and Tripp 1986; Condry and Freund 1989) and even children as young as 5 are in no doubt about the unreal status of cartoons (Brown, Skeen and Osborn 1979; Dorr 1983; Hodge and Tripp 1986; Condry and Freund 1989; Wright et al. 1994). Indeed, important modality strategies used by children at this age seem to concern the contextual cues and formal features of particular television genres, such as those that distinguish cartoons and news programmes. Children in this age group also exhibit a burgeoning interest in the technical details of television production and make spontaneous references to such things as 'actors', 'acting', 'scripts', 'camera tricks' and so on (Kelly 1981; Klapper 1981; Hodge and Tripp 1986). Wright et al. (1994) indicate, however, that there are still grey areas in this regard, with 5 year olds being less certain than 7 year olds about the occupational/role status of characters off-screen and the necessity for actors to rehearse.

In all these studies, the research design has concentrated on identifying the various strategies, cues and markers that children use to make modality judgements. Where children's language has been gathered as part of the data (Kelly 1981; Klapper 1981), it has been classified into pre-set categories and the children's actual words are often lost. Where participants have made strange or seemingly nonsensical responses, they have been ignored or classified as inadequate in terms of the studies' criteria. Apart from the risk of distorting children's original thoughts about television reality by squeezing them into categories pre-shaped by adult assumptions, one also loses the ability to examine the situations where children are making 'errors'. As Piaget found when first working in Binet's laboratory, children's errors or confusions are often more interesting and revealing in relation to the way they think than are the 'correct' answers. The latter show when children have safely arrived at intellectual destinations, the former often illustrate the difficulty of the journey.

There is a need to investigate children's modality judgement in ways that avoid the methodological and theoretical pitfalls that are evident in previous work. The present study is designed to highlight the language children actually use when collaborating with others to solve a simple research task - finding a way to show which programmes are 'real'.
or 'true-to-life' and those that are less so. In this way, not only will data about children's modality judgements be elicited, but insights into their thinking processes will be obtained as well.

THE PRESENT STUDY

The present study used a simple sorting/classification task (like several in the literature reviewed above), however, the purpose was not to see where children classified different programmes along some modality continuum, but was rather to generate rich discussion and debate among the participants in the act of making modality judgements. Fine-grained discourse analysis was the method used to identify the modality cues, markers and strategies that the children routinely used in making these judgements and, thus, the thought processes involved when the participants were faced with modality dilemmas were also revealed. These cognitive strategies are dealt with in the first section below. In the second, programme preferences for 5 - 7 year olds are examined and the links between their favourite shows and salient modality issues are explored. Finally, the children's discussions are analysed for examples of where the participants are using the modality discourse for the purposes of social action.

Thirty one 5, 6 and 7 year old children (16 boys and 15 girls) were randomly allocated to small groups of three or four. Whereas the preschoolers had been presented with pictures of characters in various television programmes with which they were familiar, for the 5 - 7 year olds, the research design was modified to keep the task challenging and genuinely problematic. A larger number of programmes, from a broader range of genres, was used and the name of each programme was written on a card. The cards were initially read out by the researcher and then placed on the table in front of the participants.

The preparatory survey had identified a wide range of programmes with which the children were familiar and from these, 24 were chosen representing as wide a range of modalities as possible. Programmes included those especially intended for children such as Big Square Eye, Play School and Skippy; cartoons such as The Bugs Bunny Show, Captain Planet and The Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles; situation comedies such as The Cosby Show and Hey Dad!; soap operas such as Neighbours and Home and Away; and general 'family viewing' programmes such as the News, Burke's Back Yard and Australia's Funniest Home Video Show. The children were asked to show which programmes they thought were 'real' or 'true-to-life' or 'not real' or 'not true-to-life' (and no further definition of these terms was provided by the researcher). Generally, the groups created piles to help distinguish the modality status of different programmes: for example, there

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19 See Appendix 1 for complete list.
might be a 'real' pile, an 'unreal' pile and a pile for those that were judged 'a little bit real and a little bit unreal'. All discussion during this collaborative process was audio-taped and once all the cards had been considered, the researcher generally asked for clarifications and/or probed certain judgements the children had made.

The data suggest that, like the preschoolers, the 5 - 7 year olds are not at all confused about the representational nature of television's images. Rather, they are intensely concerned with how television, as a medium, creates its illusion of reality. At the same time, a major means of coming to some decision about the reality status of a programme involves looking for links between television content and real life - identifying elements that do or do not have equivalents in the child's experience. As Dorr (1983) claims, younger children are very much concerned with possibility, that is, whether feats, characters or events are possible. Sometimes, separate strategies and types of knowledge are required to yield understandings about both the nature of television as a medium and its relation to real life but sometimes a particular factor will yield understanding in both domains.

COGNITIVE JUDGEMENTS

Knowledge about the Constructed Nature of Television

The process of detecting similarities and differences between different types of television programmes indicates developing knowledge about television as a constructed medium. Unlike the preschoolers, who could use the label 'cartoon' but appeared to have little understanding of the characteristics of the genre, the 5 - 7 year olds use visual cues and real-world knowledge extensively to detect the genres of both cartoons and news programmes. They also show a lively interest in how particular programmes are made and how different effects are achieved and, in the absence of accurate knowledge, come up with many ingenious explanations for them. The modality judgements that the 5 - 7 year olds make are strongly related to these emerging concepts of genre and whatever knowledge they have about 'how it's done'.

Recognising Genres - Cartoons

Cartoons are very important for children this age, possibly because, together with news programmes, they signify the extreme ends of the modality continuum. Over and over again 'Because they're cartoons.' or 'It's only a cartoon.' are considered adequate justifications for consigning a programme to the 'unreal' pile. One of their reasons for this placement is stated by Kristin (6) who says The Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles and The Simpsons are unreal 'Because they're only...um, cart...They're only cartoons as well, cos they're not true.'
At other times it is almost as though the children's understanding of television modality is covered by only two schemes, one of which covers cartoons/drawn pictures and the other, everything else. This from Tom (6) is typical:

Tom: I think the News, Burke's Back Yard, and all those movies and stuff [are real].
Interviewer: Why do you think they're more real, more true to life?
Tom: Because um, because the cartoons are really dr., um, drewed and not like the other ones.

And this from Todd (6) and Theo (5):

Interviewer: Why do you think that Vidiot needs to go on the more true to life, more real pile?
Theo: Um, because it's got real people in it.
Interviewer: Real people in it. What do you think about Vidiot, Todd?
Todd: Um...I think that...um Vidiot because...um like they haven't like draw, drawn the pictures.

[...]

Interviewer: [Pointing to the pile of cards designated 'real' or 'true to life'] Alright so, now what do you think...what have these ones all got in common?
Todd: No drawn pictures.

Katie (7) says Neighbours is real 'Because, it's like, it's got real people in it and it's not cartoon...'. and when asked what the difference is between The Simpsons and Home and Away, she agrees with Peter (7) who says 'Because they're cartoons [points to The Simpsons] and they're not [points to Home and Away].'

These children, then, easily discriminate this particular form of television programme. In two of the extracts above, knowledge that cartoons are drawn is an important criterion but this is by no means common; only nine of the 31 children (29 per cent) demonstrate that they know cartoons are 'drawn' or 'painted pictures' and seven of these are boys. For the rest, other contextual cues and formal features help separate out the genre of cartoons from different television genres and these tend to focus on the way characters look and behave.

As will be shown in greater detail in the next section, the fact that cartoon animal and human characters do not behave like real-life animals and human beings is a major factor in determining their reality status. Blair (5), for example, puts Bugs Bunny on the unreal pile.
'Because he's just a cartoon and a...and...no...um, animals can talk.' Elizabeth (7) makes a related point: 'Because real bunnies don't stand on two legs'. In all groups, it is acknowledged that while Captain Planet looks identifiably like a human being, his magic powers definitely give him unreal status.

Children rarely comment on the appearance of animal cartoon characters. No-one, for example, comments on Bugs Bunny's outsize teeth and ears or his attenuated body; no-one comments on the colour of the Turtles, or their big eyes. The exaggeration, unnatural colours and strange body shapes the children accept without comment in animal characters, are much noticed and commented on, however, when it comes to human characters. This group compares the way the Simpsons characters are drawn with the way real people look:

Karen (5): They've got yellow skin.
Ellen (7): They have yellow skin.
Interviewer: Mm hm. They have yellow skin.
Karen: And Bart has sticking up hair.
Interviewer: Mm hm.
Ellen: (Whispering) Some people have sticking up hair.
Interviewer: Any other reason?
Richard: Because, um, you don't really have those little hairs down there [indicates base of scalp] and the rest bald and little things like that, and Homer has that big, um thing around his mouth and you don't really have that.

The largely unnatural, exaggerated colours of cartoons seem to be an important means by which children discern the cartoon genre. For example, Janet (5) says '...they're not real colours' as a reason for consigning Captain Planet, The Bugs Bunny Show and The Simpsons to the unreal pile. Katie (7) claims 'Um, cartoon, um has, like it's kind of got its different colours.' John (6) answers the question 'What do you mean it's a cartoon?' with 'Because it's got colours on it.' and Elizabeth (6) says 'It's where the TV he..is just colours and it doesn't look like real people.'

Recognising Genres - The News

News broadcasting is a readily identified television genre for these children. All groups talk quite knowledgeably about the purpose of the news, and they emphasise that it has real people 'telling us all what's happening' in a world often beyond the children's immediate experience. The faith of these 5-7 year olds in the authenticity of the news is something that will be seen again among the 8-10 year olds. In a sense, this
faith appears to be a response to the disequilibrium created by the research task which has, in modality terms, made the news as problematic as other types of television programme. In the genre scheme these children are developing, they recognise that news programmes form an important cognitive base-line or anchor, an important modality benchmark against which other programmes can be measured.

There are certain contextual cues and formal features that help children identify news broadcasts. In this discussion between Todd (6), Nick (7) and Carol (5), Carol identifies the continuity of news readers as one cue:

**Nick:** The News, yes, the News of course.
**Todd:** Yes, that shows everything real.
**Interviewer:** Which ones are more real than the other ones.
**Nick:** The News is more real because they’ve got real people every, um, day.
**Carol:** They get, they’ve got the same people every day.
**Interviewer:** The same people every day.
**Nick:** No..there’s different accidents and different ..
**Carol:** But the same people..
**Interviewer:** The same people?
**Nick:** Not the same people..
**Carol:** The people that..the same people that are telling the News.

For Zeke (5), news programmes (*Wonderworld* is a kind of news programme for children) are marked by the ability of presenters to cut to a news scene or event seemingly at the push of a button. Elizabeth and Justine have learnt to identify the station logos and generics that signify a news broadcast:

**Interviewer:** You don’t watch the News. What about you, Zeke?
**Zeke:** Well, um, if there’s a bush-fire and the people on Wonderworld and then they’ll press a button, then the um, people come along.

**Interviewer:** O.K. And how can you tell when, say you turn the television on and it wasn’t at the beginning of a programme, how could you tell it was the News? Because um, they’re real people.
**Zeke:** They’re real people? Any other reason? How could you say “Oh! This isn’t Home and Away, this is the News?” How could you tell?

**Interviewer:** Because it has National Nine News.
**Elizabeth:** Mm hm. Supposing it didn’t say that though,
supposing you’d missed that bit, how could you tell it was the News? Justine?
Because there’s this circle that comes on, up on the TV and it says Ten.

Interviewer: Uh ha. Anything else?....Right, so that’s how could tell it’s the News.
Justine: And then the News comes on and then you can see the circle.

Knowledge About ‘How It’s Done’
The act of asking children to negotiate how ‘real’ or ‘true-to-life’ familiar, everyday television programmes were, often had the effect of destabilising their comfortable, existing modality schemes. In these instances, assimilation often no longer worked and accommodation, or new ways of thinking and making sense of the world, was the next step. For all participants in this study, the frequency and intensity of the ‘how it’s done’ discussions, and the cognitive effort that they invariably involved, are a reflection of the compelling need to resolve disequilibrium. In all cases, the diverse hypotheses the children came up with and the ingenuity of the supporting evidence show how cognitively important the transition phase between assimilation and accommodation - this ‘zone of proximal development’ - can be.

With the exception of two of the youngest, the 5 - 7 year old children were aware that cartoons are different from other television programmes and that their images and sounds are created by someone. Indeed, Todd (6) displays quite sophisticated knowledge about this: ‘...like um, in Bugs Bunny, Mel Blanc is doing Bugs Bunny’s sound...They have like a microphone with string or something on the roof and he talks through it like Bugs Bunny’s sound.’ Geoff (5) claims that Bugs Bunny can talk because ‘Some people that are making the show are sending their voice into the bunny.’ John (6) says of The Simpsons: ‘The Simpsons aren’t real because it’s a drawing and the person makes the sound.’

While most children are less knowledgeable than Todd, John and Geoff, they nevertheless put forward various theories about how cartoons are made. This discussion about The Bugs Bunny Show between Con (6), Sean (5), Seth (5) and Blair (5) is typical in its pooling of disparate bits of information about ‘how it’s done’. It’s clear that the boys are not really sure about how cartoons are made. There is some understanding that they are ‘drawn pictures’ that ‘move around’ but there are also signs that the boys are trying to assimilate cartoons into schemes they have already developed to explain ‘unreal’ characters on television - the schemes of ‘people dressed up’ and ‘puppets’.
Con: Um, I don’t think it’s real because um...because it’s a cartoon and it’s...it has...it, um, it doesn’t look quite...it’s got people dressed up and I think...um, they try to make it comedy that’s cartoon.

Interviewer: O.K. What’s a cartoon?

Sean: Well, it’s something that um, just have painted and then they use puppets.

Interviewer: Do you know how to make a cartoon?

Sean: No.

Seth: Yes, cos I could paint, I paint a bit of paper and then, and then make it, and then just move it around the TV.

Blair: Yeah.

Interviewer: Move it around on the TV, is that how you do it...

Sean: Seth, I think you have to stick it on and then just...

Seth: But how do you move it around?

Sean: Well, there’s...might be something on there and you just move that if you want him to move. And there’s one on that side and that side and then you use the puppet to do all the directing these things.

Blair: You take a picture.

Interviewer: You take a picture.

Sean: You’ve painted another one and when it changes pictures you just take the first picture off and then the next picture.

Another group, involving Belinda (6), Tom (6), John (6) and Marion (6), also tries to make sense of the cartoon, The Raggy Dolls, by using existing schemes of ‘puppets’ and ‘drawings’. The characters in this cartoon look and move like rag dolls, so it is perhaps understandable that the children should turn to what they know about puppets to assist them here. Most interesting, in the light of 4 year old Jimmy’s discovery about the Bananas in Pyjamas in the last chapter, is Belinda’s (6) reference to the dolls’ unmoving mouths.

Interviewer: Not real. O.K. What about The Raggy Dolls? Which pile should that go on, Marion?

Marion: Um, the real.

Interviewer: The not real pile?

Marion: The real pile.

Interviewer: The real pile, why should it go on the real pile?

Marion: Because people do have rag dolls.

Interviewer: O.K. Tom?

Tom: Um, because um they just make it and they’re like a bit of puppet when they speak from the puppets.

Interviewer: O.K. John, what do you think?

John: It’s the drawing, I think it’s the drawing and it and it moves and the person makes the
Interviewer: noise.
Belinda: O.K. Belinda?
Their mouth don’t move and the people down
the bottom that help them walk with a stick,
they do all the talking.

While only nine of the 31 children referred to the fact that cartoons are ‘painted’ or
‘drawn’, the following extract is typical of this view: Elizabeth (6) and Justine (6) stick to
scheme of ‘painted pictures’ in their explanation:

Elizabeth: Yeah, all it is, is um a picture is painted
and people who are walking just um, near the
picture...
Interviewer: Mmm.
Elizabeth: On TV.
Justine: They’re just walking behind the pictures to
make out there’s people there.

Captain Planet’s ability to fly is explained on two different occasions by referring to
schemes that make sense of theatrical stunts and illusions. Seth (5) says ‘...and
Captain Planet really might be swinging, swinging on an invisible swing because he can fly.’ Geoff (5) has a similar explanation: ‘Um, people
don’t fly because they only have strings tied up to their backs and
that, and they’re going, and they’re really tough and they can hold
people and fly them along.’

Knowledge that cartoons are made by someone is sometimes based on wider knowledge about
the media industry in general. Three groups have a scheme for ‘Disney’ which appears to
make sense of the unrealistic nature of some film/video/television products. ‘Disney’, for
them, is a place where this kind of product is made. Ross (6) for example, claims cartoons
aren’t real ‘Because they’re made in Disney and some Disney isn’t true.
Cartoons made in Disney.’ In another group discussing The Teenage Mutant Ninja
Turtles, Tom (6) and Con (6) show they have separate and distinct cognitive schemes for
both films and cartoons:

Tom: Well Ninja Turtles is kind of...thing,
because some, because there’s two movies and
a few um...a few cartoons.
Interviewer: Mmm. What of the Ninja Turtles?
Con: Yes, there’s two...the movie...
Tom: Ninja Turtles too and Ninja Turtles in
the cartoons.
Interviewer: What’s the difference between the cartoon and
the movie?
Tom: The movie has real people dressed up in
costumes and um, the cartoon’s just drawn.
In contrast with the preschoolers, the 5 - 7 year olds seem much more confident in distinguishing between characters who are real and those who are 'pretend' (a term the children introduced in the discussions). All groups identified the characters in Sesame Street as being a mix of real and 'pretend' however, there was considerable speculation about the nature of the latter. Most children judged characters like Big Bird to be unreal because they believed they were either puppets or 'a person dressed up.' Peter (7) declares 'There are people inside them and they're acting.' Ross (6) and Elizabeth (6) account for Big Bird's size by claiming there are two people in the outfit, one standing on the other's shoulders. This is not an adequate explanation however for Belinda (6), Marion (6), Colin (6) and Tom (6):

Colin: I think he's a robot.
Marion: [Whispers] I think he's real.
Interviewer: A robot. What about you Tom?
Tom: I think um, he's a person dressed up um with a birdie on top and um he talks inside so the birdie could um say but he talks to the people from inside the thing.
Interviewer: And Bert and Ernie, what are they?
Belinda: They're real because they're small and they've got a costume on.
Interviewer: They've got a costume on, so they're little...little people with costumes on?
Belinda: No.
Tom: They must be little childs.

So keen are several children on this revelation that some characters are in fact people dressed up in suits, they claim they can see the 'zip up the back' of different characters - even cartoon and real characters. In relation to Snuffy and Big Bird, Geoff (5) claims 'And they got a zip up on the back.' Belinda (6) explains 'Bugs Bunny isn't real...and Daffy Duck. Cos they both wear suits, 'cos when they turn around you can see the zip at the back.' Conversely, Seth (5) judges Skippy to be a real kangaroo because '...I haven't seen any zip on him so he's not dressing up.' Katie (7) also claims that Skippy must be a real kangaroo because you can't see the join where the head piece of a costume (like Humphrey Bear's) meets the body. One group speculates that if Skippy is a person dressed up, then he jumps with the assistance of 'tools in there and um, when it bounced they had a moving trampoline.'

When we move away from cartoons and programmes with puppets and costume characters, the children seem to have fewer explanations about 'how it's done'. Peter (7) was an exception; he very clearly explained the technique of back projection and how it is used to create illusions in dramas and situation comedies. One group speculates about the setting for
Play School and finally Colin (6) decides '...and they're not in the big house, they're in a stage because you can't see the windows and the things outside, you just, just see blue.'

Two girls use quite sophisticated explanations of television sets. Katie (7) says of the school in Beverley Hills 90210: '...it's a kind of fake school that people just go to when they're making the movie' and of E Street '...it's a real street but it's just used to be filmed.' Elizabeth (6) says of Sesame Street 'It's just a show where...it's a real house but it's just a show and ah, um, they just have the show inside a big house' and in relation to the lead character in Pugwall: 'He's just in a TV room where he was being tape-recorded.'

Only rarely did the children use the terms 'actor' or 'acting' in the sense that the characters are played by real people. Julia (6) indicates her understanding of this when she claims The Bugs Bunny Show to be not real 'Because all the um things, all the actors in there can't talk...in real life.'

There was more speculation about whether people on television continued their roles/occupations off-screen - something that Wright et al. (1994) also found to be an area of uncertain knowledge among 5-7 year olds. Several groups, for example, claimed that the families portrayed in Hey Dad!, Family Matters, Pugwall and The Cosby Show were in fact real families where the father and/or mother were the real parents of at least some of the children in the show. For example, after his group asserts that the family in The Cosby Show is a real family, that Bill Cosby is the father of the children in the show and that they all live in the same house, Colin (6) says: 'They should be married because they're both brown and they have brown children.' Ross (6), Geoff (5), Katie (7) and Peter (7) have the following conversation about the family in Family Matters and again demonstrate an unclear understanding about the characters' status:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewer:</th>
<th>So, that's pretty real. O.K. Is that family, is the family there a family when it's not on television?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ross:</td>
<td>Yes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geoff:</td>
<td>Yes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter:</td>
<td>Err...actually, that isn't a whole family.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewer:</td>
<td>Isn't it?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geoff:</td>
<td>Yes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ross:</td>
<td>Yeah.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewer:</td>
<td>It is a family?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katie:</td>
<td>Yes, it is a family.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewer:</td>
<td>It is a family. So, when the television</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The 5 - 7 year old children in this study use real-world knowledge, visual clues and technical information to identify and make modality judgements about certain kinds of television content. The suggestion by Wright et al. (1994) and Dorr (1983), that modality judgements are linked with emerging concepts of genre, is supported by the data presented here. Cartoons, which are almost unanimously judged to be 'unreal', appear to be one of the first genres to be discriminated. From an adult perspective, this seems hardly surprising given that cartoons are so radically different from other television fare, however, adult certainty about the genre is based on what we know about how cartoons are made and on long familiarity with their style and form. In addition to the animation, adults attend to formal features of cartoons including such things as the fast pace of the action, funny voices, 'violence', and loud, often zany sound effects (Huston and Wright 1983). Significantly, an exhaustive search of the children's talk about cartoons found no reference to these formal features except for 'violence' and they mentioned this only to comment on how unrealistic it was. Instead, the features the children choose to focus on are the appearance and behaviour of the characters - exactly the same things that they focus on when looking at television's relationship to real life.

One could not find a greater contrast for cartoons than news broadcasts and this is the genre which, following cartoons, is the most readily recognized by the 5 - 7 year olds. This study, like others (Condry and Freund 1989; Wright et al. 1994) found that while this age group generally judges cartoons to be 'unreal', the news is always judged 'real'. It seems likely that the reason children discriminate these genres first is because they are so different in terms of function, style and format20 and also because, in modality terms, there is a real need to establish the modality extremes in relation to television content. Once again, the links with real-life experience are clear, but there is evidence that some children are also beginning to use certain bits of visual evidence, such as station logos and generics, that they have learnt are signifiers of news broadcasts.

Many of the extracts that have been used, thus far in the chapter, show that speculation is intense about many aspects of television content: how cartoons are made; how Big Bird talks; how Skippy jumps if he's someone 'dressed up'; the nature of studio sets; how television families are constituted and so on. To deal with these questions, the children largely rely on schemes developed to deal with real life experience and must either fit the

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20 The direct address of news broadcasters, for example, distinguishes these programmes from the entertainment programming that young children typically watch.
new experiences into an existing scheme or, if this does not work, modify the scheme or
develop a new one. Some of the 'errors' or 'quaintness' (from an adult point of view) in the
children's explanations are either due to over-assimilation or to the creative way they are
approaching the necessity of accommodation.

Over-assimilation is apparent in many discussions about cartoons. With only 29 per cent of
the 5 - 7 year olds having an accurate idea about how cartoons are made, all groups
speculate widely about their nature. It is clear, the children know cartoons are contrived,
however, in their explanations the majority refer to 'people dressed up' and 'puppets'
rather than the fact that cartoons are drawn. What seems to be happening is that without
the crucial knowledge about 'how it's done', cartoon characters are assimilated into a pre-
existing scheme which makes sense of other types of characters (e.g. puppets and 'people
dressed up') whom the children have already learnt are 'unreal'.

The question of 'zips' supports this explanation. Some children have the reasonable
theory, based on real-life experience, that if a character is someone dressed up, then there
is likely to be a zip on the suit somewhere. Not only does this lead them to claim they can
see zips that aren't there (there are no visible zips on Big Bird and Snuffy), some children
also claim they can see zips on cartoon characters - a clear case of adjusting the new
experience to fit the existing scheme, or in Piaget's terms, making the unfamiliar, familiar
(Piaget 1952). In these instances, the children's existing schemes are stretched to fit - they
over-assimilate all characters they believe to be unreal into the existing concept of 'people
dressed up'. The children who claim cartoons are drawn, on the other hand, have
accommodated. They have created a new scheme to explain the phenomenon and they do
not make these errors.

That the process of accommodation can be difficult, is demonstrated in the discussion about
The Simpsons which occurs between Sean (5), Seth (5), Blair (5) and Con (6). To follow it, it
is necessary to know that Bart's stylised spiky hair-cut does look something like a crown,
there are no hair details round the back or sides of Bart's head and what remains of
Homer's hair is suggested by a few bent lines jutting out from the base of his scalp.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewer:</th>
<th>What about The Simpsons, what pile would you put that on?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All:</td>
<td>Unreal.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewer:</td>
<td>Unreal? Why is it unreal?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Con:</td>
<td>It's a cartoon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sean:</td>
<td>And they don't have spiky hair.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blair:</td>
<td>They have spiky hair?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewer:</td>
<td>Yeah, they're yellow.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Con:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Sean: No, they just put a crown on...the crown on.
Interviewer: Ah ha. O.K. Do you agree with this Seth it should go on this pile?
Seth: Yes. Um, but, the...I don't see it as a crown on there because it...because that, um because, then they'll, they'll see it's on the sides but it's not on the sides.
Sean: Yeah well they could just have a special crown and they um make it....
Seth: They could stick it on.
Sean: Yeah they stick it on here [points to top of head] and then so it doesn't come down here [points to base of scalp].
Seth: And I know cos it's a cartoon cos uh, that uh, cos they turn away and then they still haven't and, and, and you, they don't have hair. They don't have ordinary hair, it doesn't...
Blair: Only the mother has it...hair.
Interviewer: Sorry?
Sean: No.
Blair: Only the mother has hair.
Interviewer: Only the mother has hair.
Sean: The mother turns around and then you can just see a bit.
Interviewer: Right. So what you're saying is when they turn around...
Con: No and the Dad, and the Dad he has a little bit of hair.
Sean: No that's just pretend...spikes.
Seth: Or it might just be drawn on.
Sean: No, no it might be spikes, um, like stuck on or sticks.
Interviewer: O.K.
Seth: No, they're bent though.

Everyone agrees that The Simpsons are 'unreal', however only Con, the oldest child, uses the term 'cartoon' with anything like confidence. Attention focuses on the stylised representation of human beings that is used to depict the Simpsons characters, in particular, the way their hair is drawn. In their discussions, the younger boys try to assimilate the exaggerated and simplified hair of the cartoon characters to their existing scheme of 'people dressed up' and Bart's hair is explained as a 'special crown'. When this does not seem a very satisfactory explanation, the observation that Bart has no visible hair-line when he turns round is used by Seth in an attempt to accommodate. The new scheme he is trying is 'cartoon characters are distinguished by the lack of a hair-line round the back of their heads'. That doesn't work, however, because Sean and Con point out that you can see the back of both Marge's and Homer's hair. Even though Sean claims Homer's hair is 'pretend' and Seth suggests it may be drawn, they revert to the old scheme of 'people dressed up' to explain the way Homer's few wispy strands of hair are depicted - they are 'bent sticks' or 'spikes' that have been 'stuck on'.
Interestingly, in their subsequent discussion about *The Bugs Bunny Show* (see p. 107), the same boys seem a little clearer about how cartoons are made. You ‘paint it’ and ‘move it around on the T.V.’, ‘stick it on’, ‘take a picture’ and ‘take the first picture off and then the next picture’. However, they are still assimilating the cartoon characters to the pre-existing scheme of ‘puppets’ and ‘people dressed up’. Indeed, for Sean, it is the puppet who is involved in ‘directing these things’.

For these boys, all the elements for a new scheme are there - the concept of drawn pictures, the awareness that the characters are not ‘real people’ and the knowledge that the term ‘cartoon’ somehow has an explanatory function. However, despite the obvious disequilibrium, attempts at accommodation have not been satisfactory and while assimilation to an old scheme is still possible, it is a strategy that the boys continue to use.

While speculation about the nature of cartoons is very evident among the 5 - 7 year olds in this study, it is much less evident in discussions about the reality of dramas and situation comedies. This was also the case in previous research (Klapper 1981; Condry and Freund 1979; Wright et al. 1994). The children use terms like ‘make-believe’ and ‘pretend’ comfortably when talking about Big Bird, The Turtles, Bugs Bunny or Bart Simpson. Only once, however, was ‘pretending’ used about live actors and that was in relation to those in *Home and Away*. The technical language of dramatic representation - actors, acting, sets, scripts, studios - is rarely, if ever, used, although a few children have sufficient bits of technical knowledge to understand something of the professional side of television production (microphones, TV rooms’, stages etc).

Television realism (e.g. live action drama, soap operas, situation comedies) it seems, is not a focus for children’s modality judgements at this age. They know there are real people in programmes like *Home and Away* and *Beverly Hills 90210* but, beyond this, the modality status of the characters is not considered unless a direct question is asked. When these questions probe below the superficial recognition of real people, areas of doubt and confusion become apparent. This is not to suggest that children this age believe programmes like *Home and Away* are ‘true’ in the same way they believe the *News* to be ‘true’ - there is no evidence to support this view. Rather, these young participants are being consistent in their identification of concrete things and people but it seems there is not yet a comfortable ability to consider at the same time the modality of fictional storylines or plots.

Knowledge about how television realism is produced is one key to this aspect of modality, however 5 - 7 year old children do not have uniform access to useful information of this
kind. Another key is the ability to mentally coordinate modality judgements about 'real' objects/people with fictional storylines and plots - a complex skill that requires an ability to think of more than one thing at a time as well as a greater facility with abstract thought than is generally typical for this age group.

Although, like the preschoolers, the 5 - 7 year olds concepts about 'how it's done' are largely what Vygotsky called 'spontaneous' or self-discovered concepts (Vygotsky 1962), there is evidence that older and wiser members of the culture have attempted to pass on important cultural information to help children make sense of television. The fact that Mel Blanc was responsible for Bugs Bunny's voice, that cartoons are drawn and that certain effects are achieved through the technique of back projection are not things that children can work out for themselves. These things have been explained, incidentally, as children and adults have watched television together or they have been learnt from such television sources as, for example, programmes like The Making of the Lion King, where viewers are shown 'how it's done' by the experts. Todd's description of the sound studio where 'They have like a microphone with string or something on the roof and he talks through it' has a strong visual quality, suggesting that this is not something he has been told but rather is something that he has seen.

With the preschoolers, their knowledge of television as a constructed medium was limited. Some of the children believed some television characters, like Big Bird, were people 'dressed up' and others were able to use the term 'cartoon' accurately, but this did not guarantee an understanding of cartoons as a genre. The older children, on the other hand have progressed some way in their understanding about television as a medium in that they can generally discriminate types of programme that have egregiously different modality statuses, like cartoons and news broadcasts. They are more sure about 'people dressed up' and some children have bits and pieces of knowledge about how television creates its images. Where there is an absence of knowledge there is, as has been demonstrated, an abundance of theories to accommodate that which can no longer be assimilated (or temporarily over-assimilated); children this age are actively speculating and puzzling over 'how it's done'.

The modality of television realism is understood only at a very superficial level and it's not until the next age level that children begin to explore this genre in greater depth, examining the plausibility or probability of personalities, events and situations in television situation comedies and dramas. Even some of these older participants, however, have difficulty coordinating the very realistic settings and characters in television realism with their growing understanding about fictionality.
The Relationship of Television to Real Life

Real Life Equivalents
When examining the relationship between television and real life, an obvious technique is to look at the extent to which elements of the one do or do not occur in the other. In doing this, the preschoolers focussed on the very personal and familiar - body parts, proper coloured skin, walking and talking. The 5-7 year olds do much the same in relation to the television programmes they were considering, but their focus has broadened to reflect their more extensive experience of life. Real life objects, people and to a lesser extent events and situations are what the 5-7 year olds focus on.

Kelly (1981: 65) reported one child in her study judging The Brady Bunch to be real because: 'They have a refrigerator, and there are such things as refrigerators.' - a response echoed by Marion (6), in the present study, who says The Raggy Dolls are real 'Because people do have rag dolls.' The children concentrate on concrete, literal things they can identify in the programmes and recognisable objects are frequently adduced in justifying judgements that programmes are real. Real prizes and buzzers in Vidiot; real gardens and plants in Burke's Back Yard; real houses, surf boards and waves in Home and Away; real pencils, homework and computers in Beverly Hills 90210 and a real dog in Neighbours are the kinds of objects mentioned by children in their explanations. Hannah (6) for example, explains that in Burke's Back Yard '...it doesn't have trees that don't look like trees. It has real trees.'

Every group claimed that programmes such as Home and Away, Hey Dad! or Vidiot were real because '...they have real people in them.' When asked how they could tell they were real people, some children gave simple explanations which compared the appearance of television characters with 'real world' people by saying 'Because they look like real people'. Con (6) put Hey Dad! on the real pile because '...I mean on Hey Dad! they're real people because they show, like their hair is a very good style and um, they have real clothes.'

Demonstrating a more confident ability to distinguish between real and not real characters than the preschoolers, the 5-7 year olds also made judgements based on the concepts of 'real' and 'pretend' people. David (5) for example, claims the News is real '...because it's not pretend people like Bugs Bunny or Captain Planet.' Other children wanted to put Sesame Street in a half real/half not real pile because '...there's real people and pretend people in it.' A few responses implicitly compare real characters with puppets or costume characters. Elizabeth (6)
explains that Home and Away is real because they've got real people who are in them and their, their voice is just recorded and it's their own voice not someone else's.' Hannah (6) explains that Vidiot is real because '...the man he talks and there's no - and there's no-one dressing up as that man' and the News is real '...because the lady who talks and there's no-one under her who's dressed up....'

The 5, 6 and 7 year olds much less frequently referred to television situations and events as being real. When they did, it was because they had personal knowledge of the events or because they matched their own model of the way the world works. Those references that were made were in relation to news programmes. Spiro (5) for example, claims a news programme is real because it had run a competition for a car and the family of one of the children at the school had won it. Seth (5) argues that the News is real because he had seen the report of the fire at Windsor Castle on one evening and the next day the same pictures were published in the newspaper. Belinda (6) refers to a flood in a nearby suburb reported on the News: 'Um, well, once there was a flood in Greenvalley Creek - they said that there was a big flood, and the dog got killed cos it got washed away and some people in a helicopter they got some people out of the big flood from a truck.'

Judgements based on 'possibility' were used when a direct one-to-one match between personal experience and events in a television programme could not be found; the child's model of the world acted as a basis for comparison here. Richard (7) for example, thinks the News is real '...because it can really happen'; Karen (6) thinks the News '...is true because people get hurt and they get killed and there's fires and all sorts of stuff.' When asked how she knew there were real things on the News, Jenny (6) said 'Because it happens in real life...they tell you there's a fire somewhere and there is some fires.'

Colour was an important means of judging the extent to which things on television are like those in real life for some of the 5-7 year olds. Of the 15 children who used colour in this way, 10 of them were girls. Janet (5) for example, claims Skippy is real because it has '...a real-coloured kangaroo'. She also claims the News, Pugwall, Home and Away, Now You See It and Neighbours are real 'Because of the colours'. When asked to explain this notion of colour a bit more, another girl in the group, June (7) says 'Well, um, like people colours, like um light pink...and, and like some programmes have um, different colours like The Simpsons have yellow.' Maria (6) also says the difference between the family in The Simpsons and
the family in Hey Dad! is ‘...because they’re yellow [points to The Simpsons] and they’re not [points to Hey Dad!].’ Natural colour, for these girls, is clearly an important cue for judging modality.

_No Real Life Equivalents_

If one major criterion for establishing modality was looking for similarities between television and real-world people, objects and events, then another is its opposite. The more these things clashed with the children’s own experience or their model of the world, then the more likely they were to judge a programme unreal.

With the exception of one or two of the youngest children, these 5 - 7 year olds readily classified cartoons as being unreal. Many children, as indicated above, considered the term ‘cartoon’ a sufficient explanation to justify their ‘unreal’ modality judgements. Other explanations referred to the obvious differences between real-life people, objects and events and those in the cartoons. The focus, as Dorr (1983) and Kelly (1981) suggested, is on things that aren’t possible. Here Richard (7), Andrew (5), Karen (5) and Ellen (7) discuss why Captain Planet isn’t real with their judgement centring on the appearance of Captain Planet himself. Note, however, how Karen, in her statement ‘They could dye it’, is using a scheme that makes sense of ‘real-life’ experience to assimilate the cartoon Captain Planet’s green hair:

Interviewer: O.K. why’s Captain Planet not so real?
Andrew: Because no-one has green hair.
Interviewer: Nobody has green hair. Mm hm. Any other reasons?
Ellen: Green face.
Karen: Red eyes.
Interviewer: Any other reasons Andrew?
Karen: They could dye it.
Interviewer: They could dye it...yes. Do you think they’ve dyed their hair?
Andrew: No.

Other children also recognize that Captain Planet has abilities that real human beings do not share, for example he owns a magic ring that gives him special powers and he can fly. As Seth (5) says ‘I don’t think Captain Planet’s real because, because they have powers and things like that and people don’t have powers.’ That real people don’t have special powers is also alluded to by Con (6) who claims Now You See It is real ‘Because there’s buzzers and it’s not cartoons and um, and ... and they don’t have magic in it or powers or things like that.’
The appearance of the characters in *The Simpsons* is cited by all groups as evidence of their 'unreality'. The following extract is typical in that it concentrates on the physical characteristics of the cartoon characters (their colour, the way they are drawn) which are compared with those of real people:

Interviewer: You've chosen *The Simpsons*. Why is *The Simpsons* not very real?
June: Because they've got funny heads.
Interviewer: They've got funny heads [All laugh] O.K.' Why's that not real, can't people have funny heads?
June: Well, they can't have bumpy, pointy heads.
Janet: Bumpy, pointy heads.
Interviewer: And yellow heads.
Interviewer: Anything else about *The Simpsons* that makes them not real?
June: Doesn't look like real people.

Animal cartoon characters are, for most children, unquestionably unreal because they are unlike real animals. Frequently, the children explain that animals like Bugs Bunny or the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles cannot be real because real animals can't stand on two legs, sing or dance, wear clothes or talk. Furthermore, as Ellen (7) points out, it is not realistic that 'Bugs Bunny lives in this big hole and there's um all seats for him and comfortable things'. Similar arguments are adduced when discussing *The Raggy Dolls*. Real dolls, it is claimed, can't walk, move, live or talk (unless as John (6) points out they have batteries!)

The model of the world used by several children in this study clearly includes knowledge or beliefs about the effects of injury or violence on others. The effects of cartoon violence clearly do not fit this model of the real world and this provides a further justification for the judgement that cartoons are not real. Katie (7) says '...on the cartoon there's, like you see something, there's something happens and you get a black eye and the next time you see this person he hasn't got a black eye any more.' Similar insights are articulated by June (7):

June: Because um, well, um, well Bugs Bunny, um hurts himself and then in a couple of and then he just gets up.
Interviewer: And that's not very real you think.
June: No.
Interviewer: What happens if you hurt yourself?
June: Well you have to sit there. Well you have to...well if we hurt ourself we could just stand up if it was a little hurt but if it was a...if we fell over or something, we might, we couldn't, probably couldn't get up.
Colin (6) agrees. His comment is interesting for another reason, however, because he links violence and blood in the same way that 4 year old Jimmy did in the previous chapter. Blood, here, appears to be a high modality sign:

Colin: Um, well, um one day when um Bugs Bunny, well this um person shot um a ra...Bugs Bunny, and there was no blood coming out and you could see the hole – that’s why they’re not real. They just bounce back.

Interviewer: In real life what would happen?
Colin: Um, there would be blood coming out.

For Richard (7), the same argument applies to the realism of the rather gothic soap opera, E Street. He judges this programme to be unreal ‘Because lots of people die and you can’t...if you get um, shot about three times, um, you have to die. And like in E Street, Steven Richardson he got shot three times in the um, face and he came alive again.’

For June (7), the dramatic convention of making a character’s thoughts and daydreams visible, as used in Pugwall, is not plausible because it is not something that happens in real life:

June: ...like he imagines all these things and, but, um people don’t imagine things and show other people do they? He, he imagines something on TV.

Interviewer: So, something’s going on inside his head – but you can see it on the TV, is that right?
June: Yes.
Interviewer: So that’s not very real you think.
June: No.

As Jaglom et al (1979) claimed about the preschoolers, real life is the basis for all these judgements the children have made about the reality of television. The principal strategy involves matching things, detecting similarities and differences between what the children know intimately from their own experience (or from their model of the world) and images of those things on television. The cognitive process of detecting similarities and differences involves not only careful visual scrutiny but also the ability to classify things.

The fact that children are working hard at visual discrimination as a means of judging modality is clear when one considers the careful and meticulous scrutiny to which they are subjecting television images. Few adults who watch children’s programmes would be aware that the Simpsons have only four fingers on each hand, that the Raggy Dolls have unmoving mouths and no fingers at all, that Captain Planet has red eyes, that Skippy is seamless or that you can’t see anything outside the windows on Play School. In a way, none
of those things matter to more mature viewers because they have already made modality judgements about these characters and programmes based on their greater understanding of television genres and their greater knowledge of 'how it's done' - they don't need to look for confirming evidence. Only when adult viewers are confronted with entirely bizarre or unfamiliar images\(^{21}\) do they ask 'Is that real?' and deliberately seek visual evidence to arrive at an answer.

Piaget (1952, 1970) and others (Flavell 1985; Kohlberg 1976; Selman 1980) have drawn attention to the fact that children between the ages of 2 and 7 are influenced in their thinking (about, for example, moral dilemmas or friends) by the way things look - by external appearances. During this period, children become more systematic when classifying things, they use more complex attributes as the basis for sorting and they are increasingly successful in these tasks, provided that the organizing rule is concrete and unidimensional (Piaget 1970). The children in this study are indeed using a concrete and simple organizing rule for judging modality - real means having a real-life equivalent or being possible and it is therefore highly consistent that the way people, objects and animals look is very salient. These children rarely make modality judgements about television events and situations (unless they occur on the news) because such judgements require more than simple visual scrutiny and matching. When Kirsty (6) claims that Captain Planet is not real because the female characters are too passive ('...the girls don't do much stuff'), this is a qualitatively different kind of judgement from the kind that says the Simpsons are not real because '...they're yellow'.

Judging the modality of television programmes that fall between the modal extremes of cartoons and news broadcasts requires the ability to hold in mind and juggle two contradictory concepts - on the one hand the images are of real things and people, but on the other these shows often revolve around fictional (i.e. not real) stories and characters. The 5-7 year olds in this study largely demonstrate a preference for dealing with one set of concepts at a time. Like the children in Kelly's study (1981) they have an understanding about what is real that is absolute. There is little acknowledgment yet that 'real' might mean different things in different circumstances, that it is in effect a relative term.

\(^{21}\) For example, the sky surfers in the Coca Cola advertisement or the athlete swimming through sand in the Powerade advertisement.
MODALITY ISSUES AND CHILDREN’S PROGRAMME PREFERENCES

In the preparatory survey for this research, the children indicated that a very high percentage of the programmes that they watched frequently, and liked a lot, were cartoons. This was a phenomenon endorsed (and lamented) by their parents and supported by previous research and ratings data. That this is a preference which has been consistent over a long period of time is clear from the work of Schramm et al (1961) who reported that the preferences of 5/6 year olds 36 years ago were for cartoons and ‘fantasies’ like Batman. Twenty five years ago, the 5 - 7 year olds in the huge study conducted by Lyle and Hoffman (1972) also preferred cartoons, family and situation comedies. For the month of March 1995, for children aged 5 - 9, the most high-rating programme was the animated movie An American Tail, followed by the cartoons Captain Planet, The Simpsons and Disney’s Winnie the Pooh. Other top-raters were the children’s game show Vidiot, the general entertainment shows Very Best Worst Drivers! and Australia’s Funniest Home Video Show, and the family shows: Family Matters and The Brady Bunch (Nielsen Media 1995).

It is argued here that an important reason for the television preferences of the 5 - 7 year olds being so persistent is because these programmes permit children to explore two types of social reality issue of crucial importance to them at this time. One involves the continued delineation of what it means to be human and the other concerns the growing awareness that social texts are created by others. The favourite programmes of 5 - 7 year olds neatly fall along a modality continuum with the completely ‘unreal’ cartoons at one end through to the simple realism of family comedies like Hey Dad! and The Cosby Show at the other. In between there are interesting test cases where elements of the two ends of the continuum are blended together to create interesting and amusing modality puzzles (e.g. the special effects in Vidiot and the cartoon-like things that happen to real people in Australia’s Funniest Home Video Show). In fact, the popularity of anomalous programmes like these suggests that children are deliberately seeking out television experiences that stimulate cognitive disequilibrium.

Compared with the preschoolers, the 5 - 7 year olds seem to have clearer ideas about what constitutes ‘real’ people and are much better at identifying which characters are real people and which are not, which are cartoons, ‘people dressed up’ or puppets. Human realness, however, is still an issue but now, in their discussions about how real they think various programmes are, most children choose to focus on its limits. As demonstrated above, and as Dorr (1983) and Kelly (1981) also found, the children’s strategy of matching and comparing things on television with things in real life is very much concerned with questions of possibility: what is possible, what is impossible or absurd.
Cartoons, of course, lend themselves to the exploration of these questions because things in cartoons are so manifestly 'unreal', exaggerated and absurd. Cartoon characters can go beyond the limits of human possibilities in their stunts and antics; they can do the impossible - they can get shot and not bleed; they can be horribly injured and be up and about in the next scene; they can fly; they can use magic powers and so on. By contrast, the simple realism of Home and Away and Neighbours and the documentary-type realism of Burke's Back Yard enable the reassuring identification of familiar, everyday objects - trees, surf boards, dogs and so on.

Australia’s Funniest Home Video Show creates disequilibrium because it challenges the simple view of what is possible. It shows real people behaving like cartoon characters - children are hit in the face by swings, chairs collapse under people, dogs chase balls full tilt and slam into walls - and everyone laughs. Vidiot does the same thing because it has special effects that make it appear as though impossible things are happening in a real place and to real people. Contestants materialise at the beginning of the show as though they had been 'beamed down' (using the 'Beam Me Down, Scotty' effect from Star Trek). When a question is answered incorrectly a 'bomb' sound effect goes off. In the following discussion Sean (5), Seth (5) Blair (5) and Con (6) speculate about the 'beaming down' and the 'bomb', both of which clearly transgress what they believe is materially possible:

Interviewer: Vidiot? Why would you say Vidiot is not, not real?
Sean: Because um, when they, when the man tells you the guests they come down because it goes round and then it comes down and show up.
Interviewer: Right.
Seth: Because, because they have buzzers, buzzers and they...and they and they have ten points and things like that and hundreds and that..
Interviewer: O.K. Yes.
Sean: And um, when they come down they, they're just shadows when a bit of them comes down and then when they come down all of their body, they turn to real people but I don't think it's real.
Interviewer: You don’t think it's real. Blair, what do you think?
Blair: I don't think it's real. Why not?
Interviewer: Because they just come down.
Blair: Why not?
Interviewer: Because they just come down. And Con? Do you have a view about this? Do you think Vidiot's not very real?
Con: I think it is real.
Seth: It's not real cos it has a bomb, a bomb it goes down except you can't see it.
Interviewer: A bomb?
Con: No, it's this drum that goes [drum/bomb noise]
Interviewer: Right.
Con: And this...um...and this, um...
Blair: Con!
Con: ...thing.
Seth: It's not a drum.
Interviewer: Not a drum?
Seth: No.
Interviewer: What is it?
Seth: It's um, I think...that....
Con: When it comes down it's just a brick they throw down.
Sean: Or it might be a drum that's thrown down on the ground.

The speculation evident in the passage above (and elsewhere in this chapter) about 'how it's done' is the other important social reality issue for children this age. While cartoons, programmes with costume characters and those with special effects like Vidiot lend themselves to this kind of speculation, some television realism encourages it too. Here Nick (7), Theo (5) and Carol (5) worry about The Cosby Show. Initially they agree that the Huxtable's house is a real one, but then they modify their position:

Nick: But the background's not. It's just a big wall or something, the background.
Interviewer: So, what are you saying here?
Nick: Er, it's in between as well cos the background should be like a background. The background's different.
Interviewer: O.K. So, if it's not in a real house, where is it really?
Nick: In a real house but the background's um like...
Carol: The garden, the garden...
Nick: Like a big wall, just like a big wall.
Carol: You have a big piece of cardboard painted with the background.
Nick: It has to be thick cardboard.
Interviewer: Thick cardboard with the background painted on it.
Nick: But it's not – it is strong cardboard.
[some minutes later]
Nick: I think um, um The Cosby Show, you know why er, I don't, now I don't think they've got the background on a big piece of cardboard because um, if that was cardboard how would, how would it balance?
Interviewer: So it would, it would fall over you think?
Nick: Mm.
Interviewer: O.K.
Theo: Yeah, because er, the background, there's stairs on the background and they couldn't
climb up the stairs because it’s a background.

Interviewer: So there would be nowhere to go.

Theo: Yes, they’d just walk straight past it.

It is not clear why Nick decides the ‘background’ is not real but this judgement foreshadows many that the 8 - 10 year olds will be seen making in the next chapter. They claim, for example, that the view out of the windows in these ‘houses’ are fake because you cannot see the trees moving through the windows in programmes like Neighbours. At the beginning of the extract above, Nick and Carol are clearly talking about an outside ‘background’.

Lacking crucial knowledge about television studios and sets, they try to figure out how this illusion of a comfortable family house is created and accommodate with the notion of a big sheet of cardboard with a background painted on it (drawn perhaps from knowledge about painted theatrical backdrops). The discussion moves on to another topic but clearly Nick’s disequilibrium has not been resolved by this explanation because he returns to it some minutes later - accommodation has not worked because he realises cardboard wouldn’t balance. Theo, who assumes they’re talking about the back wall of the set points out that cardboard would not do at all because there are stairs at the back of the Huxtable’s living room and people cannot climb a painted staircase. Nick, at this point, has not resolved his disequilibrium but collaboratively, this group has moved much closer to accommodation - to a satisfactory explanation of how a studio set can create the illusion of a real house.

As can also be seen from the children’s discussions in the two extracts above, once they have worked out that something is not real or is an illusion, there is considerable disequilibrium and subsequent speculation about ‘how it’s done’. In many of these discussions there is reference to an anonymous ‘they’ who are doing these things (e.g. it’s ‘they’ who throw a brick down and ‘they’ who have got the background on a big piece of cardboard in the passages above). This suggests that the children implicitly understand that ‘unreality’ on television is mediated by others. However, the passion for knowing ‘how it’s done’ suggests they want to know how their perceptions are being manipulated as well and this is an issue concerning social power and control. Knowing how the images one sees are created places one in a much more powerful position than simply recognising that these images are contrived. In other words, if I know how an illusion has been created then I am in control of my sense of social reality, not someone else. The big surge in speculation about ‘how it’s done’ is, it is argued, an important social reality issue for children this age and one that their favourite programmes serve well.

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22 One is strongly reminded here of the scene in The Wizard of Oz where Toto pulls aside the curtain to reveal the ‘Wizard’ manipulating all the levers and dials on the machines that create the illusions. Given their passion for wanting to know ‘how it’s done’, this must be a very satisfying scene for children this age.
MODALITY JUDGEMENTS AS SOCIAL ACTS

The 5-7 year old children were most biddable as far as the research process was concerned and without exception, they appeared interested and eager to help the researcher with her work. Reducing the power differential between themselves and the adult researcher was certainly not achieved through subversion or disruption (as was sometimes the case with the preschoolers); rather several of the children adopted a kind of collegial tone - television was something they knew a lot about and this elevated their status vis à vis an adult in a school setting. Katie (7) for example, kept suggesting programmes that might have been included among the ones they were discussing; Richard (7) took it upon himself to monitor the tape recorder to make sure the tape did not run out; June (7) told some boys off for making a noise outside the area where we were working. Essentially, these children seemed to find that being asked to participate in the research gave them a sense of status and thus the power differential between child and adult was greatly diminished.

Talking about modality provided many different opportunities for the children to position themselves socially in relation to each other and the researcher. When talking about how real they thought various television programmes were, for example, girls and boys began to show some gendered responses that, as will be seen in the next chapter, persist among the older children as well. Of the 15 children who used colour as a modality discriminator, 10 of them were girls. Indeed, one group of three girls, June (7), Janet (5) and Jenny (6), used this criterion so extensively it suggests that colour is an important organizing principle in their construction of social reality. On the other hand, 10 of the 16 boys make modality judgements that have a technical orientation compared with three of the 15 girls. On the question of whether cartoons are ‘drawn’ or ‘painted pictures’, seven boys speculate that this is the case, compared with just two girls. It is boys too who are most interested in how the illusion of ‘place’ is created. It is Nick (7) for example, who raises the question about the set for The Cosby Show and it is Colin (6) whose attention is focussed on questions of ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ when he makes the following comments about Hey Dad!: ‘...and they don’t...and it must be just a building because they don’t show the outside’. Among the girls, only Carol (5) appears to show any interest in these matters. With girls’ attention focussed on the appearance of objects and boys’ attention focussed on the way things are put together or technically organized, there are clear signs of conventional, culturally-approved gender orientations being exhibited here.

If the children above are constructing themselves in traditionally gender-appropriate ways in their talk about television, Kristin (6) uses the modality discourse to position herself as an ‘active’ girl, an equal of boys, not one who stands around and watches while
boys do interesting things. David (5) cuts short his initial response, but he was probably going on to stake out a superior position for himself, as a boy, based on the belief that boys are ‘better’. By the end of the discussion about Captain Planet, however, he appears to have aligned himself with the older and more worldly Kristin:

Kristin: Because, um, it’s just, because like um, they don’t, they’re just cartoons and they don’t, they don’t do much stuff like girls, cos they have girls in there but they don’t do stuff.
David: Yeah but boys are bet...
Interviewer: Sorry, the girls in the cartoon don’t do much stuff?
Kristin: No, they just stand there.
David: But boys do.
Interviewer: And the boys...
Kristin: Like statue-like.
Interviewer: Right. What do the boys do?
David: They, they do....
Kristin: They do all the stuff and the girls don’t they just stand and just them watch like...
Interviewer: O.K. Maria, what do you think?
Maria: Um, I think it should go on that one [unreal pile] because um, they, they can really fly and, and people can’t fly.
Interviewer: O.K. And David?
David: Um, I think it should go on that one [unreal pile] because, um, it’s, it’s not real and, and, and there’s no such thing as um, um Captain Planet and also because the boys always do the work and the girls always always are, um, and the girls always just stand and watch them.

The children use the modality discourse in various ways to construct individual positions. One might use it to present oneself as superior, more knowledgeable, possessed of better taste and manners than one’s peers. Or, one might use it to create bonds of solidarity with those whom one values or admires. In their modality discussions, many of the children defer to their parents’ judgements and in this way they align themselves both with their parents and their values. Seth (5), for example, refers to his mother’s judgement about Play School:

Interviewer: Why isn’t Play School real?.
Seth: Because my Mum doesn’t... think that it’s real and I don’t either.
Interviewer: O.K. Why doesn’t she think it’s real?
Seth: Because, um, I, um don’t watch it that much and we’ve tried some of the things that they do on Play School and they don’t work.

and Marion (6) has parents who ‘know’ things:
Interviewer: On this pile? O.K. Right. So we've put the News on the realistic pile, why's that? Because um, it's, because my Mum and Dad think it's really true.

Marion: Right. And why do they think it's really true, do you know? Because um, because it's, cos, cos, they um, because they um...they know.

Ross (6) and Katie (7) both claim Sesame Street is a real street because their mums told them it was:

Interviewer: Is it a real street?
Ross: Yes.
Interviewer: O.K.
Ross: You can get...
Katie: My Mum told me.
Ross: It's a real street, yes my Mum told me.
Katie: Because it's got a real bus in it sometimes.
Interviewer: Yes.
Ross: Yeah and my Mum told me.

One way of constructing a superior position for oneself in relation to others is to criticise their manners or their ability to speak clearly and articulately. This is particularly effectively used to put people, who are different from you, in their place. Sean (5), a middle class Anglo-Australian, here upbraids Con (6), a working class Greek-Australian, after the latter boy contradicts him and then struggles to express himself:

Sean: It's not real cos it has a bomb, a bomb it goes down except you can't see it.
Interviewer: A bomb?
Con: No, it's this drum that goes [drum/bomb noise]
Interviewer: Right.
Con: And this...um...and this, um...
Sean: Con!
Con: ....thing.

However, Sean's focus is perhaps more on perceived discourtesy than ethnicity. Anglo-Australian, middle class Seth (5) also comes in for the same treatment when he contradicts and interrupts Sean:

Sean: And...
Seth: No, I think it should go on...
Sean: Seth! And um, because you um...sometimes you can see that when um, one of them turns around and I don't know which one that you can see another bit of hair

128
And so does Blair (5) who is also Anglo-Australian and middle class:

Sean: Because um, there's um, ....deep holes and they're...when people...when Bugs Bunny's walking along he um, sees a hole, he...there's no hole but there's only one hole and he...sometimes he goes down and...

Blair: [interrupts/undecipherable]

Sean: Blaaaaair! And, um he um, and ra..rabbits can't dig very well up and he comes up the other end.

Sean and Con both ridicule Blair when he says silly things, pretending to be familiar with a programme when he clearly is not:

Interviewer: O.K. And Couch Potato, where do we put that?
Blair: On the unreal pile.
Sean and Con: On the real..on the real pile.
Interviewer Why is it unreal Blair?
Blair: Because...because potatoes are real.
Sean and Con: [Ostentatious giggles]
Sean: Real because um, you can't um...
Blair: Potatoes can't talk.
Sean and Con: [More giggles]

Claiming to have had personal experience of something is a good way of 'pulling rank' and does not leave a lot of room for disagreement. Here, Janet (7) provides the clinching argument that the News is real because she has been to the television studio:

Interviewer: Because it tells us about things. Good. Alright. Any other ones on this table that...
Janet: There's something else to t...about that, because I've been to that place.
Interviewer: Have you? Where is that place? That's the, the television station isn't it?
Janet: Yes. I've been in there and seen the stuff.

Tom (5), on the other hand, has been to Movie Land and has seen the 'real' Bart Simpson:

Tom: It [The Simpsons] should go on the real pile because I've seen some at Movie Land and they're just dressed up because they're really furry.

If you have special knowledge, it is as well to let others know, otherwise they won't be able to admire you for it! For no reason in particular, Peter (7) launches into a description of back projection and special effects involving cars:
Kristin (6) loses patience with David (5) and Marion (6) who clearly still believe in the Easter Bunny. She knows the truth and disabuses them of their illusions:

Marion: Well how could they get the chocolate. How could we get chocolate eggs?
David: Yeah.
Interviewer: What, at Easter time?
David and Marion: Yes.
Kristin: [scathingly] I know how to get them. Your Mum and your Dad get them.

The modality discourse also enables you to position yourself as superior and much more sophisticated than those who are younger than you. Having admitted to being an avid watcher herself, Kristin (6) claims that David (5) and Marion (6) are too young to watch the racy E Street:

Kristin: I think it's really true because they've got real people and sometimes little kids like Marion and David can't watch it because they're only little and they have sex and stuff.
Interviewer: Right. O.K.
David: What do you mean sex stuff?

Tom (5) has put away childish things now he is 6. He claims he no longer watches Sesame Street although, from his contributions to earlier discussions, it is clear he has a vivid (and up to date) recall of programme content:

Interviewer: O.K. Who does watch it?...What do you think, Tom?
Tom: Um, I forgot because I don't watch it when I'm six.

Colin (6) agrees about Sesame Street being of interest only to younger children:
Colin: It’s children’s stuff.
Interviewer: Children’s stuff.
Colin: It’s baby stuff.

And David (5) is wiser now he is no longer ‘a toddler’. Then, he believed in monsters, but he doesn’t now:

David: I think Captain Planet isn’t real because it, cos they got, I’ve seen Captain Planet heaps, a thousand times even when I was a toddler and I, and I thought, and I thought it was real when I was a toddler and then when I was, when I was on the, when I was four I saw it and it, and I, and they and one was, they had green hair, one had green hair and there was a pink thing in there, and they, and they do, and they if it, if ...and, and there were the, there was a kind of monster there and it, and there’s no such things as monsters now.

The data presented above provide evidence that 5 - 7 year old children are negotiating their social world and positioning themselves in various ways through aligning themselves with people or ideas they admire and value or by constructing themselves as superior to others. Alignment with parents’ views is one means of achieving a sense of strength and solidarity. In terms of gender, traditional, culturally-approved constructions dominate, however feminist discourse presents a challenge in one instance. The age discourse is also very useful for presenting oneself as superior and more sophisticated than those who have the misfortune to be younger. Although there are nine different countries of origin represented among the 5 - 7 year olds and rather more middle class children (21) than working class (10), there is remarkably little evidence of children using either cultural difference or social class as a means of marginalising others. Sean, after all, was equally scathing of Con, Blair and Seth’s manners; he was not victimising the only non-Anglo-Australian in his group.

Some Summarising Comments
Throughout this chapter, the 5 - 7 year old children have shown themselves to be extremely interested in questions of television modality and there is certainly no doubt they believe television’s images are representations. The present study, however, goes beyond previous work (Hodge and Tripp 1986; Buckingham 1993a) insofar as it demonstrates, yet again, the dialectic between emerging modality schemes and theories of development. Like the preschoolers in Chapter 2, these older children are still basing their judgements on external appearances but now the principal means of determining whether a programme is ‘real’ is whether there is evidence of ‘real’ things and people and
whether characters behave in ways that are humanly possible. Unlike the preschoolers, these older children’s gaze has now moved beyond the immediate and personal to a consideration of people and things in the wider physical environment. The things about which children can think have grown in number, variety and complexity.

By using the modality strategy of seeking real-life equivalents (or the reverse) the children are learning to distinguish between various types of television content and thus, their classificatory schemes are becoming more organized. Modality judgements are linked to emerging concepts of genre, with cartoons universally judged to be ‘unreal’ and news programmes ‘real’. These genres are at the extreme ends of the television modality continuum and it is clear that programmes that fall between these bimodal poles have yet to find a secure place in this cognitive scheme. Television realism, with fictional stories and characters, requires the ability to see things in different ways at the same time - this is a real person playing a fictional role - and there are few examples of children this age spontaneously exhibiting this skill. Instead, the simple ‘real life objects, people and things’ scheme is most frequently used to judge programmes like Home and Away, real.

The ‘how it’s done’ category of response is an indicator of the power of television images to create major cognitive disequilibrium and, consequently, to promote major cognitive advance. Like the preschoolers’ speculation about whether characters were ‘people dressed up’, these older children are fascinated by television’s ability to create illusions. They have now acquired enough technical knowledge to have clear schemes for ‘people dressed up’ and ‘puppets’ and these are often pressed into service to make sense of other types of character (e.g. cartoon characters). There are, however, many other television illusions about which the children have incomplete or inadequate knowledge and these promote rich speculation. Unlike the preschoolers, these 5 - 7 year olds seem to be less discomfited by disequilibrium, providing instead striking examples of thinking in action: the testing out of hypotheses; the casting about for explanations that will make sense of things; the flying of ‘cognitive’ kites to see whether they will work. This study shows in greater detail than before, the kinds of modality judgements that 5 - 7 year old children make - the what of modality judgements. In addition, it shows how they make those judgements and in this it provides genuinely new insights.

Knowing how an illusion has been created gives a greater sense of control over one’s construction of social reality than merely knowing that something is an illusion. For these reasons, wanting to know ‘how it’s done’ is an important social reality issue for children this age and it is demonstrated in some of their programme preferences. In this way, the dialectic between modality judgements and social reality issues is again illustrated: children choose to watch programmes that promote disequilibrium so that they can figure
out 'how it's done' and extend their understanding about social reality. Equally important to these children is the continuation of the exploration of what it means to be human, with the focus now on the limits of human possibility. Many programmes that children prefer at this age are also ideally suited to an exploration of these issues.

As always, talk about modality provides opportunities for children to define and position themselves in their social world by providing alternative ways for them to constitute themselves as knowers. The children's discussions show that the discourses of age, gender and status all intersect with talk about television reality to create individual identities and social positions for the speakers. That the social persona that children are creating for themselves are becoming more complex and diverse is illustrated by comparing 4 year old Barbara's statement 'I bigger than you' with 6 year old Ross's airy proclamation that: 'I should know everything about the News I watch it every night.' More complex again are the social persona of the 8 - 10 year olds, and these will be explored in the next chapter.
CHAPTER 4

'Because it doesn't really happen'
'And they don't act that good'

The Modality Judgements of Eight, Nine and Ten Year Old Children

For the 8 - 10 year old children in this study, daily experience with television has produced considerable knowledge about the medium and an easy familiarity with its content. Years of real-time viewing, however, have not been the only means of gaining these insights. Given the pervasiveness of video cassette recorders in Australian homes, many children have grown up with VCRs as adjuncts to their television sets and these have provided a powerful means of extending their knowledge and understanding about television. Children are able, for example, to view programmes that are scheduled outside their normal viewing times. They are also able to manipulate what has been recorded: they can re-view parts of programmes, fast forward to 'the good bits', skip 'boring bits' and use freeze-frame or slow-motion functions to carefully scrutinise particular images. As will be demonstrated in this chapter, all this experience is reflected in older children's more sophisticated understanding of television. They talk confidently about different television genres; they are more knowledgeable about 'how it's done'; they regularly enjoy a wide range of programmes and in them they see new and more subtle links with real life than they did at earlier ages.

Children in middle childhood range quite widely through television's offerings, often favouring such programmes as situation comedies and dramas - programmes that would normally be classified as 'family' or 'adult' entertainment. Indeed, a certain anxiety about the adult/mature nature of children's programme choices is reflected in the early studies of 8 - 10 year olds' modality judgements. Unlike the studies reviewed for younger age groups, most of this early research has little interest in the extent to which children see television as a constructed medium; instead, it focuses on the degree to which children see connections and relationships between what they see on television and real life. At least in the minds of the researchers, such a change signals a change in what questions of the 'real' might mean.

Once again, with the exception of Hodge and Tripp (1986) and Buckingham (1993a), the studies to be reviewed here are firmly located in the field of psychology. Half are locked into an 'effects' model and employ traditional experimental methods to demonstrate 'perceived reality' as the link between television and the child viewer's subsequent
behaviour, attitudes and beliefs. The other half uses more flexible, more interpretive research techniques to explore the cognitive skills that children employ in making modality judgements. The two most recent studies (Hodge and Tripp 1986; Buckingham 1993a) are cross-disciplinary and use the techniques of discourse analysis to explore television modality as part of broader investigations into the ways young viewers actively make meaning and derive pleasure from television. In each of these research traditions children are conceptualised quite differently; the ‘victims’ of behaviourist psychology give way to the ‘information processors’ of cognitive psychology which in turn are superseded by the ‘interpreters, meaning makers and enjoyers’ of the cross-disciplinary approaches.

According to Luke (1990b), the 1970’s saw the emergence of more cognitively-based, interactive explanations of television’s effects on children, however most studies on children’s modality judgements from this decade were still emphasising causal links between television and children’s beliefs, attitudes and behaviour, thus, revealing a covert behaviourist model of learning. There was great reliance on a narrow range of research instruments (e.g. ‘perceived reality’ questionnaires/interviews) which were used to test the hypothesis that ‘perceived reality’ was an intervening variable in a cause-and-effect process. Considerable effort was expended on refining this ‘perceived reality’ concept and on showing how children (especially those from different demographic groups defined by race, class, sex) were negatively influenced by television, though their judgements about television modality.

Questionnaires using ‘perceived reality’ items were a research method employed by many studies (e.g. Greenberg and Dominick 1970; Greenberg, Ericson and Vlahos 1972; Greenberg 1974; Greenberg and Reeves 1976; Hawkins 1977; Van der Voort 1986). Generally using a 5-point Lickert scale for responses, many of these questionnaires included items the same as, or similar to, the following:

- The people I see on TV are just like people I know in real life
- Families I see on TV are like my family
- The programmes I see on TV tell about life the way it really is.
- The same things that happen to people on TV often happen to me in real life
- The people I see on TV are just like I want to be when I grow up

It must be reiterated that, despite their popularity, ‘perceived reality’ questionnaires are a very flawed research technique. As can be seen from the examples above, many items collapse together the two kinds of ‘knowing’ about modality - knowledge about television as a constructed medium and perceptions about the extent to which there is a relationship between television content and real life. Given the response formats offered in these questionnaires, children have no chance to indicate which of the two dimensions they have
in mind when they are responding. One might, for example, know full well that television is constructed and that programmes are fictional and yet see a strong similarity between people one knows and television characters in, say, a soap opera or family comedy. Most studies ignored this distinction and interpreted ‘real’ or ‘very real’ responses as evidence of television’s negative effects - a demonstration of its power to mislead and deceive young and vulnerable viewers. A further problem, associated with the interpretation and scoring of results in studies like these, is the assumption that reality is ‘knowable’ and that the adult researcher’s definition of it is correct.

Several studies made their assumption that ‘perceived reality’ was an intervening variable, quite explicit. A study by Greenberg and Dominick (1970), for example, investigated how 9 and 10 year olds, from different social groups, varied in the extent to which they believed what they saw on television to be real. They hypothesised that the low-income child would be more dependent on television and more prone to believing its ‘messages’ because he [sic] has fewer direct contacts with the ‘real world’ and more frustrations’ (Greenberg and Dominick 1970: 52). Given the assumptions built into the research design, the findings are hardly surprising. In general, black children perceived television as being more realistic than did white; high-income group children perceived the least realism and low-income group children perceived the most realism in television presentations. Another study (Greenberg 1974), found that perceptions of television reality among 9 year old (and older) children were significantly related to aggressive attitudes and to watching violent television shows. In particular, it found believing that violent television content was similar to real life produced the belief that violence was the most effective way to resolve interpersonal conflicts. Greenberg and Reeves (1976) selected 8 - 11 year old subjects from different social groups and found that children from economically disadvantaged homes, black children, younger children, girls, and those who watched a lot of television were all likely to perceive more reality in television shows than children not in those categories, and were therefore at greater risk. For once, the findings of these studies showed a rare lack of contradiction - it appears that any child who was not white, middle class and male was at risk of being negatively influenced by television.

Still using ‘perceived reality’ questionnaires, but only acknowledging the possibility that ‘perceived reality’ might be implicated in the effects process, are two other studies (Greenberg, Ericson and Vlahos 1972; Hawkins 1977). Hawkins (1977), as previously reported, interpreted his findings to mean that the ‘magic window’ dimension increased as children grew older (i.e. they increasingly saw television as a constructed medium) and he found that the ‘social expectations’ dimension had a curvilinear trend, with 6 and 10 year olds perceiving many similarities between television and the real world. The contradictory findings so frequently found with these kinds of studies, however, is evident
once again in the study by Greenberg, Ericson and Vlahos (1972). They found that 9 - 10 year old children neither believed nor disbelieved the reality of television but, rather, were uncertain about it.

It is surprising that 'perceived reality' studies were still being conducted during the late 1980's, given the general trends in the field of psychology and the long and inconclusive history of research that had used 'perceived reality' as a key concept. However, as part of a much larger investigation into the effects of television violence on children's attitudes and behaviour, Van der Voort (1986) conducted such a study with Dutch 9 - 12 year olds. In terms of the extent to which the children believed different types of programme to be true to life, the great majority judged those programmes defined by the researcher as 'fantastic' to be unrealistic (i.e. westerns, cartoons and what the researcher termed 'Incredible Hulk-type' and 'knights-in-armour' programmes). Opinion was divided, however, on the programmes the researcher defined as 'realistic' (e.g. police, detective and children's adventure programmes). Some children believed this latter type of programme was very unrealistic while others believed them to be quite realistic. In other findings, boys generally saw television programmes as being more real than girls; 'perceived reality' was not found to be systematically related to social class but was negatively related to school achievement and positively related both to frequency of viewing in general and, in particular, to violent programmes. The findings of studies such as this one, however, are seriously called into question by the researcher's pre-judgement of which television programmes are 'real' and which 'unreal' - adult, normative assumptions about 'reality' again prevent any careful examination of how children may view things differently.

Another late 80s study, (Sprafkin, Kelly and Gadow 1987), compared emotionally disturbed (ED) and learning-disabled (LD) children's abilities to perceive television reality with those of non-handicapped children. A fundamental problem lies in these classifications of ED and LD. The school system had labelled children in these ways for undisclosed reasons and the investigators appear to have unquestioningly accepted the labels and treated them as self-explanatory. The children were shown video excerpts and were then asked questions that reflected the major dimensions of 'perceived reality' which had been derived from the work of Hawkins (1977). No examples of the actual questions are provided and the only response option available to these children was to say either True or False to each question. Given these serious problems with the classification of the participants and the research design, it is difficult to accept the findings that emotionally disturbed and learning-disabled children, compared with non-handicapped peers were more likely to perceive television as being real and were less likely to comprehend special effects. The ideological bias of the researchers is also evident in their concept of a 'majority culture', which, they suggest, is not freely available, even to some of
the non-handicapped: ‘... children who are younger, have lower IQs, are frequent television viewers, and are from minority or lower socio-economic backgrounds, tend to perceive entertainment programmes as presenting life as it is. This suggests that limited cognitive abilities and restrictive exposure to majority culture, coupled with exposure to television, produce a viewer who has difficulty discriminating reality from fantasy on commercial television.’ (Sprafkin, Kelly and Gadow 1987: 152).

The work of Feshbach (1972; 1976) is noteworthy here for a number of reasons. Feshbach conducted a classic experimental study designed to test the simple link between viewing violent material and subsequent behaviour. However, unlike other studies of this kind, (e.g. Bandura’s Bobo doll experiments 1963; 1965), Feshbach altered the way different groups of subjects interpreted the stimulus material, by altering the modality. Children aged 9 and 11 were exposed to identical violent film footage under two different conditions: one group was told the film was a news reel of an actual event (the ‘Reality’ condition), the other was told it was a segment from a movie (the ‘Fantasy’ condition). The extent to which the subjects had been affected by what they saw was subsequently tested by requiring them to ‘hurt’ others by pressing a button which was supposed to trigger painful noise. What Feshbach found was that the ‘Reality’ condition stimulated aggression (these subjects were prepared to press the ‘hurt’ button longer and more often) but the ‘Fantasy’ condition actually reduced it. In his view, the fantasy experience provided by some television programmes with aggressive content might actually control or reduce aggressive behaviour, rather than encourage it - in other words, such programmes might have a cathartic effect.

This was a radical finding because it challenged the simple cause-and-effect linkage of the dominant behaviourist paradigm and raised the serious possibility that modality schemas of subjects were of great importance not only in the way they interpreted what they viewed but also on how their subsequent behaviour was affected. Interestingly, subsequent research (e.g. Greenberg and Reeves 1976; Hawkins 1977) tended to refer to Feshbach’s experiment only to point to the link between ‘perceived reality’ and negative effects. This aspect of Feshbach’s work was used by the research community to establish ‘perceived reality’ as an intervening variable, however his other finding regarding the ‘catharsis effect’ was largely left to languish23, too anomalous and potentially too disruptive for a research tradition that was still anxious to prove that television had negative effects on viewers.

The studies conducted in the late 1970s and the early 1980s tended to reflect the general shift away from behaviourist influences in psychological research and instead focused on

23 The ‘catharsis effect’ was taken up by only a small number of scholars (e.g. Noble 1975).
the child as an active processor of television stimuli. As Klapper (1981: 56) states: 'Children's judgements of realism or unrealism are in accord with and in part a function of their cognitive abilities.' In line with the shift away from experimental studies, new more flexible research methods were also employed. There was much less emphasis on 'perceived reality' questionnaires with fixed wording, presumed to be equally intelligible to all children irrespective of age, sex, class, race or ethnic background. The limited range of response possibilities, usually associated with the old tradition (Lickert scale-type formats), also gave way to more interesting tasks in which children could demonstrate their understanding. While many findings were still subjected to statistical manipulation and analysis, there was, at the same time, a move away from reliance on researcher-defined concepts of reality and more genuine attempts to find out how children were interpreting what they viewed.

Eight year old children were included in the study by Morison, McCarthy and Gardner (1979) that was introduced in the last chapter. In general, the researchers found that the spontaneous use of reality-fantasy considerations and an understanding of 'television concepts' were both correlated with age, with the 8 year olds performing significantly better than the 6 year olds. Reality-fantasy sophistication and understanding of television concepts were significantly correlated for the 6 and 8 year olds, leading the researchers to conclude that age alone was not a sufficient predictor of the ability to discriminate television reality and fantasy; knowledge about the medium was also probably involved.

A variety of sorting, classifying and discrimination tasks were the methods used in a number of studies (Morison and Gardner 1978; Quarforth 1979; Kelly 1981). The study by Morison and Gardner (1978) required 9 year old children to make reality-fantasy distinctions by pairing cards, from 3-card selections, on either a 'fantasy' or an 'alternate' basis. Like the younger children discussed in the last chapter, the 9 year olds significantly preferred the 'alternate' category to the 'fantasy' one. This age group also performed well in sorting real and fantasy characters into their appropriate categories.

Quarforth (1979) also included 8 and 9 year olds in her study of children's ability to distinguish between human, puppet and cartoon characters. She found that the ability to make these discriminations increased systematically across the age range with 9 year olds being 95 per cent accurate in their choices (as opposed to the 48 per cent accuracy rate among the 6 year olds). When asked to pick out the characters that were 'alive' and the ones that

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24 For example, the child might be presented with three cards bearing the pictures of Donald Duck, Minnie Mouse and a mallard duck respectively. The 'fantasy' pairing would be Minnie Mouse and Donald Duck on the grounds that they are both cartoon characters; the 'alternate' pairing would be Donald Duck and the mallard on the basis that they are both ducks.
could 'walk and talk by themselves', the 8 and 9 year olds were also significantly more accurate than the younger children. For the third task, where children were required to explain how humans differ from cartoons and puppets and how cartoons and puppets differ from each other, 85 per cent of the 9 year olds were able to make satisfactory explanations (compared with 15 per cent of the 5 year olds). However, despite their generally superior performance on these tasks, Quarforth found a substantial number of 8 and 9 year old children who demonstrated an incomplete understanding of the functioning of cartoon and puppet characters.

In Kelly's study (1981), the 9 year olds' performance on the various sorting tasks led her to conclude that at this age there is a general conception of the fictional status of many media presentations. In their talk about television, the children constantly referred to the fact that shows are acted by actors, that they have scripts and they have to rehearse. They were very clear that television does not present life but rather re-presents it. In addition, the 9 year olds no longer needed to rely on perceptual clues to form judgements about the reality of television; their focus had shifted away from the way things looked and, instead, had turned to what was going on. In terms of seeking links with real life, these children frequently applied the notion of 'possibility' to social and behavioural events/situations, unlike the younger children who had applied this concept to concrete things like people or objects.

Interviews with children were used by some researchers (Klapper 1981; Fernie 1981). Klapper (1981) found that televised fiction was not perceived as being inherently or consistently realistic or unrealistic by 80 per cent of her 10 year old subjects. When making modality judgements, either about programmes or about particular depictions, the 10 year olds, like the younger children, frequently cited concrete, literal and fragmentary bits of the whole under enquiry. The older children also referred to broad similarities and differences between television and real life and were more likely to comment on social interactions in their responses than the younger children. The 10 year olds frequently and spontaneously commented on the fictional nature of television by referring to actors, roles, scripts and predictable plot endings. More than 90 per cent of the 10 year olds also cited real-life sources as their reason for making the judgements they did about television.

Fernie (1981) included 8 year old boys in a study addressing several aspects of children's perceptions of television characters and real people. For these boys, unrealistic characters were considered to differ greatly from other people, while realistic characters and real people were fairly similar to each other. Realistic qualities were associated with all groups of characters, however realistic characters were accorded more realistic 'interactions with others' and more 'expressed emotions' than the people with whom the
children interacted on a daily basis. In terms of what Fernie terms 'identification', the eight year olds, like the other children, most wished to be like unrealistic characters because of their unique characteristics. Mixed-reality characters like the Fonzie (from Happy Days) were their next choice, and realistic characters and real people came last. In terms of 'Actor-Knowledge', the 8 year olds showed partial or full understanding that the people on television were generally actors. Unrealistic characters like Superman produced full understanding, however, they were less sure about more mundane characters like Dan Connor (from Roseanne).

The shift away from the cognitivist tradition that was occurring in the 1980's was a reflection of a general dissatisfaction with psychology as a means of accounting for human behaviour and marked the increasing influence of post-structuralist perspectives that conceptualised children as social beings, located in and framed by social and cultural contexts. The studies by Hodge and Tripp (1986) and Buckingham (1993a) are two studies in this more post-structuralist tradition. They draw on a range of disciplines - psychology, sociology, education, linguistics, semiotics, cultural and media studies - in order to carry out investigations into various questions concerning children and television. Both studies included tasks where children were required to demonstrate and talk about their television modality judgements.

The study by Hodge and Tripp (1986) included 9 - 12 year old children. In the task where children were asked to choose conceptually-related pairs from selections of three television characters, these older children used many more characters from drama and fewer cartoon and real-life characters than the younger children. In their triadic groupings, the older children had '± television' (i.e. 'on television/not on television'; 'on television/not in real life') as their construct only 20 per cent of the time, which suggests that it was no longer as critical a construct for them as it was for younger children. The majority of the older children believed life was more real than television, with about one third believing it was equally real. The older children also used more media-related criteria to specify reality than the younger children; indeed, methods of media production - knowledge or theories about 'how it's done' - emerged as a salient criterion of reality for 8 - 9 year olds.

Buckingham (1993a) explored the television reality judgements of 8 - 12 year old children. In small groups, children were asked to discuss a number of television programmes in order to determine how realistic or true-to-life they thought these programmes were. In terms of their understanding about television as a constructed medium, the children clearly demonstrated, in their talk, that they understood the purpose of different forms and conventions of television and that they knew about various technical processes of television
production. As far as the relationship between real life and television was concerned, the
children were broadly in agreement about those things that were ‘impossible’ and those
things that were ‘true’ and in between the two extremes the children relied on notions of
plausibility. Buckingham (1993a) found younger children generally appeared to be more
preoccupied with matters relating to television as a constructed medium while older ones
were more likely to use the television/real life relationship as the basis for their
judgements. In addition, middle class children made a larger proportion of modality
judgements and appeared to be more concerned with television’s relationship to real life
than working class children.

In the research reviewed above (and summarised on pages 143 - 146), two clear themes
emerge. One strongly suggests that television provides the definitive model for children’s
beliefs about real life. It concerns how children this age believe certain television
depictions to be realistic and the extent to which these beliefs then reflexively feed back
into attitudes and beliefs about social reality (e.g. Greenberg and Dominick 1970; Greenberg
1974; Greenberg and Reeves 1976; Sprafkin et al. 1987) or into actual behaviour (Greenberg
1974; Feshbach 1986; Van der Voort 1986). The findings, however, are contradictory and
inconclusive with some studies finding high ‘perceived reality’ among all 8 - 10 year old
subjects, some finding it only in particular social groups (e.g. black, working class, learning-
disabled children) and some not finding high levels at all. Some studies found a
behavioural link and some, like Feshbach (1976), found a link that was the opposite of
what was expected.

The second theme suggests that real life experience is the blueprint that guides children’s
judgements about television. This research concerns how children make their television
reality judgements; that is, what they take into consideration, what is salient, what
strategies they use (e.g. Quarforth 1979, Klapper 1981; Kelly 1981; Hodge and Tripp 1986;
Buckingham 1993a). In relation to the understanding that television is a constructed
medium, there seems to be agreement that 8 - 10 year old children are considerably more
advanced than the 5 - 7 year olds. There is evidence that children in this age range can now
confidently discriminate between human, puppet and cartoon characters and explain why
they are different; they know that television characters are actors who use scripts and must
rehearse (although there is still some doubt about the status of characters in some
television realism); they are fascinated by the techniques of media production and they
speculate a good deal about ‘how it’s done’.

As far as the television/real life relationship is concerned, once again there is general
agreement that the 8 - 10 year olds make different sorts of judgements from those made by
### SUMMARY OF RESEARCH FINDINGS FOR 8-10 YEAR OLD CHILDREN
#### EXPERIMENTAL RESEARCH 1970 - 1993

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research</th>
<th>Findings</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Greenberg and Dominick (1970)</td>
<td>Social class, race and age are variables that influence perceptions of TV reality - black and low-income group children perceive the most realism and white and high-income group children perceive the least realism in TV presentations. Children who perceive TV to be real are likely to have distorted views of social reality</td>
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<tr>
<td>'Perceived reality' questionnaire</td>
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<td>392 x 9 and 10 year old children</td>
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<tr>
<td>Greenberg, Ericson and Vlahos (1972)</td>
<td>TV reality perceptions vary with age. Adults' understanding about 'reality' is different from children's. Children were uncertain about the reality of television; their mothers disbelieved the reality of TV and estimated their children's disbelief to be higher than it was.</td>
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<tr>
<td>'Perceived reality' questionnaire</td>
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<td>100 x 9 and 10 year old children</td>
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<tr>
<td>Greenberg (1974)</td>
<td>Perceptions of TV reality among 9, 12 and 15 year old children were significantly related to aggressive attitudes and to watching violent TV shows. Believing violent television content to be similar to real life led the children to believe that violence was the most effective way to resolve interpersonal conflicts. Perceived reality is an intervening variable increasing the harmful effects of violent TV programming.</td>
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<tr>
<td>'Perceived reality' questionnaire</td>
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<td>9 - 15 year old children</td>
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<td>Feinbach (1972; 1976)</td>
<td>The subsequent mean level of aggression for the 9 - 11 year olds who believed violent film they viewed to be real was almost twice the level of those who believed the film to be fictional. The 'Reality' condition is seen to have stimulated aggression while the 'Fantasy' condition reduced it. Perceived reality is a mediating variable between viewing violent material and subsequent behaviour.</td>
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<td>Viewing of selected segments followed by testing</td>
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<td>60 x 9 - 11 year old children</td>
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<td>Source</td>
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<tr>
<td>Greenberg and Reeves (1976)</td>
<td>The more specific the question about TV content, the more realistic was the judgement likely to be. Experience with real life counterparts of television characters like policemen, families and black people did not diminish the children's judgements about the reality status of the TV characters. Children's television reality judgements were influenced by the attitudes of significant others. Younger children, less able children and the TV fan all believed TV to be more real than other groups. Reality judgements may flow from the mediated (TV) version of life to real-life experiences.</td>
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<td>Hawkins (1977)</td>
<td>Specificity of items unrelated to the degree of perceived reality. Preschoolers believed TV to be less like real life than the older children. In terms of usefulness, six and eight year olds found TV characters and events very or somewhat useful for their own lives but the older children and the younger children did not find them useful at all. Belief in the constructed nature of television increases as children grow older but the 'social expectations' dimension did not diminish in the age range studied (3 - 11 years).</td>
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<td>Van der Voort (1986)</td>
<td>As a group, 9-12 year old children regarded fantastic elements of programmes as unreal, however, many individuals believe they do or could happen in real life. Westerns, cartoons and other 'fantastic' programmes, regarded as unrealistic but opinion divided over 'realistic' programmes like detective, police and children's adventure programmes. A gradual decrease in 'perceived reality' of fantasy programme types was found among the 9 - 12 year olds so that by age 12 the children's judgements were congruent with adults'. But no age-related decrease in reality perception found for realistic programmes. In terms of whether TV events or situations were possible in their own neighbourhoods, children and adults agreed it was highly unlikely, however the extent to which these things were believed possible in real life showed the children to be less critical than the adults. Boys generally saw TV programmes as being more real than girls; 'perceived reality' not systematically related to social class; perception of TV reality negatively related to school achievement but was positively related both to frequency of viewing in general and in particular frequency of watching violent programmes; high 'perceived reality' was also associated with greater absorption, emotional responsiveness, identification and readiness to see violence. 'Perceived reality' does not automatically decrease with age, rather age-related changes depend on both programme type and the dimension on which their reality is judged.</td>
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<td>Sprafkin, Kelly and Gadow (1987)</td>
<td>Emotionally disturbed and learning disabled children, compared with non-handicapped peers are more likely to perceive television as being real and are less likely to comprehend special effects. When tested, emotionally disturbed and learning disabled children were unsure about the concepts of animation, the distinction between actors and their roles and the special effects of superhuman feats or acts of aggression.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Study</td>
<td>Findings</td>
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| Morison and Gardner (1978)  
Sorting and matching tasks  
20 x 9 year old children | Nine year olds significantly preferred the 'alternate' category to the 'fantasy' one when pairing cards from sets of three. This age group also performed well in sorting real and fantasy characters into their appropriate categories.  
The use of fantasy classifications steadily increases with age but is not dominant in 9 year olds. The fantasy classification is not salient unless clearly cued. |
| Morison, McCarthy and Gardner (1979)  
Viewing of selected segments followed by semi-structured interviews  
12 x 8 year old children | Eight year olds scored a mean of 8.3 out of a possible 29 (compared with 4.25 for 6 year olds and 17.6 for 11 year olds) for reality-fantasy distinctions. Eight year olds scored 7.4 out of a possible 22 (compared with 3.5 for 6 year olds and 13.3 for 11 year olds) in their understanding of TV concepts.  
Understanding television concepts and reality-fantasy sophistication correlated for the 6 and 8 year olds.  
Age alone is not a sufficient predictor of the ability to discriminate television reality and fantasy; knowledge about the medium of TV is also probably involved. |
| Quarforth (1979)  
Sorting and discrimination tasks and questionnaire  
41 x 8 and 9 year old children | Nine year olds were 95% accurate when making reality discriminations between human, puppet and cartoon characters. When asked to pick out the characters that were 'alive' and the ones that could 'walk and talk by themselves', the 8 and 9 year olds were significantly more accurate than the younger children.  
Where children were required to explain how humans differ from cartoons and puppets and how cartoons and puppets differ from each other, 85% of the 9 year olds gave good explanations compared with 15% of the 5 year olds.  
A substantial number of 8 and 9 year old children demonstrated an incomplete understanding of the functioning of cartoon and puppet characters. |
| Klapper (1981)  
Structured interviews  
44 x 8 year olds | When making reality judgements the 10 year olds (a) frequently cited concrete, literal and fragmentary bits of the whole under enquiry, (b) referred to broad similarities and differences between TV and real life and (c) were more likely to refer to social interactions in their responses than younger children.  
On the questions of 'Good people mostly always win on TV' and 'The police almost always catch the criminals on TV', 10 year olds and younger children tended to agree with the statements however the older children were more sceptical than the younger about whether the statements held true for real life.  
61% of the 10 year olds spontaneously commented on the fictional nature of television. Televised fiction was not perceived as being inherently or consistently realistic or unrealistic by 80% of the children studied (7-10 years).  
Real-life was the basis on which judgements about TV's reality were made. |
| Fernie (1981)  
Structured interviews  
8 - 11 year old children | For 8 year old boys, unrealistic characters differed greatly from other people, while realistic characters and real people were fairly similar to each other. Realistic characters are accorded more realistic interactions with others and more 'expressed emotions' than real people.  
Boys identified first with unrealistic characters because of unique characteristics; followed by mixed reality characters with realistic characters and real people coming last.  
Unrealistic characters ranked as least like themselves and realistic characters and real people as more like themselves.  
Partial or full understanding that the people on TV are generally actors; more sure about unrealistic characters than realistic ones. |
<table>
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<th>Reference</th>
<th>Experiment Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>Kelly (1981)</td>
<td>Nine year olds referred to shows being 'acted', 'actors', 'scripts', 'rehearsal' and no longer relied on perceptual clues to form judgements about the reality of television; the focus shifted from the way things look to what is going on. Nine year olds able to consider issues of possibility rather than being dominated by issues of impossibility. The criterion of possibility is now more frequently applied to social and behavioural events/situations rather than to people or objects. General conception of the fictional status of many media presentations; they are very clear that television does not present life but rather re-presents it.</td>
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<td>Hodge and Tripp (1986)</td>
<td>28% of 9-12 year olds chose conceptually related pairs of cartoon characters, 58% chose drama characters and 9% chose 'stars'. In their triadic groupings 9-12 year olds chose on television just on television, on television/not in real life as their construct only 20% of the time suggesting that this is no longer a critical construct for them. In the real/less real sorting exercise, 70% of the 9/10 year olds indicated they believed life was more real than television and 30% that television and life were equally real. Older children used more features to specify reality than the younger children with 80% of the 9 year olds using media-related criteria. Methods of media production - knowledge or theories about 'how it's done' emerge as a very salient criterion of reality for 8-9 year olds.</td>
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<td>Buckingham (1993a)</td>
<td>Children aged 9-12 confidently distinguished between puppets, cartoons and live action dramas and between actors and 'real people'. Comedy operated as a modality marker. Children aware that different plots were constructed according to different conventions in order to achieve different effects. Children aware that characters in fictional programmes were played by actors; some knew they are paid to do this. Some doubt arose about characters in live action dramas that were often judged 'realistic'. Some of the 'characters' thought to be real people. Much speculation about 'camera tricks', editing, the use of robots and models, back projection, chromakey, computer animation and the use of special make-up. Fictitious/fantasy elements sometimes judged real because they 'looked real' - an aesthetic judgement. Younger children generally appeared to be more preoccupied with internal criteria while older ones were more likely to use external criteria as the basis for their judgements. Middle class children made a larger proportion of modality judgements and appeared to be more concerned with external criteria than working class children.</td>
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younger children. Many similarities between the world of television and the real world are seen by the 8-10 year olds. In making their modality judgements they tend now to focus on social situations and events rather than concrete, literal objects; they are more concerned with probability or plausibility than plain possibility/impossibility; they recognize that 'reality' is relative, understanding that something is both real because it is modelled on reality and simultaneously unreal because it is not reality itself.

While this age group has, perhaps, been best served by recent research (Hodge and Tripp 1986; Buckingham 1993a), it still remains to provide a detailed, textured picture of the kinds of modality judgements that children make at this age. In addition, neither of the previous two studies has explicitly attempted to account for the development of children's modality constructs in terms of cognitive developmental theory. Accordingly, the present study provides a thorough, exhaustive analysis of the children's responses and shows the reciprocal links between elements of their modality judgements and their developing cognitive skills. The programme preferences of this age group will also be examined to show how children's favourite television shows, once again, are those that reflect modality issues of great importance to them at this age. In the final section, the power of social context and social interaction to generate 'non-television meanings' amongst the participants will be explored.

THE PRESENT STUDY

For this phase of the present study, the participants were 14 girls and 16 boys from public primary schools in both England and Australia. Both schools were similar in that they were mixed sex, drew their populations from areas that contained a similar mix of working class and middle class families and had a broad range of children from different cultural backgrounds. The choice of participants reflected these gender, cultural and class differences: eight different countries of origin (other than England or Australia) are represented in the sample and in terms of class background, 13 children were classified as working class and 17 middle class (in the manner set out in Chapter 1).

The research task was similar in nature to the one used with the 5-7 year olds. In groups of 3 or 4, the children were asked to find a way of showing which television programmes (represented by titles printed on cards) they judged more 'realistic' or 'true-to-life' and those they judged to be less so. Once again, no further definition of the key terms was provided by the researcher. Some groups chose to arrange their cards in a modality continuum ranging from those programmes considered most realistic through to those considered least realistic. Other groups arranged cards in piles with different modality
labels which they negotiated (e.g. 'very realistic' 'not too realistic' 'not real at all'). The children were left to discuss and debate which programmes they thought were realistic and which they thought were not until they had negotiated a classification for all the programmes. At this point, the researcher might ask questions of clarification or probe certain judgements. All of the talk was audio-taped.

A preparatory survey had asked the children to indicate those programmes with which they were familiar and which they watched on a regular basis. From these, 38 programmes from a wide range of genres were selected. These programmes included those intended for general viewing like the News, live action dramas (e.g. The Bill), cartoons (e.g. Transformers), family shows/situation comedies (e.g. The Cosby Show), game shows (e.g. Double Dare), magazine programmes (e.g. Blue Peter, Big Square Eye), young children's programmes (e.g. Play School, Sooty) and soap operas like Home and Away and Neighbours.

The analysis of the children's discussions is organized in three sections. In the first, the cognitive judgements relating to the two dimensions: Television as a Constructed Medium and The Relationship of Television to Real Life will be presented; in the second it will be shown how the favourite programmes of 8-10 year old children support the exploration of modality issues of importance to children at this age; and in the third section, the ways in which these children use the modality discourse to define and position themselves socially will be demonstrated.

COGNITIVE JUDGEMENTS

As is suggested by others (Kelly 1981; Buckingham 1993a), children in middle to late childhood are in no doubt that fictional TV programmes are constructed representations of the world, with varying degrees of relationship to real life. In this study, the 8-10 year olds were also the first children to move away from a fixed, concrete and literal interpretation of the word 'real', recognising it instead to be a relative term with a range of possible meanings. Several groups, for example, began by trying to clarify what the term meant when it was used to introduce the task:

Narelle: Real? Does it matter if they're the cartoons?
Gina: Cos The Simpsons, you know, tell you about life.

Some programmes were used only with the British or Australian respondents. See Appendix 1 for a complete list of programmes used.
Knowledge about the Constructed Nature of Television

In terms of their understanding of television as a constructed medium, children this age are able to identify various TV genres; they generally talk knowledgeably about actors, studios, acting, rehearsing, audiences and so on - only one small area of doubt remains about the status of some characters in fictional realism. They are keenly interested in speculating about 'how it's done' and often admiring of programmes that convincingly achieve clever effects.

Recognising Genres

It is generally considered that the ability to differentiate the mass of television material into separate genres constitutes evidence of children's understanding about television as a constructed medium, and, that this is a skill that develops with age (Dorr 1983; Wright et al. 1994; Buckingham 1993a). The findings of this study support these claims. Some of the preschoolers referred to cartoons but seemed unsure what this term meant, whereas the 5-7 year olds identified and named only two distinct genres: cartoons and news programmes. In contrast, the 8-10 year olds mention an elaborate range of programmes from cartoons to comedies, from game shows to 'programmes that help you or tell you things'.

All groups identify and spontaneously name soaps, cartoons, news programmes and programmes, like Play School, Sooty and Mr. Squiggle, intended for children younger than them. In six of the eight groups, children refer to quiz and game shows with teams of contestants like Double Dare and Now You See It, and shows 'with contests' like Vidiot, Big Square Eye and Couch Potato, where individuals compete against each other. There are programmes like Roseanne and The Cosby Show that are 'just for to make you laugh' which seems a good enough description of situation comedies and there are 'serious' programmes (live action dramas) about the life of police officers (The Bill), lifesavers (Baywatch) and life in hospitals (Children's Ward).

Different genres produced different modality classifications. There was little disagreement either within or between groups about what deserved the most and least real classifications. Cartoons or obvious fantasy programmes were usually judged the most unreal. Every group rated such shows as Dennis, He-Man and Transformers as being very unreal - often citing the fact that they were cartoons as self-evident proof of their unreality.

News programmes were judged by all the groups as being very real. Most discussions indicated that the children saw the News as the closest thing to 'a window on the world' that television affords; the news presenters were 'telling you what's happening'.

149
As was seen with the 5-7 year olds, news broadcasts appear to fill an urgent need to establish a modal base-line. As Hitesh (10) says, there's got to be one programme that does this:

Hitesh: The News. Because they wouldn't be making it up like ..cos, if they ..people wouldn't know what's happening in the world here, so they've got to find out. There's got to be one programme that has to be real and showing real things.

Only one boy, Hamid (9), showed any understanding that news can be manipulated. Such doubt was not shared by any one else - indeed there was generally an unswerving belief in the trustworthiness of the news. The incident concerning the Kuwaiti babies which Alex (9) finds so convincing, was later exposed as propaganda:

Mark: No. Some people die from it and they are telling the truth because...
Garry: They wouldn't make up things just like that.
Interviewer: Wouldn't they?
Mark: They wouldn't make up things to upset us.
Hamid: Sometimes! Sometimes!
Alex: Sometimes they do.
Hamid: Sometimes.
Mark: What to upset people? What, really say that sorry...
Hamid: In newspapers they do it.
Mark: Yes...
Hamid: Same thing, same thing.
Interviewer: So, you think they might do it on the television as well?
Hamid: Yes.
Interviewer: Garry what do you think?
Garry: Um...Well, I think it's realistic cos um... they ain't going to make..have a war just for no reason are they?
Hamid: But we're not saying um...the war's...they're lying.
Garry: No, no...
Garry: You see...when they got the thing...like the um Gulf crisis. They ain't going to start that up just for playing around are they?
Mark: They don't want a game of golf do they?
(Laughs at the pun).
Interviewer: What do you think Alex?
Alex: I think that they wouldn't...the, the...on the last news they had people crying and saying things that, like the Iraqis, um, got into...went into hospital and took out the babies out of the incubators and things like that and they were crying and all sorts of things that makes it look realistic and it is.
The 'truth' status of news programmes for these children can be attributed to a number of factors: it contains live footage of dramatic events, the authenticity of which can be confirmed by other sources like newspapers; the mode of address is unlike other programmes - 'they're telling you' - so they're providing a service; and the promotional publicity surrounding news services generally emphasises the probity of the newsreaders and the accuracy of the information they broadcast.

Actors and Acting

In their talk about television, the children shared a basic understanding that the characters in fictional programmes were actors. All groups confidently used terms such as 'actors', 'acting', 'playing a part' and shows being done 'in front of an invited audience' in their discussions. In this, the older children show a definite advance on the 5-7 year olds, who, it was shown in the last chapter, rarely used such terminology. EastEnders and Neighbours come in for comment because they create cognitive disequilibrium. On the one hand, the location appears to be extremely authentic, however, this has to be squared with the understanding that the people are actors who live, possibly in some comfort, elsewhere:

**Interviewer:** Right. Is it a real place?
**Hitesh:** It is a real place.
**Interviewer:** It is a real place. And the people that are in EastEnders are they people that actually live there?
**Hitesh:** No.
**Interviewer:** Who are they?
**Robert:** Actors.
**Hitesh:** Actors. They, they...they've got expensive houses somewhere else.

and

**Hamid:** Ramsay Street they..like when their film cameras are looking from the top you can see all the street houses. They come down and they come into one of the houses, like, you know Jim's house and it's like true but they're actors and they live somewhere else.

Wright et al. (1994) found that, among their 7 year olds, there was some doubt as to whether actors retained their roles/occupations off-screen. Although the 8-10 year olds

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26 At the time of writing, Channel 10 news is promoting itself in prime time as having presenters who 'get it right' whereas Channel 9's hook is 'With Channel Nine News you can be sure'. From time to time all channels use promos that underline the integrity, the probity, the absolute trustworthiness of the service and the presenters, so it is unsurprising that children this age classify the news as the most real or 'true' of all programmes.
here were generally very secure in their understanding about the nature of acting there were some interesting examples of disequilibrium about this. Some programmes appear to be so authentic, that old schemes for making sense of real life situations are used to assimilate (or partly assimilate) the television experience. Here, the relationships between the actors on The Cosby Show are discussed:

**Interviewer:** And are they a real family? In real life?

**Garry:** Yes.

**Mark:** No. The dad and the boy, not the boy, the dad and the girl is, but the rest isn't.

**Interviewer:** What are the rest?

**Garry:** They're just friends I think.

**Alex:** Yes.

**Mark:** Acting friends, not like...They didn't know each other until then.

Dramas with very realistic settings like The Bill and Children's Ward also produced confusion about the status of those appearing in them. In all cases, the groups classified these programmes as 'very realistic'. In the following extract, James (9) is fairly sure that the cast of The Bill consists of both actors and real police officers. Anton (10) has a critical view, but he is not as strong in the group and signals deference to James:

**Interviewer:** Are they real policemen in the programme?

**James:** Yes.

**Anton:** No.

**James:** Some are, some ain't.

**Interviewer:** How can you tell the difference between them?

**James:** Cos like they...the ones that er get like...the ones that like...when I watched it once...the ones that got beat up...like they were real because they could take it. But the other ones couldn't. So they don't punch them up, they punch the people that are policemen up. I think.

**Interviewer:** So, the people who are in the programme are actually policemen in real life.

**Dipesh:** Some.

**James:** Some

**Anton:** Yes.

**Dipesh:** Cos they can't get lots and lots and lots of police officers...

**Interviewer:** Who are the other ones then?

**Dipesh:** Actors.

**Interviewer:** Just actors.

**Anton:** Yep.

The mixed-cast possibility is also raised in relation to Children's Ward, but Alex's final comment underlines his belief that the programme is essentially fictional - even if they are really sick people they would still have to act:
Interviewer: Are the children in the hospital really sick?
Hamid: No.
Mark: No.
Garry: Could be, some of them.
Alex: Some of them could.
Mark: Nah!
Interviewer: Why do you say no, Mark?
Mark: Because why would they... They wouldn't do that to people that ain't well. They couldn't do that.
Alex: Because they wouldn't be able to act. They wouldn't be well enough to act. They'd look green and stuff. And they... because they have to make up their faces and things.

Another example, in relation to Children's Ward, shows James (9) and Dipesh (10) also trying to balance the programme's authenticity against its fictional status. James 'can't remember' whether he actually saw the fake needle but fake needles are consistent with fictional stories - on the other hand, some of the children on the ward are long term residents and only really sick people are kept in hospital for long periods of time.

Interviewer: What about the kids in Children's Ward - are they really sick children?
Anton: No. Just pretend...
Dipesh: No, not all of them.
Interviewer: Just pretend?
Anton: Most of them are pretend.
Interviewer: Just acting are they?
Anton: Yes.
Dipesh: Yes.
James: Like cos like... that boy wanted an operation and he's got this invisible thing, a teddy bear or whatever it is, and he didn't really get an injection or something.
Interviewer: You don't think so?
James: I think that was just pretend like. If they showed you - I can't remember whether they showed you or not - there was just a blunt needle and when they pushed it in, it didn't go in, it was a blunt needle and it went straight up into the thing again.
Interviewer: So you think this was just pretend.
James: When people are brought in, they're just pretend, but when like they've been in there since the beginning, I don't think it's pretend like, there's this girl's got a broken arm... and there's a girl that's got a broken neck..
Anton: ...and they run away.
Interviewer: And you think she's probably really sick?
Dipesh: Yes.
James: Yeah.
And finally, Elspeth (10) also makes a decision about the children in Children's Ward that seems to be more influenced by her careful observation of the authenticity of the opening sequence, than it does by her recognition that it is most unlikely anyone would actually make a television programme in a hospital:

Interviewer: What do you think Elspeth? Do you think it's a real hospital ward?
Elspeth: Well, I think, I think when they're, they're on the outside they're not on this just normal building - that's possible. And when they're coming in through the gates that's a real hospital and when they go in through the door, and maybe the steps are still the hospital but the ward couldn't be because they wouldn't vacate a whole ward to devote it to a programme.

Interviewer: So are those children really sick?
Elspeth: Yes.
Interviewer: In the programme?
Anne and Elspeth: (Nod assent)

It would be unwise to think that the confusions illustrated above are evidence that 8-10 year old children believe they are seeing ongoing life through their television screens or even that they are viewing a documentary. In the examples above, and elsewhere in the transcripts, there is plenty to suggest that the children are well aware that they are watching a scripted, fictional story. What these discussions do is, once again, demonstrate the confusion that arises when schemes that are so effective for assimilating real life experience are able to be used to assimilate television ones too. The difficulty arises because television realism looks so real, it looks so authentic. The children have seen policemen, they have been inside hospitals and what they see on The Bill and Children's Ward is consistent with these real life experiences. They therefore try to use their real life schemes for 'policemen' and 'hospitals' to assimilate what they see on the television - and to a certain extent it works because everything looks so much like the real thing. However, they also know that television is a constructed medium, that parts are taken by actors, that special props can create the illusion of, say, a real injection and this knowledge causes disequilibrium. The understanding that television programmes are essentially fabricated does not square with the very convincing visual authenticity that programmes like The Bill present. The children in the extracts above have reached an accommodation of sorts: they conclude that a mixture of actors and real people populate these programmes. Alex (9), in reasoning that you can't ask sick people to act, demonstrates both the competing schemes and the fragility of this accommodation.

As Dorr (1983) suggested, knowledge about the economic basis of television is little understood by children this age. Only two groups referred to the fact that actors were doing
their job for money. That a star-system operates and that actors are paid according to their status is understood by Hitesh (10) and Anitra (9):

Hitesh: In a show, like they just do it for the money. cos you know they’re super-stars, I don’t know.
Anitra: They do it for at least £200 a week.

There are also producers and directors who are paid for being involved in the process:

Interviewer: Who’s making the money?
Hitesh: The children get some of the money. The grown-ups get money but, most of all the producers and directors and so on etc.
Interviewer: And who do they get the money from? Who do they sell the programme to?
Hitesh: I don’t really know about that.
Robert: They sell it to ITV.
Interviewer: And who pays...and where does ITV get its money from? How do they pay for the programmes?
Hitesh: We don’t know that kind of detail.

Knowledge About ‘How It’s Done’
Dorr (1983) and Hodge and Tripp (1986) agree that while all children ‘... need, and crave, an understanding of the processes of media production.’ (Hodge and Tripp 1986: 126), for 8 - 9 year olds, this is the most salient criterion of modality. Certainly, the 8 - 10 year olds in this study continue to show the fascination with questions of ‘how it’s done’ that the 5 - 7 year olds demonstrated in the last chapter.

Cartoons were understood by all children in this study to be contrived or created by someone and were mostly judged ‘unrealistic’. However, in the same way that Quarforth (1987) interpreted her data to show that a substantial number of her 8 and 9 year olds did not understand the nature of cartoons, there was no clear, universal knowledge among the 8 - 10 year olds in this study about how the images or effects were achieved.

Various hypotheses and bits of knowledge were put forward to account for how Dennis, He-Man and The Simpsons were made. In the first extract, the children understand that cartoons are drawn and Tina (10) draws on knowledge, perhaps learnt from a media studies exercise, about how the drawings appear to move:

Robert: Dennis is just a cartoon.
Hitesh: If he tried to do those stunts he’d be in hospital.
Interviewer: And you say he’s just a cartoon?
Robert: Yeah.
Interviewer: What does that mean?
Robert: That means, er, it's only...it's made by people like cartoonists. Drawing.
Tina: It's like card that's cut out and it's got two flicks at the side and it's got two holes and you put a pencil in it.

Mark (10), has a slightly more 'high-tech' hypothesis involving the use of computers.

Interviewer: Do you know how cartoons are made?
Mark: Oh yes, that's right, you get a computer. This is a button here and you get a drawing and you cut it out (the drawing) and you get some background. Say that's a man there and you got some things there and there's a pond over there and you want him to jump into it. Right. You put him there and press the button, so it's recorded. Then you put him up a little bit, that's slanted, press the button. Put him there, slant it, put him in, slant it and then cut his legs and then bend them a bit so they look like it really. Press. Then put him the other way. Press. Put them the other way. Press.

A fantasy science fiction programme like The Land of the Giants, which uses many special effects and live actors, stretched the imaginative resources of most groups when it came to explaining 'how it was done'. Robert (10) has one explanation for the disparity in the characters' sizes:

Robert: Land of the Giants. Well, the giants are real people but are standing on stilts and the little people are real.

In other groups the hypotheses varied, but all relied to a degree on their understanding that images can be manipulated by using particular camera techniques. The following extract, from an all-boy group, is typical:

Dipesh: Yes because the people are quite small and if you look at the people and the giants then it looks realistic.
Interviewer: Are there giants in real life?
All: No.
Dipesh: If you look at a big building from the little people's point of view, it looks kind of realistic. If you look like at the people and the buildings it looks quite big..
Interviewer: Where did they get the little people from?
Dipesh: Well, what they do is they shoot the people...
Anton: It's a big giant screen behind it with people and then they're speaking, right, behind it...and it's just a projector, right, and then they have to speak back to them but they're not really speaking to them.
Interviewer: So, they're real people...
Anton: Yeah they're real people but the other giants ain't. Cos it's like a big screen at the back.

The use of special props (e.g. fake hypodermic needles) and special make-up (e.g. fake blood) is also widely understood. Here Garry (10), Alex (9) and Hamid (9) discuss how the illusion of injury is created in *The Bill*:

Garry: There was blood coming down everywhere and stones and everything.
Interviewer: How do they do that then?
Alex: They get uh...they get little bits of like plastic, yeah and they have um sticky stuff on it and they can...when you get hurt you can like stick it on like that as if it's hurting you. And it sticks on.
Interviewer: So, it's pretend.
Hamid: And sometimes in the shops you get like in toy shops you get a cut there and you stick it on and it looks so real.

In programmes like soaps, situation comedies and dramas, the ability to spot, sometimes poor, production techniques also provides insights into 'how it's done'. Garry (10) and Anton (9) were, for example, quick to spot fake hypodermic needles in *Children's Ward*:

Garry: Um...the needle things like, they're see-through and if it were a real needle you'd see the thing go back up. You'd see the piece of metal go back up.
Anton: It's probably got water in it or something.
Interviewer: So...I see, they're not real injections.
Anton: No.

Carlos (9), Natasha (9) and Rose (10) spot a fake pregnancy in *Neighbours*. Here a range of observations and bits of knowledge are produced:

Carlos: I reckon when one of the twins was having the baby you could see that it wasn't a real baby. Cos you could actually see the cushion...
Natasha: It didn't look anything like it.
Carlos: ...like there was a cushion in there, you could actually see it.
Interviewer: Right. So it wasn’t a real baby.
Carlos: No, you actually see the cushion.
Rose: [Jokingly] It was a real baby because she went [mock groan] ‘Oh, I’m having contractions!’

Another important production factor (amounting almost to an obsession with some groups) concerned whether the programme used a studio set or an actual location. Actual locations were usually enough to guarantee a programme a ‘very realistic’ classification, while the fake quality of some studio sets (e.g. painted exterior backdrops) invariably entailed judgements that the programme was less real or ‘unrealistic’. This marker was almost exclusively used by the boys in this age group. In the following extract, James (9), Anton (9) and Dipesh (10) are explaining why, of the two Australian soap operas, Home and Away is more real than Neighbours:

Interviewer: Why is Home and Away more realistic than Neighbours?
James: Because they are.
Anton: Because, Neighbours when they open the door, right, there’s this house right, I saw outside and it wasn’t real.
Dipesh: It looks like a sort of fra...a sort of picture coming. It’s got a picture.
Interviewer: I see, but Home and Away?
Anton: Yes, it’s real.
Interviewer: How can you tell?
Dipesh: Because if you look outside you see all leaves moving and things like that. And plus in Neighbours...when they slam the door they make a funny sort of sound from outside and inside.
Anton: Yeah.
Dipesh: And when they’re outside...say if you look at Des’ place and it’s cloudish if you look through the door, and it gets cloudish - and when someone goes outside it didn’t really - after, it looks sun-shiny. It’s the scenery. Yeah, it’s the painting behind the door.
Interviewer: I see.
Anton: And when they close the door they’re in the studio innit. That’s what makes the funny noise when they slam the door.

The next group judges Roseanne, Bread and Coronation Street to be realistic because there are shots that show what’s happening outside the house and this proves that what is happening is happening in a real house as opposed to a studio - thus these programmes are more realistic than The Cosby Show - at least for Hamid (9) - because this latter show does not have sufficiently authentic exterior shots:
Garry: [Roseanne] is realistic cos, um, it's always... um,... you can see outside and everything. You see the trees moving and the cars going up and down the road and everything and they're going to different houses and theirs must be a real house and everything.

[...]

Interviewer: What about Bread?

Hamid: Um. Because when they open the doors and they go outside it's like, it's a real place and the cars and they drive the cars and they've got telephones.

Garry: It's like we said, it's just like Coronation Street, it's a real street and the houses are real and everything like that.

[...]

Hamid: In [The Cosby Show] when they open the door, when they open the door you see like a big screen and there's no, it don't look real, just like...

[...]

Interviewer: No, let Hamid say, you don't think it looks real when the doors open.

Hamid: Yes, the inside looks like a real family but when they open the doors, it's the same thing like Neighbours...

Interviewer: Yes.

Hamid: And you like see a picture of people, like the trees and then the trees don't move and you could tell.

Interviewer: I see.

Garry: It might not be windy.

On the one hand, this obsession with sets versus real locations could be seen as another example of how authenticity dazzles some of these children and leads them back to using pre-existing real-world schemes to make sense of this television experience. On the other, the discussions above might better be seen as the children using this notion of authenticity to rank programmes (which they know are fictional) on some kind of 'realism' scale - for example, those shows with the more authentic locations are more realistic than the lower budget ones that have to use studio sets. Given that it is essentially the same children who are concerned with the status of both locations and actors, it is clear that while their understanding about television realism is still somewhat fragmented, one could interpret these later extracts as evidence that they are moving towards a more integrated understanding of the genre.

The discussions of the 8–10 year olds here show how a more and more sophisticated understanding of television as a medium is developing. These children have moved a long way beyond the 5–7 year olds in their understanding about how television programmes are constructed, although, interestingly, there is still no comprehensive knowledge about how
cartoons are actually made. Their understanding of genre encompasses a wide range of programmes in between the modality ‘extremes’ of cartoons and news broadcasts and the focus now is on television realism. The children understand about ‘actors’ and ‘acting’ (although there is little knowledge about the economic basis of television) and they continue to speculate about ‘how it’s done’. The fact that television realism often looks so right is sufficient to send some children back to pre-existing schemes, derived from real world experience, to help make sense of what they see. In this way, they can explain television family members, police officers and hospital patients as being a mixture of genuine people and actors. The discussions about sets versus locations, however, may also be an indication that they are simultaneously using this concept of authenticity to develop a more complex scheme for ‘realism’ that will eventually be able to comfortably accommodate programmes like The Bill, Children’s Ward and The Cosby Show.

The Relationship of Television to Real Life

When younger children compared what they saw on television with real life they were looking at concrete, literal things. Real people are not yellow so The Simpsons aren't real; Home and Away is real because it has real surfboards and real waves; Big Bird has a moving mouth, so it is real. In essence, the younger children were looking for examples of possibility (and, more often, impossibility) when making their judgements.

There are examples of the 8-10 year olds using this strategy - ‘there are no such things as giants’ (Land of the Giants), ‘real people don't have pencils stuck up their noses’ (Mr Squiggle), but on the whole, children at this age do not focus so sharply on objects and people and they are less concerned with questions of possibility and impossibility. Rather, they talk far more about events and situations that occur in various television programmes and they are generally more concerned with questions of their plausibility - that is, how likely or how believable they are. In making these judgements, children use their own personal experience when things in their lives map onto things that happen in television programmes. However, the range of incidents that occurs on television far exceeds the individual experiences of children in middle to late childhood and in these instances, the children base their judgements on their personal models of the world, their versions of social reality. As Hodge and Tripp state:

> Media-external criteria have become more important to older children. That is, they are using (testing) their developing knowledge of reality generally as the basis for modality judgements.

(Hodge and Tripp 1986: 126)
There are, of course, overlaps between the two kinds of criteria being considered in relation to children’s cognitive judgements. An important way in which children judge plausibility concerns recognition of the ways different plots are manipulated in order to produce different effects - for example, the cliff-hanger endings and the heightened realism of soaps; the humour in situation comedies. While an understanding of ‘the forms and conventions of television’ (Buckingham 1993a: 221) is indeed evidence of knowing that television is a constructed medium, it is simultaneously the case that children judge implausibility on the likelihood or the believability of these things happening in real life. In addition, many of the implausibilities in television programmes are deliberate ways of heightening enjoyment and this is reflected in the children’s discussions here - thus, their affective responses are interwoven with their cognitive judgements.

Personal Experience

If things that have happened in the child’s life can map onto things that happen in a television programme, then the programme is judged ‘real’. Anne (9), for example, uses her own hospital experience to justify the ‘realistic’ classification of Children’s Ward:

Anne: Yeah. And it was just like when I went there. I mean, the ward is exac...quite the same. There’s ducks on the walls and curtains and everything and the nurses all ACTED the same.

Mark (10) bases his judgement that Baywatch is real on his observation of life-savers in action while holidaying in America:

Interviewer: And you’ve seen a beach like the one on Baywatch?
Mark: We went on a beach like this and there was towers with lifeguards and this er, not little girl, there was this woman on a floater and the waves got too big and she got tipped over and, er, I can’t remember his name but he told us and I asked for his autograph...

Interviewer: The lifeguard.
Mark: Yeah, a lifeguard, he jumped in and swam with her back to shore and gave her this little float thing. This isn’t on the Baywatch, this is real...

Stavros (10) proudly contributes personal experience to provide incontrovertible proof that the news is ‘realistic’ in his group’s discussion:
Stavros: It tells you what happens. Cos, like I was going to be on the news once. Channel 7 News.
Roger: He was real.
Interviewer: You personally were going to be on the news?
Stavros: Yeah, all by myself.
Roger: It's reality in itself.

Plausibility
In situations where there is no direct personal experience to draw on, children fall back on their versions of social reality - their models of the way the world works and their hypotheses about life - as a basis for comparison. In the first extract, Alex (9) and Garry (10) discuss why they have classified both EastEnders and Neighbours as 'realistic'. This judgement seems to have been based on a mixture of general beliefs about how life is lived (births, deaths, marriages, childhood pranks) and some specific ones relating to life as it is lived in the children's own London neighbourhood:

Alex: It's like in a market and people, they're buying things and things like that. They're buying things and having arguments and they're talking about getting married and things like that and they're going and getting cups of tea, buying things...
Interviewer: And that's more realistic than Coronation Street?
All: Yeah!
Interviewer: O.K. What about Neighbours and Home and Away?
Alex: Neighbours got people getting married, it's got realistic things like...
Garry: It's got real swimming pools and everything.
Alex: Yeah.
Garry: And kids got drowned...
Alex: And people...
Garry: And babies...
Alex: And, and children getting in trouble for...um
Garry: Stealing dogs.
Alex: Stealing dogs.

Natasha (9) supports her group's classification of the situation comedy Diff'rent Strokes as 'realistic' because she recognises that divorce and the break up of families does occur, even though this is not part of her own experience.

Natasha: Things happen in...like Diff'rent Strokes - that's funny. Like, it's true how people like, get divorces and they...the mother takes the kids and the father adopts...um, a few children so he can have someone to live
with, like if you don’t have any children, it’s no fun at all.

Dramas like The Bill and soap operas like E Street are often judged to be realistic because, even though it is unlikely that any of the children has ever been involved in the dramatic types of events that occur in those programmes, ‘...things like that do happen.’ Jacinta (9), Katherine (9) and Paul (10) have not come across criminals in their own life experience but their model of the world certainly includes them:

Jacinta: Well I like E Street because erm well there’ve got to be criminals and erm and erm real life things...real life stuff.

Katherine: Cos there’s real people in it and [interruptions of various kinds] and there’s like robber...like bad things that the police erm supposed to er...

Interviewer: Have to come and sort out.

Katherine: It’s good. It’s good.

Paul: It’s like real life.

The final extracts are particularly interesting because they relate to a cartoon. In the first, Gina (9), Narelle (9) and Stavros (10) have decided that the cartoon The Simpsons should be classified as belonging to a ‘medium realistic’ pile of programmes. These children see beyond the obvious cartoon qualities of the programme and, instead, base their modality judgement on the fact that even a cartoon, with all its obvious visual/aural lack of realism (hence, perhaps, the ‘middle realistic’ classification), can depict events that might happen in real life:

Gina: Cos The Simpsons, you know, tell you about life

Narelle: Yes Simpsons they do get to life.

Stavros: The Simpsons like...the man who did The Simpsons that’s more like his life...so it’s like what they sort their problems out like humans.

Martin (10), Jacinta (9) and Katherine (9) make a very clear distinction between the ‘reality’ of the Simpsons characters (they are not real people) and the themes of the show (they are ‘true’). Here is evidence, that unlike the 5 - 7 year olds, these children are making distinctions between real people, actors and storylines and can simultaneously contemplate a real person in a fictional story. Jacinta’s model of the world, at present, includes families who sensibly resolve conflicts and differences:

Interviewer: Why have you put The Simpsons on the realistic pile?
Martin: Well, they're true and...
Interviewer: Why are they true?
Martin: They are.
Jacinta: The facts are true, not the cartoons.
Katherine: [To Martin] And you like the people I think.
Martin: Yes.
Interviewer: Alright, so the facts are true. What do you mean by the facts?
Jacinta: Ooooooh - if they have a family fight they resolve it in some sensible way.
Interviewer: O.K. Would you agree with that Martin?
Martin: Yes.
Interviewer: But what isn't true about it? What isn't real?
Jacinta: The cartoons. They're not real people.

Implausibility

As demonstrated above, one major strategy for establishing modality for this age group was looking for similarities, accumulating resemblances between the television event or situation and the children's personal experience or models of the real world. In this way, the children established a major reality marker. At the same time, the opposite strategy is to look for discrepancies between the television world and one's own and these act as unreality markers - after sufficient have been accumulated, then 'unreal' status is confirmed. When children's modality systems are being strained and they are forced into their 'zones of proximal development', unreality markers are an important way of resolving the disequilibrium.

Implausibility could be judged in several ways. Some soap operas, for example, were judged more 'unrealistic' than others because of the sheer weight of 'Significant Events' they tried to pack into an episode. Here Elspeth (10) justifies her group judging Coronation Street to be more realistic than EastEnders.

Elspeth: I think EastEnders is a bit over the top a bit like...but Coronation Street isn't very over the top. It's like someone dying, and a fire, all this thrown into one programme. It's a bit confusing.
Interviewer: That's Coronation Street is it?
Elspeth: No, it's EastEnders. And you can't really tell what's going on so...you find there's about fifty muggings in a week and...
Interviewer: So you're suggesting that that's not very realistic?
Elspeth: Yes.

While heightened realism may be implausible so, however, is the fact that the boringly mundane events of life are omitted!
Natasha: ...but what I don't like about these [Neighbours and Home and Away] they never go to the toilet or something like...they should go to the toilet in parts I think cos that's a normal, everyday thing.

Interviewer: Do they go to the toilet on E Street?
Chloe: They must be busting!
Natasha: Yeah, a few times.

The use of coincidence in soaps is mentioned by all groups but it's rarely enough to demote a soap opera to an unrealistic classification. Here Alan (10) judges Neighbours only 'three quarters realistic' because of the implausibility of coincidence:

Interviewer: What are some of the things that aren't realistic?
Alan: Well erm how the dog was lost and someone just happened to be driving past and they heard the dog bark, you know, I don't think that would happen.
Interviewer: Right. A bit of a coincidence you think?
Alan: Yeah.

Programmes like Press Gang are not considered very plausible by most children because the protagonists run and publish a weekly newspaper called The Junior Gazette. The problem is, as Alex (9) points out, not so much that the children's time is completely taken up with this work, but rather that they are allowed to work without adult supervision in their own building:

Alex: It's about a newspaper thing and they're making newspapers and things like that and the government, not the government, people put them up...the Council put them up as...in the place to look after it and it's only them, it hasn't got any adults or anything, there's only children like under 15 or something like that. And that wouldn't happen, putting children in charge of a whole block.

Similarly, few groups find Doogie Howser M.D. plausible, because although he is only a teenager, Doogie is a fully qualified doctor. Children this age know very well that their freedoms and responsibilities are much more limited than those of Doogie Howser or the kids on The Junior Gazette.

Implausibility also occurs when the model of life presented on the television programme is extremely different from the child's own experience or the model of life that the child has developed. Cultural differences, of course, play an important role. For example, here are a
white working class boy (Robert 10), an Asian working class boy (Hitesh 10) and an Asian middle class girl (Anitra 9), discussing the American situation comedy Roseanne. All three children give the impression that Roseanne's family life is very different from the one they have experienced. Some of the comments (e.g. being told to play in one's room) have the ring of authentic, real-life family scripts. The discussion is reproduced here in its entirety because of the passion and barely restrained outrage demonstrated by Hitesh. What Hitesh considers to be Roseanne's lack of discipline and care and her family's boisterous behaviour are all unreality markers for him. There are so many of them that he seems almost overwhelmed - he retreats from the disequilibrium caused by the show into the safety of the modality judgement that '...they're just doing a show.'

**Hitesh:** Yeah, but it's not all the time, you know, there are things similar to that, but, you know, things that wouldn't really happen in real life...that's stupid. You know, like, you wouldn't actually get a kid, yeah?...who the littlest boy, O.K., you know, all his toys are under things and that would be a bit stupid and mother, Roseanne, doesn't do nothing! You know. But if it was in a real family you'd go "What's your room for? Go and play in you room." But she didn't say nothing so I don't think that's very good. They're just doing, you know, they're just doing a show.

**Interviewer:** Just doing a show.

**Hitesh:** Yeah, they just, you know, it's all a...it's all about their own jokes, they don't really think of the, you know, the things that would happen in real life. Even though it is a family programme they wouldn't, you know, they don't have the real thing that a real family would have.

**Anitra:** It hasn't got the real things that happen in a family.

**Interviewer:** What sorts of things happen in a family that aren't on that kind of programme?

**Robert:** Arguments and things.

**Hitesh:** But they never have arguments. They're always thinking about themselves. They don't care about their children. They're always thinking about their diets and telling jokes and everything and kids really just...

**Anitra:** And one of the little ones kicked the big one out of her room when she threw all her clothes out and everything.

**Hitesh:** And Roseanne doesn't do nothing about it! And they break the house down, like they slam the door down and everything.

**Anitra:** Yes and Roseanne doesn't do anything.
Comedy

As Hodge and Tripp (1986:106) point out: 'Laughter is an important indicator of modality in speech' because laughter tends to weaken the perceived reality, or modality, of a message. This effect seems to transfer to a verbal-visual medium like television. For many of the children in this study, the humour present in such programmes as situation comedies rendered them implausible and so they often judged them less realistic than other kinds of programme. Here, Hitesh (10) and Robert (10) explain why The Cosby Show is implausible:

Interviewer: O.K. Anything else you want to say about any of these programmes?
Hitesh: **The Cosby Show.**
Interviewer: Tell me about it.
Hitesh: Well...it's not really much you know. It's just that every time he comes in, he's always making jokes. Even at dinner time he's making jokes. He's not as real...

Robert: They all spit out their food. And they start laughing.
Hitesh: And you know you wouldn't be that stupid like making jokes every ten seconds, twenty four hours a day, seven days a week like that.

Interviewer: O.K. So you think the funnier the programme, the less realistic it is?
Hitesh: Yes. Cos if it was just a little thing of talk, um, jokes, then that would be alright. Cos you know you've got to have a bit of a laugh haven't you? But if...you know...you have it day and night, you know...

In the following extract, Elspeth (10) judges Only Fools and Horses to be 'less realistic' than The Bill because the former programme is 'jokey':

Elspeth: Well **[Only Fools and Horses]** that's jokey. It's not...it's about real life but it's jokey.
Anne: It's not.
Elspeth: It's a bit...**Only Fools and Horses** and **The Cosby Show** are jokey so they're not as realistic as the others.

As can be seen, the 8 - 10 year olds are no longer fixated on identifying 'real' objects or examples of possibility and impossibility when considering television's relationship to real life. Personal experience carries a lot of weight, but, so too do children's working hypotheses about, for example, what families and neighbourhoods are like; how one should resolve problems or conflict; the existence of crime and the role of the police. At the same time, they are quick to pick up examples of implausibility - too much incident, convenient coincidence, too much humour and unlikely scenarios are all things to which the
respondents here were very sensitive. As predicted (Kelly 1981; Buckingham 1993a), these children’s broadening circle of social experience and the social knowledge and hypotheses this has generated, have created a far greater interest in the plausibility of television’s events, situations and relationships than was evident among the younger children in this study.

To conclude this section on cognitive judgements, there is no question that the 8 - 10 year old children in this study understand that many of the programmes they watch and enjoy are fictional. They recognize different genres and know that each carries a different modality status; they know about actors taking parts; they know a lot about how television achieves its effects and they know how to judge whether something is plausible or implausible. The chief modality problem for some of these children now is not concerned with establishing whether something is ‘real’ but, rather, involves trying to work out the parameters of ‘realism’ as a genre, which is a much more sophisticated problem. As can be seen from the children’s discussions about actors and acting (p. 151 - 154 above), and sets v real locations (p. 158 - 159 above), it essentially involves modifying their scheme of ‘realism’ (although they do not have this term for it yet) to accommodate the compelling ‘authenticity’ of live drama.

There is ample evidence that the children here are thinking in the more flexible and sophisticated ways that Piaget suggested was mostly characteristic of middle childhood (Piaget 1952). The extracts presented thus far show children thinking about complex but concrete or imaginable things - families, world events, the lives of police officers, being in hospital, dramatic events and their frequency and so on. They also understand that terms like ‘real’ are relative and can have a variety of meanings in different circumstances. Where younger children had difficulty thinking about two things at the same time when making judgements, the 8 - 10 year olds can do this with ease. The example of The Simpsons demonstrates this. The 5 - 7 year olds reasoned simply that people aren’t yellow so The Simpsons aren’t real. The 8 - 10 year olds reason that The Simpsons is a cartoon so therefore in one sense it is not real, but in another sense it is, because the characters behave very much like human beings and they have the same kinds of problems that most human beings have. In this example, the older children’s thinking is largely unhitched from considerations of the way things look - or, in Piaget’s terms, is de-centred (Piaget 1952) - and this enables other important elements like theme and plot to be taken into consideration in their reasoning.

From a Vygotskyian point of view, the children are still operating very much with ‘spontaneous concepts’ (Vygotsky 1962). Sometimes ‘scientific concepts’, such as how special effects are achieved (e.g. fake blood) or the nature of holograms, are introduced by
individual children but on the whole 'technical' knowledge about the production process is scarce. The way cartoons are made, for example, is still not universally or clearly understood by these children. There is also little knowledge about the media industry evident. The lack of a formal media studies curriculum for primary school children in Australia seems a serious omission when, not only do media of all kinds form such an important part of children's lives, but they are also, from the evidence presented above, something about which children are intensely interested.

MODALITY ISSUES AND CHILDREN'S PROGRAMME PREFERENCES

That children in the middle to upper grades of primary school are eclectic in their television viewing is demonstrated by the fact that their preferences are predominantly drawn from a broad range of adult and family programming. In a study of Australian 8-12 year olds, Palmer (1986) showed that, although the children had a clear and accurate perception of which programmes were made especially for them, the preferences of both boys and girls were actually for shows involving family life and domestic situations such as Diff'rent Strokes and The Brady Bunch, soap opera (in this instance, Sons and Daughters) and cartoons. Boys also included the action adventure series Knight Rider in their preferences and girls included the situation comedy I Dream of Jeannie. Gunter and McAleer (1990) provide similar information about the preferences of the British child audience; one set of statistics\(^{27}\) shows the top ten programmes for 4-9 year olds including several cartoons and, in the top three places, the soap opera Neighbours, the action adventure Knight Rider and another soap opera EastEnders. In Australia, the pattern is repeated. Top-raters with the 8-10 year olds include the soap operas Neighbours and Home and Away, the family comedies The Brady Bunch and Family Matters, the cartoons The Simpsons and Ren and Stimpy, action/adventure/fantasy series like The New Adventures of Superman and the surf life-saving drama Baywatch (Nielsen Media 1995).

Once again, it can be argued that children prefer soap operas, family/situation comedies and drama series because they enable them to explore social reality issues that are now beginning to loom large in their lives. In discussing how realistic or true to life these kinds of programme are, the children choose to focus on themes '...about life', sex, love and violence. Clearly, attention has shifted from the questions of human 'realness', that occupied so much of the younger children's attention, to serious contemplation of interpersonal relationships and their dynamics.

\(^{27}\) IBA/AGM Programme Profiles, April 1988.
Themes "...about life", of course, are the very stuff of soap opera and family/situation comedy. In these programmes, stories indicate how television families manage their relationships; how characters solve the problems of daily life; how they learn to behave in various situations; the experiences of characters suggest what can be expected as one grows up and so on. While children are not duped into thinking that all families look and behave like the Bradys or the Huxtables, they nevertheless recognise that the themes of some programmes have significance for them - how do others manage situations with bratty siblings? How do others feel when they've been caught doing the wrong thing? What do other people do when they've been treated unfairly? By the same token, the action/adventures, live drama shows and adult soap operas often feature themes relating to sex, love and violence - things, about which children are increasingly aware and curious, but largely ignorant. The mysteries of adult life can, to a certain extent, be explored and vicariously experienced in programmes such as The Bill, E Street and Baywatch. Programmes, like all of these, enable children to develop working hypotheses about life matters presently beyond their actual experience.

Telling you "...about life".
Children have a curiosity about life and relationships between family members and friends and these things can be explored through soaps and family shows like The Cosby Show, Growing Pains, Hey Dad! and Neighbours. In their discussions, it is clear that the children are not fooled by the anodyne model of the family that is frequently presented in these sorts of shows - they know their own families are often very different from the ones depicted on television. In the transcripts, for example, there were several instances where children rejected the depiction of family life offered in Roseanne because it was so contrary to their own (e.g. Hitesh's vehement rejection of the programme quoted on p. 166). Anita (9) says that Roseanne "...hasn't got the real things that happen in a family" but the show has a resonance for Robert (10). Clearly, both children are comparing the Connor family practices with their own:

Anitra: You don't have that much arguments in a family.
Interviewer: In a real family?
Robert: You do.
Anitra: Not that much.
Robert: I do.
Anitra: I don't.

Some of the programmes that the children talk about are two-parent, relentlessly happy, good-humoured families. Dipesh (10), for example, thinks that The Cosby Show is pretty realistic because 'They're happy.' and because they're like '...ordinary families.' but James (9) challenges the notion that all families are structurally like the
Huxtables (the family in *The Cosby Show*) and that happiness is the inevitable outcome. He introduces the programme *Who’s the Boss?* (Which features a single parent family) and the kind of family structure presented here seems more familiar to him than the one presented by the Huxtables:

James: I remember on *Who’s the Boss*, the husband came back and they were going to get divorced and the man was a creep and he started like saying ‘Shall we get back together again?’ and all that stuff and then they didn’t right and then they went and got the papers.

Interviewer: And that’s pretty true to life?

Dipesh: Yeah, that’s true to life because I used to know some people who done that.

Interviewer: That really happens.

James: My Dad’s had...my Dad was married before and he got divorced.

Children’s interest in themes that deal with problems and issues about life and relationships is evident in all groups. Programmes like *The Cosby Show*, *Growing Pains*, *Hey Dad!*, *Neighbours* and other situation comedies, family shows and soaps were all judged ‘realistic’ to a degree because they are ‘...about life’. The Simpsons, a cartoon, was also singled out by all four groups who were familiar with it, for the same reasons:

Gina: Oh because *The Simpsons* it tells you about life and, er, how, how you should keep your life going and...er...you know it’s just life.

Roger: I think it’s a bit crazy, the hairstyles and things that are on it.

Stavros: Yeah, they’re...um...but the hairstyles are just making to look funny.

Interviewer: Is Bart Simpson real?

All: No.

Gina: It’s just like, it’s sort of like a comedy in the life.

Roger: I think it’s like a modern day cartoon.

Stavros: Yeah, so we’ll say *The Simpsons* explains about the life and the...like explains how they sort their problems out.

The way the children talk about these programmes suggests that they are not effortlessly and uncritically absorbing television’s ‘lessons about life’ into personal versions of social reality. While the children seem to relish watching how other ‘families’ live life and manage interpersonal relations, and occasionally they talk about specific examples of problem-solving techniques they have seen on television (e.g. talking problems out), there is, nevertheless, a social distance often evident in the way they discuss these things. In the extract above, for example, Stavros claims *The Simpsons* ‘...explains how they sort
their problems out' and Jacinta says about the same programme: '...if they have a family fight they resolve it in some sensible way.' The fact that the children say 'they' rather than 'you should' in relation to the strategies being promoted is possibly evidence that rather than unthinkingly accepting these life/relationship lessons as a blueprint for their own lives, they have instead taken them up as useful information to be tested in real life situations and refined in due course.

Sex and Love
It was the girls in all groups who showed a keen interest in the topics of sex and love. Soap operas give the greatest scope for discussion about pregnancy and babies. Here the girls chummily gossip about soap opera characters, sounding uncannily like some of the women they are discussing. The only suggestion that what they are doing might be a little risky is suggested by Jillian (9). Talking about pregnancy and such topics could be construed by some (especially adults) as 'nasty' because children are not supposed to be interested in such things:

Jillian: Please. Not being nasty or anything but thingy's pregnant and nobody's going around...it's gossip, they're gossipping about it and people don't say 'Oh, she's pregnant' like say on Home and Away, they made such a fuss over Pippa.

Elspeth: Well, she was...she did have quite a special case though didn't she.

Anne: I know – six adopted children and one baby coming up of their own.

In another group, we see three girls talking about Neighbours. Chloe (10) is busy retelling 'a good bit' while Rose (10) and Natasha (9) interject comments about kissing and babies. Unlike the girls in the previous group, these girls appear to be less comfortable talking about such aspects of adult sexuality and take refuge in joking and claiming that the programme is unrealistic:

Chloe: I like it because there are normal everyday things that happen and like, what are their names...Todd and Josh, um, they used the car and went and they thought they'd crashed it...

Rose: There's too much kissing.

Interviewer: Too much?

Natasha: Kissing.

Rose: Kissing. And too much money.

Chloe: ...and they thought like they'd get away with it and when they went to put the tools in the shed, the car was there and it wasn't crashed because Helen had played a trick on them.
Rose: And too many babies.
Interviewer: [To Chloe] And you think that's realistic do you?
Chloe: Yeah. It's realistic.
Rose: There's too many babies. They keep on saying that they're having babies.
Natasha: And they all die and things like that...
Chloe: Cos when I'm about 15 or something...
Rose: And they break down in the car [giggles].

The only boys to engage in this kind of talk, do so at a very safe distance. Roger (10), for example, claims that Neighbours is really for older teenagers 'because it gets a bit mushy.' and Carlos (9) talks about pregnancy only to the extent that he exposes the one in Neighbours to be a fake.

Questions of love and romance are introduced in discussions about Doogie Howser M.D. Again, it is the girls who lead the talk. In this extract the discussion appears to be designed to tease one of the boys. In the end, the unsettling topic of boy-girl relationships is removed to the safe distance of the future by Stavros (10) and Narelle (9):

Gina: Doogie Howser M.D. is a bit realistic.
Interviewer: Why is that Gina?
Gina: It's got some good looking girls on it!
Interviewer: That's why Roger watches it [giggles].
Roger: Alright, so it's a bit realistic because the boys are all interested in girls.
Narelle: [laughing] I didn't say that, she said that.
Stavros: Same thing, same thing.
Narelle: [...] It's life...it's like life again.
Gina: Yes cos a lot...all the like girls go for men when they're...
Stavros: When they're older...in their teens.

Violence
Like sex, violence is also a topic that arouses considerable interest among children this age. Happily, for most, violence against themselves is not something they have directly experienced but they have seen depictions of violence on television in both the news and in some dramas - programmes they judge generally to be 'realistic'. Moreover, there may have been occasions when they acted violently or were motivated to do so only to find the social sanctions against such behaviour to be very severe. The feelings to which these sorts of experience give rise are very strong and unsettling and need to be explored safely. Discussions about violent or 'scary' television and film episodes and violent events on the news allow this to happen.
Gina (9), Narelle (9) and Stavros (10) are all enthusiastic fans of E Street - a soap opera in which a murder has recently been committed by a psychopath called Steven. They judge this programme to be realistic:

Narelle: Er, it just shows lots of things that really happen.
Gina: [whispering to Narelle] Did you see what happened last week?
Stavros: Oh I know one thing...when erm they...you know how they had like they had a murder in it and it's...
Narelle: I know, I go like (hides face in hands) this, I say to Dad 'I'm not going to watch this'.
Stavros: In murdering, like they have murdering...like you have murdering...
Gina: Cops...
Stavros: ...in real life and all that and they...
Gina: Yeah erm...what was I going to say...Did you see on the...erm when Steven was ...sleeping on Sheridan's lap right and erm Sheridan was thinking back and you know how he goes like that [makes gesture with arm] and that ring...
Narelle: Yeah...that's how she...
Gina: And she looked at the thing and she goes 'It was Steven'.
[...]
Gina: ...like they did in E Street once and that little girl..
Stavros: ...that got murdered...
Narelle: Claire
Gina: Yeah Claire
Narelle: Becky, Becky
Gina: No Claire, she sang the lullaby to Sharon and that's what would became to Steven and that and the murderers and that..
Narelle: ...Simon says 'Who taught you that song?' and everything...
Stavros: ...and someone, and the little girl...I don't know who it is...
Narelle: Becky or Claire?
Gina: Becky Campbell
Stavros: Yes Becky Campbell, got murdered on her birthday and stuff like that and...
Interviewer: Mmm. Heavens. And that's pretty realistic. Do you think, you think...? It's like real life.
Gina: How many children do you know who've been murdered on their birthday?
Interviewer: ...One!... Becky Campbell!...(All laugh)
Gina:

Here the children are dealing with many disturbing facts of life - murders do happen; they are often committed by people well known to the victim; children get murdered and so on. The extract has been quoted at some length to illustrate the intensity of the discussion,
exemplified by the urgency with which each participant makes his or her contribution, the way they try to re-create the most tense or shocking moments and their continual interruption of each other.

Viewing these things can be frightening, as is indicated by Narelle who reports hiding her face in her hands at one particularly awful point (although she was viewing in the safety of a family situation). The children's response to all this horror, however, (apart from Narelle's reported behaviour) appears inappropriate. They seem to be enjoying the re-telling of the scary bits; they seem to relish going over the details again; they giggle and laugh. Television lobbyists would argue that here is evidence that children have been corrupted or, at best, de-sensitised by too much violent television. It can also be argued, however, that the children are using this discussion to re-experience all the powerful, scary, unsettling feelings they originally felt. As Laidler (1995), talking about children's use of horror-videos, says:

Children even at a young age, are eager to encounter new and powerful emotional experiences. They are utilising the horror-video as a predictable stimulus in order to do this. For some children these heightened states of fear and shock are used as an ordeal of courage, whilst others simply enjoy the involuntary reactions generated.

(Laidler 1995: 44)

Despite the 'realistic' classification for E Street, the laughter and giggling and the exuberance of the re-telling of the story all position the actual disturbing events at a very safe distance. The same situation occurs when Natasha (9) interrupts her group's discussion of E Street to share her experiences of the cult movie Nightmare on Elm Street:

Natasha: Yeah, like *Nightmare on Elm Street* I've got really used to that now so I like it. So, like, I used to be really scared of him, as if, and I saw a movie called the Rock Yard Zombies and they were cutting off every heads and they went into this...

Chloe: Don't tell me!

Natasha: ...and they went into this gas chamber thing and the head split and I thought and this lady was holding her husband's head and erm when I went to bed that night I thought they were going to walk right through my bedroom door so I got really scared of it.

As Laidler (1995: 41) points out, many children do watch these horror videos over and over again, freeze-framing the awful bits to see how it was done, often suffering nightmares as a consequence. He claims there is, however, the pleasure of vicarious thrills, the experience of new and powerful emotional responses with some children using these films as a personal
test of maturity or bravery. Natasha (9) very clearly fits this description - she has worked at watching Nightmare on Elm Street so that the horror is now tamed. Rock Yard Zombies, however, is still disturbing her sleep. The exuberance of the re-telling suggests something of the pleasure that she gets from being scared to death by such films.

Watching the news, which all groups judged to be most 'realistic', provides children with plenty of opportunities to contemplate violent death. Local news is often all the more disturbing for children because these things happen in places they know and to people like those they know (Sheldon 1995). Often the children just broke into a discussion about something completely different to tell about some recent, shocking event. No discussion seemed required, just the space to re-tell the incident. Perhaps, by doing this the feelings of shock or pity or fear can be re-worked and dealt with. Here the rest of the group is discussing a frivolous game show called Double Dare, but Jacinta (9) breaks in to talk about a dreadful accident in a local department store:

Katherine: Because that's only a game and there's real people in it.
Jacinta: Can I tell you something? Erm...it...well doesn't really have anything...but on the news yesterday this man in Myers erm he thought that he had to get off and he walked into...he was 37 and he walked into a 6' glass...
Interviewer: How terrible!
Jacinta: Yeah and he died yesterday.

Chloe (10) affects bravado when she re-tells a story recently reported on the news, but it is clear she is trying to find some 'human' explanation for such a shocking event:

Chloe: The News I just like it because, like I saw this kid with this eye which was stitched up because of a dog it was a killer dog and um it attacked the baby and um I thought it was sort of like..I mean the dog's brain is good because he knows when he's jealous and not. Like there's a baby in a basinet and he didn't get very much, the dog didn't get very much attention and um killed the baby, pulled it out and ripped it to shreds.
Natasha: Like a pillow.
Chloe: It was jealous.

And Carlos (9), providing evidence that the News is 'very realistic', refers to a recent television news report of a teenage boy who ran amuck with a rifle in a local high school:
Carlos: Er I think cos, you know they show those gun killings and all of that.
Rose: Yeah that scared me.
Carlos: Like a kid might just go and get a like his father's gun and go shoot someone or something. Like if a kid watches the News he might just go and shoot someone with his father's gun or something.

As Sheldon (1995) claimed, the news is the most disturbing programme for children and this is probably because it is the most 'real' of all television programmes for them. The feelings of horror and fear that awful news items produce cannot be talked about using the safety zones of humour or distance that, as has been shown above, work so well for material with a different modality status.

Once again, children's preferred programmes, according to research and ratings surveys, have been shown to reflect the issues they wish to explore in their modality discussions. For these 8 - 10 year olds, soaps, situation/family comedies and live drama all encourage the exploration of matters of great importance in their increasingly complex sense of social reality - the management of life's problems and relationships; the dangerous matters of sex and violence. The information that the children gather from social texts, like television, forms the basis of working hypotheses which will undergo subsequent testing and modification in the face of personal experience and additional information from other sources. Whereas the younger children were focussed on individual human qualities and characteristics, the gaze of these older children has moved outwards towards the social groups within which they must live their daily lives in relationship with others.

MODALITY JUDGEMENTS AS SOCIAL ACTS

As has already been seen with the younger children, talking about modality can serve particular functions and purposes within the context of different social groupings. Claiming to know what's 'real' is one way of making a bid for social superiority and in the transcripts there are many examples of the children using the modality discourse to position and define themselves as mature and grown-up compared with younger children; to promote themselves as sophisticated viewers for the benefit of the adult interviewer and to marginalise others who are different. Gendered responses that were evident among the 5 - 7 year olds are again evident among the 8 - 10 year olds.

Age, once again proves to be a useful discourse to mobilise, if one wishes to promote oneself as mature and sophisticated. Programmes like Mr. Squiggle, The Sooty Show and some cartoons were not ones with which the 8 - 10 year old children wished to be associated
because they are intended for much younger children. In the following extract, group members scramble to distance themselves from the preschool puppet show Mr Squiggle:

Interviewer: Mr Squiggle?
Gina: I used to watch that.
Stavros: I watch that...
Narelle: I’ve watched that.
Stavros: My sister likes watching that.

Another group dismisses Mr. Squiggle as ‘just for little kids’ but then goes on to discuss at some length the different characters and the format of the show. One child concluded that ‘I think it’s meant to be realistic but in a way that smaller children can understand.’

Chloe (10) positions herself as more mature now because she used to be scared by E Street when she was younger, but now she can enjoy it:

Chloe: OK I’m going to put E Street in the real realistic pile because erm like there’s killings and that...I watched it and then I watched...and then like I watched it and it was scary and I changed over to Flying Doctors but I really like it now because it’s not so scary.

Some remarks about television’s ‘educational role’ were clearly designed to position the speaker as a wise viewer who could tell the difference between ‘rubbish’ and ‘educational programmes’. Often programmes were given an ‘unrealistic’ rating because ‘...they’re not too educational.’, whereas others, like quiz programmes were said, approvingly, to be ‘very educational. You learn a lot.’ Chloe (10) claims to enjoy the News because of its educational value: ‘I like the News because it’s sort of good education’

As with younger children too, there were instances of children ‘pulling rank’ by claiming superior knowledge as a result of privileged personal experience. Anne (9), for example, took the opportunity to describe, in some detail, her trip to the television studios in Manchester when justifying her ‘realistic’ classification for Coronation Street. Stavros (10) boasts to his group about how he was ‘almost’ on the news and Mark (10) claims Baywatch is authentic because he has seen lifesavers in action in America. Robert (10) says he’s been to the area of London where Only Fools and Horses is filmed and so the programme must be judged ‘realistic’. 
A frequent use of the television modality discourse for social purposes among the 8 - 10 year olds was to marginalise another person for reasons of ethnic or class affiliation and/or gender. In the first group, Garry (10) and Mark (10) are Anglo-British, working class boys, Alex (9) is Afro-Caribbean and working class and Hamid's family is from Turkey and is also working class. Mark behaves as though he were the leader of this group. Throughout the entire session Mark and Hamid were engaged in the battle of 'put down' and 'retaliatory defence'. It begins when Hamid leaps in with an opinion about Mark's choice of programme and the researcher, ignoring Mark, asks Hamid to continue. Hamid is never short of something to say, so his last remark seems best interpreted as an unwillingness to give further offence. Mark quickly capitalises on this, claiming Hamid's silence is proof that his own opinion is correct. Given that all the boys' class origins are the same, it would seem that Hamid's Turkish ethnic affiliation is the focus of attention here:

Interviewer: Let's see what Mark has got here. Let's see whether you agree with this. Mark, you've chosen Land of the Giants. You think that's a realistic programme?
Hamid: No. I don't.
Mark: Yes it is because ...
Interviewer: Wait a minute, let's get one at a time. Hamid, why do you think it's not realistic?
Hamid: Um... dunno.
Mark: See? So, it must be, if you don't know.

Hamid however retaliates by challenging Mark's naive views about the news and Alex, who is black and perhaps used to racist attack, supports Hamid:

Mark: They wouldn't make up things to upset us.
Hamid: Sometimes! Sometimes!
Alex: Sometimes they do.
Hamid: Sometimes.
Mark: What to upset people? What, really say that sorry...
Hamid: In newspapers they do it.
Mark: Yes...
Hamid: Same thing, same thing.

Then Garry (10) takes up the charge by publicly criticising the way Hamid speaks:

Hamid: Animals going under wa-er... and they were going through the wa-er.
Garry: Water not wa-er.

That Hamid (9) really feels victimised is clear when he feels it necessary to defend himself against any possible charge of stealing after a discussion about an episode of Grange Hill where boys had been stealing:
Mark: Like a lot of people nick stuff in here. Someone from our class nicked a camera.
Interview: Oh really.
Hamid: It weren't me because I weren't here!

In the second group, a feud is carried on throughout the session between Martin (10), a working class, Anglo-Australian boy and Jacinta (9), a middle class, Spanish-Australian girl. She is very bright, extremely confident and self-assured and has the habit of leaping in at every opportunity to air her knowledge about programmes under discussion. It is not clear whether Martin's desire to snipe at Jacinta is because she is a girl, or because she is brainy, or middle class or because her family is from another country. He tries, however not to miss an opportunity as the following two extracts show:

Introducer: What do you think Katherine?
Katherine: Yes.
Jacinta: It's all about this father and mother and they're always and their children are really driving them bananas all the time.
Katherine: Yes.
Martin: Jacinta, you don't have to say everything!

In the next extract, the programme being discussed is Big Square Eye, a children's magazine show, which includes contests. Paul (10), a Greek-Australian, middle class boy has judged it to be 'true'; Jacinta makes a comment having admitted she doesn't know the show and Martin thinks he's caught her out and Paul tries to correct her. The fact that both boys are irritable with Jacinta suggests that their problem does not arise from her ethnicity or class but rather from the fact that she's a brainy, self confident girl and is therefore perhaps perceived as a threat. Jacinta, however, has the last word:

Introducer: What do you mean it's true?
Jacinta: Never heard of it.
Interviewer: What does it tell us about? What's on it?
What happens?
Paul: Well there's games and contests and... Competitions.
Jacinta: You said you don't watch it.
Martin: Anyway it's not competitions.
Jacinta: Contests are competitions.

Lisa (10), Alan (10) and Paul (10) here are discussing Hey Dad!, one of the few Australian family/situation comedies to be considered. The characters in this show are all readily identifiable as Anglo-Australians (as are Lisa and Alan) and that this is what is really at stake in defining a 'typical Australian family' is illustrated by the following exchange. Paul, whose parentage is Greek, appears to be being marginalised here:
Lisa: They're more normal than other people in the other shows and they're not sort of so changed.

Alan: It's like a typical family.

Paul: It's more comedy than serious.

Interviewer: Right. You think it's a typical family? Is it like your family?

Paul: Erm no.

Alan: His family are Greek.

In few respects is the television family in question either 'normal' or 'typical' - it is certainly unlike either Lisa or Alan's family, except for being Anglo-Australian, and in Lisa's case, middle class - so ethnic origin seems likely to be the underlying issue. Paul distances himself from the others' classification of the family as 'typical' by pointing out that it is a comedy (a modalising strategy - comedy reduces reality). That ethnicity is the issue is clear from Alan's final comment. Paul's family cannot be a 'typical Australian family' because they're Greek.

Throughout the transcripts, boys and girls shared the many different ways in which modality judgements can be determined and expressed; however, two particular strategies were used differently. Those involving technical interests ('how it's done') were favoured by boys, and those involving emotional responses ('it's real because I like it') were favoured by girls. The 'how it's done' interest was evident in the younger boys in this study, but the affective response produced by many 8 - 10 year old girls appears for the first time in these discussions.

There was a marked disparity between boys and girls in their use of 'how it's done' criteria for judging the reality of particular programmes. Thirteen of the 16 boys (81 per cent) used this criterion by engaging in speculation about how different effects or technical aspects of programmes were achieved. In the two groups that were composed entirely of boys, the heaviest concentration of 'how it's done' judgements occurred. Of the 14 girls in the study only three (21 per cent) used a technical judgement about 'how it's done' to support a modality judgement. In one instance, Anne (9) was able to use her personal experience of having been to the television studios in Manchester to explain about sets in the soap opera Coronation Street. In another, Tina (10) explained her theories about why the characters in Knightmare were actually not real and how to make cartoons. In the final instance, Jacinta (9) explains how the characters in Land of the Giants look very small because of 'camera tricks':

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28 A pattern of response that is, of course, similar to that found in children's reading preferences at this age (Reference)
Interviewer: How do you think they do it. Are they really little people?
Martin: They might just make it up.
Katherine: No they’re not really little people.
Jacinta: What those people that are so small?
Katherine: Yeah.
Jacinta: No I think erm..well on TV Kathy it just...the camera man makes it really...zooms it in really small. That’s all that really happens. The camera plays tricks on you. That’s all, it just plays all these tricks.

When it comes to affective responses, the difference is not quite so dramatic, but there is a difference. An affective response here is judged to be any case where a child has made a modality judgement because they like or dislike a programme. For example, in the following extract Gina speaks for Narelle too:

Interviewer: E Street is the most realistic?
Gina: Yes.
Narelle: Yes.
Interviewer: Because?
Gina: It’s just better cos we like it better.

or

Interviewer: What else do you want to put on this not true-to-life pile?
Chloe: Now You See It.
Rose: Now You See It.
Natasha: Yes, that is really BORING!
Chloe: It’s really stupid.
Interviewer: Why’s it boring?
Natasha: They pick the easiest questions as well...It’s really boring.
Interviewer: O.K. And it’s not true-to-life because?
Chloe: It’s...’off’...like Land of the Giants.
Interviewer: Anyone want to add anything to that?
Natasha: Not too popular.

An affective response can also include those parts where a child has re-told an episode, simply for the pleasure of it, in response to a request to judge whether the programme is real or true-to-life. Here, it is reasoned, the more intense the pleasure, the more ‘real’ an episode is, thus, re-telling the good bits, whether they be funny, scary or poignant, is indeed a modality strategy. Of the fourteen girls in the study, 10 (71 per cent) used this strategy and the greatest concentration of its use occurred in the one all-girl group. Of the 16 boys, six (38 per cent) used this strategy. Carlos (9) provides an example of the ‘it’s real because I like it’ kind of judgement:

Carlos: I reckon about All Together Now, it’s alright. It’s a pretty good show.
Interviewer: Realistic?
Carlos: Realistic.
Interviewer: Why's that?
Carlos: I just think it's a good show.

And Mark (10) provides an example of 're-telling the good bits':

Mark: Also, like Mr. Wilson wanted to go on holiday and he thought 'At last! He's gone on holiday and he thought, 'At last no more Dennis,' and he's opened his suitcase, 'Let's see. What clothes have I got, what have I got to eat?' And he's opened the case and Dennis has jumped out...
Interviewer: Oh no!
Mark: And there's all marmalade around his mouth and he's ripped all the clothes.

It is clear from the analysis of the younger children's discussions, as well as the evidence presented here, that children are defining themselves in terms of traditional, culturally approved gendered responses in their modality judgements. In our culture, expressions of affect are still both more tolerated and encouraged in females than in males and conversely, girls are still discouraged from engaging with toys, hobbies and activities that emphasise construction. Thus, learning 'how it's done' is unlikely to become a major preoccupation for girls.

Age and gender are still in evidence as ways of positioning oneself in the social worlds of middle childhood. It is easy to feel superior to those who are younger, less wise and experienced; it is easy to slot into culturally-accepted, gendered ways of seeing the world. Obvious signs of difference (e.g. ethnic affiliation, sex) are a means used to separate, divide and marginalise, but, it is suggested, the signs of class are still not yet fully understood or recognized. There are occasions in the extracts above where class may be implicated, but in each case, there are other more 'obvious' signs of difference which probably better account for the episode.

Some Summarising Comments
The work in this chapter supports and amplifies previous work on 8-10 year olds' modality judgements (Kelly 1981; Dorr 1983; Hodge and Tripp 1986; Buckingham 1993a). In the analysis presented here, far greater detail is provided about the previously identified modality categories of, for example, Plausibility, Implausibility and 'How it's done', making possible a clearer and more comprehensive picture of how children use these modality cues and markers. The ability to search exhaustively through all the data made
it possible to identify not only previously unnoticed gender differences, but also
ambivalences over the status of sets/locations, actors/real people.29

Placing these children's modality judgements within a cognitive developmental framework
not only assists in the interpretation of the responses, it also contributes to our
understanding of the theory. The picture of children's thinking becoming increasingly
focused on things less familiar, less immediate, less concrete is supported by the television
modality judgements of these 8-10 year olds. Instead of the concrete objects and people and
questions of 'possibility' that dominated younger children's thinking, these older children
are now beginning to think hypothetically about relationships, people's lives, institutions
and about 'plausibility'. They can also appreciate that 'real' is a relative term - a further
indication of the move towards more flexible, sophisticated thinking. The 8-10 year olds'
understanding that a cartoon can have themes relating to 'real life' was not generally
typical of the 5-7 year olds, and suggests that the older children now can coordinate and
synthesize two seemingly contradictory bits of information in order to make better sense of
things.

The basic modality schemes of the 8-10 year olds, however, are not yet complete. The
question of the very convincing illusion of real life presented by television's live drama
programmes still has the power to produce cognitive disequilibrium for these children. In
order to be able to accommodate these programmes they need to be able to account for their
strong visual and narrative authenticity while acknowledging that these shows are
essentially fictional. The children here are working hard at developing such a scheme, but
the compelling authenticity of programmes like The Bill and Children's Ward dominates
their thinking and prevents them from coordinating this perception with the contradictory
knowledge that it is 'just a story'. By combining discourse analysis and psychological
theory, the present study has generated this insight which, it is argued, is important for
pedagogic purposes.

Once again, preferred television programmes have yielded opportunities to explore social
reality issues of great importance to children this age. Their attention has moved from
defining human 'realness' and possibility to consideration of the wider social world in
which they live and the dynamics that make it work. They puzzle over, and take from
television, information about how to live life and deal with its problems; they focus on
episodes that deal with sex, love, violence and use the depictions to explore these topics
and the feelings they can generate. In addition, talk about television modality, like much
of children's talk, provides opportunities for positioning oneself. Age, a relatively neutral

29 This type of response was only previously reported among 7 year olds in the experimental study
means of claiming solidarity with some, and defining oneself in opposition to others, still emerges as a powerful discourse here.

by Wright et al. (1994).
CHAPTER 5

'They can't act. Jodie can't sing. No high schools wear casual'

The Modality Judgements of Older Children and Teenagers

In this chapter, the modality judgements of older children (11 and 12 years of age) and teenagers (13 - 17 years of age) are investigated. The review of the existing research with this age group shows that interest in young people's understanding of television as a constructed medium is very scant. Instead, the bulk of studies concentrates on measuring the 'perceived reality' of various kinds of television programme in an attempt to demonstrate how television negatively affects young people's perceptions of social reality. The problems associated with this kind of experimental research, already discussed in previous chapters, persist in these studies, resulting in findings that are often inconclusive, contradictory or unconvincing.

Research adopting more flexible empirical approaches also concentrates, almost exclusively, on older children's perceptions of a relationship between television and real life and, in doing so, points out some of the more sophisticated ways in which this age group goes about making these judgements. With only one exception (Dorr 1983), this latter research does not include participants beyond the age of 12. Thus there is a dearth of work with teenagers in the area of television and modality - a gap the present study seeks to fill.

Using a modified research method, to suit the greater sophistication of older participants, the present study set out to explore the same two basic dimensions of 'knowing' about television modality that had proved useful with younger children (i.e. Television as a Constructed Medium and the Relationship of Television to Real Life). Participants, who were older than those used in previous research, were selected in order to build on the findings of earlier work. In addition, the neglected dimension: Television as a Constructed Medium was restored as a focus for analysis in this study. It was hypothesised that the absence of interpretative research dealing with teenagers might be due to an assumption that questions of television modality are no longer of interest to this group. Thus, an additional research question, concerning whether television modality is a salient issue for those over the age of 12, was formulated.

As with the chapters on the younger children, the data here have also been interpreted to show the ways in which television preferences reflect important modality issues and how
the modality discourse is used by the teenage participants to construct individual social identities.

The bulk of studies, to be reviewed here, concern the extent to which young viewers perceive a relationship between television and real life and the effects that those perceptions might have on their behaviour, beliefs and attitudes. Generally, in these studies 'perceived reality' is seen as an intervening variable facilitating an effects process in which distorted, stereotyped or paranoid beliefs about the real social world are produced. The early research (e.g. Dominick and Greenberg 1970; Donohue and Donohue 1977; Elliott and Slater 1980), concentrated, in particular, on the vulnerability of particular social groups (e.g. girls, black and working class teenagers).

'Perceived reality' questionnaires, surveys and interviews were all extensively used in these studies. The weaknesses of such a research method have been discussed in previous chapters and will not be rehearsed here, except to emphasise that the normative view of reality (i.e. the assumption that reality is objectively knowable and the researcher's perceptions of it are 'correct') is very much in evidence, especially in research which focuses on demographic variables (i.e. sex, class, race).

Dominick and Greenberg (1970), for example studied black, white, low and middle-income teenagers with a view to discovering the role of television in the lives of disadvantaged youth. One hypothesis was that lower-income teenagers would be more likely to believe that television portrayed real-life situations; another was that teenagers from low-income homes would watch television more often for learning purposes than would middle-income teenagers. The findings indicated that low-income black teenagers perceived the highest amount of television reality, followed by low-income and then middle-income white teenagers. Further analysis also revealed that both low and middle-income girls perceived more television reality than did boys. In relation to the second hypothesis, black teenagers had the greatest tendency to select those items that had a 'learning about life' function (e.g. The programs give lessons for life) while white middle-class participants had the least tendency.

Another study focusing on the variables of race and class was conducted by Donohue and Donohue (1977) who classified their participants as lower class black, middle class white, gifted white and emotionally disturbed white and black teenagers. They used 'perceived reality' items that related to specific television perceptions (e.g. role stereotypes,

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30 More than thirty years ago, for example, Schramm et al. (1961) found 11 and 15 year olds from lower class families more prone to use television in what they called a 'fantasy-seeking' way than were the more 'reality-oriented' middle class children.
interpersonal situations and specific television characters) and they looked at the extent to which 'perceived reality' was based on personal experience with particular roles or situations. In general, the results showed that black and emotionally disturbed teenagers perceived television in all categories to be significantly more real than did those who were middle class, white and gifted and that 'perceived reality' of television content was inversely related to intelligence. Making all kinds of assumptions about the lives of poor, black and emotionally disturbed teenagers, Donohue and Donohue (1977) argued that their results provided evidence that the less familiar people were with a particular stereotypical image or situation, the more likely they were to perceive television's portrayal to be an accurate representation of life and this could lead to unrealistic expectations and disappointment. Black teenagers who, according to Donohue and Donohue, might never develop proper judgements about television reality, were seen as being most at risk here (1977: 619).

Demographic variables were also important in a study by Elliott and Slater (1980). They examined how exposure to television crime shows compared with direct experience of law enforcement agencies in affecting teenagers' perceptions of these things in real life. The variables included amount and type (positive or negative) of direct experience with law enforcement personnel, amount and 'perceived reality' of crime shows viewed, demographic variables (e.g. age, sex, SES) and IQ scores. Unlike the studies above, there were few significant relationships between the demographic variables and 'perceived reality'. Overall crime show watching, however, was fairly strongly related to 'perceived reality' and large correlations were found for particular shows. Direct experience was reasonably strongly correlated with 'perceived reality'; those with the positive direct experiences saw crime shows as being less realistic and those with negative direct experiences saw crime shows as more realistic. Elliott and Slater (1980: 414) claimed their results provided strong support for the hypothesis that program exposure was positively associated with 'perceived reality'. This finding was inconclusive, however, because, as they themselves said, it was not clear whether programmes were watched because they were seen as realistic or whether they were seen as realistic because they were watched. It was quite likely that the influence was reciprocal.

Although Gerbner and Gross (1976) and Gerbner et al. (1977) conducted their research primarily with adults, it is of relevance here because their 'Cultivation Hypothesis' became an important theme in succeeding research with children and teenagers (Wober 1978; Hawkins and Pingree 1980; Pingree and Hawkins 1981; Slater and Elliott 1982). The essential proposition behind this research is that television's offerings, which are largely
realistic in style, present a continuous stream of ‘facts’ about the real world, a kind of ‘common consciousness’ (i.e. viewers believe television’s representation of the social world to be reasonably accurate)\(^{31}\). Through content analysis, Gerbner and his colleagues established that U.S. television shows, at the time, portrayed a great deal of violence and conflict. They then went on to investigate the extent to which watching this material affected people’s beliefs about social reality by comparing the responses of ‘heavy’ (i.e. > 4 hrs per day) and ‘light’ viewers (i.e. < 2 hrs per day) to questions relating to law enforcement, trust of others and a sense of personal safety. Their results showed that the ‘heavy’ viewers were less trusting of others, more fearful of being a victim of crime and they also over-estimated the number of people involved in law enforcement. In the following year, a separate study (Gerbner et al. 1977) showed that the incidence of television violence had increased. With the questions from the previous study combined into a ‘Mean World’ index, ‘heavy’ viewers again scored somewhat higher than ‘light’ viewers. Black viewers however, irrespective of whether categorised as ‘heavy’ or ‘light’, tended to exhibit ‘Mean World’ beliefs (but race, inexplicably, was not given consideration as an active variable). Although the correlations between amount of viewing and ‘Mean World’ answers were very small, Gerbner et al. (1977) strongly promoted this aspect of television effects, claiming that it was a subtle form of social control.

A similar study, but not apparently motivated by the work of Gerbner and his colleagues, was conducted by Teevan and Hartnagel (1976). Using a questionnaire with more than 2000 teenagers, they set out to show that ‘perceived reality’ of television crime affected both their attitudes and beliefs about crime in the real world and their defensive behaviour. The results, however, showed little support for any relationship between television violence as ‘objectively’ measured on favourite shows and either perceptions of crime or reactions to crime. Any fears about crime that did exist, claimed the researchers, emanated from such sources as newspapers, television news and other people, rather than entertainment programming (Teevan and Hartnagel 1976: 36).

The results of a British study also challenged the validity of the ‘Cultivation Hypothesis’. Wober (1978), tested paranoid perception as an effect of watching violent television in more than a thousand participants who were interviewed using two ‘Mean World’ questions. The responses were synthesised into a ‘security scale’ and the scores for heavy and light viewers in separate sex, age and social class categories were compared. No significant correlations were found, leading Wober to claim that there was ‘no convincing or systematic tendency for heavy viewers to have lower security scale scores than light viewers.’ (Wober 1978: 319).

\(^{31}\) In this way, the ‘Cultivation Hypothesis’ makes the implicit assumption that ‘perceived reality’
A study designed to replicate and develop the 'Cultivation Hypothesis' was conducted in Australia by American researchers (Hawkins and Pingree 1980; Pingree and Hawkins 1981) who asked subjects questions that were designed to test their 'Mean World' beliefs. A significant relationship between the total amount of television watched and beliefs in a 'Mean World' was found, however, the correlations were only small and younger participants seemed less affected than older viewers. Among the older participants, 'perceived reality' did not correlate with beliefs in a 'Mean World'. Media Studies students, in fact, believed more strongly in the reality of television than did other students and there was a negative correlation between Media Studies students' 'perceived reality' and 'Mean World' views. The researchers concluded by saying that 'perceived reality' and taking Media Studies courses were important conditions of the cultivation effect. In a further report on this study (Pingree and Hawkins 1981), attention is drawn to the fact that the relationship between television viewing and teenagers' beliefs about social reality did not seem to be culture-bound; that is, cultivation of beliefs about the world occurs even when the programmes chiefly thought to be responsible for this effect (crime/adventure programmes) emanate from another country (in this case, the USA). Pingree and Hawkins (1981) point out that this contradicts the proposition that larger cultivation effects will occur in participants who have less direct experience of the phenomenon being studied.

Slater and Elliott (1982) examined 'Mean World' beliefs and the 'perceived reality' of television portrayals of law enforcement activities. The results suggested that teenagers with negative law enforcement experience were more likely to have 'Mean World' views than others. However, higher levels of crime show watching were positively linked to higher estimates of societal safety and not the negative one that would be expected with the 'Cultivation Hypothesis'. Greater 'perceived reality' of these shows, on the other hand, was negatively associated with images of societal safety. This is a contradiction which the authors do not adequately explain by claiming that 'social catharsis' effects, brought about by watching this kind of show, might be responsible for the results. Slater and Elliott (1982) conclude that 'perceived reality', rather than amount of viewing, is the critical indicator for television's impact on judgements about social reality.

An assortment of other studies has used 'perceived reality' items in questionnaires, surveys and interviews and the results, as one has come to expect from this research method, are contradictory. Lyle and Hoffman (1972), for example, asked 15 year old subjects to respond to the following: *The programmes on TV tell about life the way it really is* and *The people you see on TV are just like people you meet in real life*. Eighty four per cent and 58 per cent of the participants answered 'some of the time'/'now and then' for both questions operates as an intervening variable in an effects process.
respectively, which the researchers felt showed a pleasing scepticism about television’s ability to accurately reflect life. In addition, participants were asked whether TV programs should be for fun, not education and whether You learn a lot from watching TV. More participants disagreed than agreed with the first proposition, but as the researchers point out, programme preferences for this age group contained no educational, news or current affairs programs (Lyle and Hoffman 1972: 175). They conclude, given that 67 per cent of the participants agree that they do learn a lot from watching television ‘some’ or ‘most of the time’, that this learning is occurring during their favourite entertainment programmes - family shows, situation comedies, action adventures and humorous/satirical programmes.

Greenberg (1974), using a ‘perceived reality’ questionnaire, found that perceptions of television reality among British adolescents were significantly related to aggressive attitudes, aggressiveness and to frequency of viewing of violent content. Specifically, Greenberg found perceptions that television content approximates real life, in conjunction with viewing violent content, corresponded to beliefs that violence was the best way of resolving interpersonal conflicts.

Eleven year olds were the oldest children included in the study by Hawkins (1977). On his ‘Magic Window’ dimension, the older children were much more likely than the younger ones to understand that television is a constructed medium and thus they perceived television to be less ‘real’. On the ‘Social Expectations’ dimension, however, the 11 year olds like the preschoolers (and like Lyle and Hoffman’s teenagers) were more sceptical about the plausibility of television than were the children in between. There was an exception, however: the 11 year olds were more likely than the preschoolers to perceive television families as similar to real families. The 11 year olds also did not find television’s depictions of characters and events at all useful for their own lives.

Pingree (1978) used ‘perceived reality’ as an intervening variable in her study of the effects of non-sexist television commercials on teenagers’ attitudes about women. Subjects were presented with television commercials showing images of women in either traditional or non-traditional roles. One third of the subjects was told that the characters in the commercials were all real people, another was told they were all acting and the final third was told they were just ordinary commercials. Results showed that the two sets of commercials had a significant effect only if the participants had been instructed about reality. No matter what images of women they had seen, those participants told they were viewing actors were less traditional in their attitudes about women than those who thought they were viewing real people. Like Feshbach’s work, reviewed above, this study showed that by altering the modality of the stimulus material the viewers’ interpretations of that material could be changed.
Dorr, Kovaric and Doubleday (1990) used a ‘perceived reality’ questionnaire to test how much young people thought television families were like real life ones and specifically, how realistic they thought the feelings, actions and composition of these families were. The television families were classified by the researchers into traditional (nuclear families) and non-traditional. Results showed that 11 and 15 year old children judged traditional television families to be more realistic than non-traditional ones; 11 year olds found all four types of content (i.e. general realism, feelings, action, composition) to be equally realistic while 15 year olds found feelings and action more realistic than general realism. The authors note that ‘perceived reality’ varies according to the content being judged.

The most recent research to utilise ‘perceived reality’ as an intervening variable in a survey examined the extent to which young people’s identification with television characters and their modality perceptions of them, mediated the relationship between television viewing and behaviour (Duck 1992). The survey, using a range of fictional television characters, examined individual differences in identification and ‘perceived reality’ and the association between them. Results showed that the two variables were closely linked - the more young people identified with television characters as ideals, the more likely they were to perceive those characters as real. However, in terms of the ‘perceived reality’ of characters mediating behaviour, the findings were tentative and inconclusive. The proposition that ‘perceived reality’ is age-related was supported, with the 11 and 12 year olds believing television to be more real than the teenagers.

The work reviewed so far indicates how much the researcher’s interpretation of ‘reality’ can influence the findings of the study and how important it is to allow participants in the research the opportunity to explain, not only how they interpret the television programmes that they watch, but also how they interpret the questions that the researcher is asking. In order to avoid these methodological problems, the present study rejected the idea of ‘perceived reality’ measures, preferring instead to leave the question of what ‘real’ meant up to the participants to negotiate. Small group discussions were also used among the 3 - 10 year olds to enable the children to express their ‘readings’ of the different programmes being considered.

The remaining cognitive studies, were more interested in the kinds of modality judgements made by young people than in proving that their attitudes and beliefs about the real world were influenced by ‘perceived reality’ in an effects process. Morison and Gardner (1978), it will be remembered from previous chapters, investigated the extent to which reality and fantasy were meaningful categories for children in making judgements about media. Given three-card selections, they found that 11 year olds chose ‘fantasy’ pairs as often as
'alternate' pairs, which was significantly more often than did younger children. The older children could give reasons for their 'fantasy' choices that emphasised appropriate criteria and they also had no difficulties sorting fantasy and real characters. The researchers concluded that the use of fantasy classifications and explanations, while not becoming dominant, increases steadily with age as does the capacity to sort on that basis.

A further study by Morison, McCarthy and Gardner (1979), investigating 11 year olds' reality/fantasy discriminations, used standardised interviews and two kinds of sorting task. A wide range of sophistication was found in children's understanding of television but in general the ability to discriminate between fantasy and reality correlated with age, with the 11 year olds scoring higher than the younger children. Inter-grade overlap, however, suggested the effects of other factors like knowledge of television production (but not amount of viewing) were also implicated in the discrimination process.

In the study by Kelly (1981), when asked to judge which one of two television shows was more 'real' than the other, 11 year olds asked questions like 'What do you mean, real?' This was not a response found among the younger children. As Kelly (1981) notes, these older children had begun to appreciate the complexity of the question and understand that it could be answered in a number of ways. These older children used plausibility as their major tool in assessing the reality of media presentations with such considerations as the likelihood of the representation, the probability of its events, characters and plot predominating. Kelly (1980) concluded that by the age of 11, evaluations of social-psychological reality had become the means by which children determined the reality or fantasy of television.

Reviewing a number of her studies that had used semi-structured interviews, Dorr's findings (Dorr 1983) contradict those of Kelly (1981). She found that about half the 11 year olds in the studies said that 'real' meant something that could possibly happen (a response Kelly found associated with younger children) and only a very few said that it was something that had happened to them or an acquaintance. Sixteen year olds, however, defined 'real' as something that was probable, something that was representative of real life and like something they had personally experienced (a response that Kelly found typical of 11 year olds in her study). This finding is, it is suggested, largely an artefact of the somewhat abstract question: What do you mean when you say something on television is 'real'? which Dorr used. By contrast, in Kelly's task, the level of difficulty was much reduced (Kelly 1981). The criteria the participants were using were distilled from their explanations from particular, familiar programmes.
The cultural studies tradition has been interested primarily in adults and the ways in which they 'read' cultural texts. In recent times, however, there has been more interest shown in young people - and especially in the forms of popular culture that appeal to them. The final two studies both belong to the cultural studies tradition and were part of broad explorations of children's understanding of television. They used sorting/discrimination tasks, similar to those described above, however, these investigations emphasised social explanations of how children were making meanings from television.

Hodge and Tripp (1986) included 12 year olds as the oldest children in their investigation of reality constructs. In choosing favourite television characters, they found a clear shift towards stronger modality among older children who chose predominantly 'real' characters from drama and non-fiction programming compared with the cartoon choices of the younger children. In addition, in the triadic groupings task, the ± television construct was far less salient for the older children than it was for younger children, suggesting that the difference between television and reality was now so boringly obvious that other more interesting variables were used. This explanation was borne out in a real/unreal television characters sorting task where 56 per cent of the older children made judgements indicating they thought life was more real than television, 40 per cent felt television and real life were equally real.

In the study by Buckingham (1993a), 12 year olds were the oldest participants. While his chief aim was to show how diverse the children's modality judgements were, he does provide evidence of patterns in responses which were related to the age and social class of the participants. Older participants were more likely to use 'external' criteria (those relating to the extent television representations were similar to real life) in their modality judgements compared with younger children's preoccupation with 'internal' criteria (those relating to television as a constructed medium). Middle class children made a larger proportion of modality judgements and appeared to be more concerned with 'external' rather than 'internal' criteria and older children (especially middle class ones) used a range of reality/fantasy-related words in their discussions (e.g. 'illusion', 'overdramatise', 'exaggerated') which were rarely used by younger children.

From this review of the literature, it is clear that in terms of sheer volume, there has been far more research interest in the effects of television and 'perceived reality' on teenagers' perceptions of the real world, than there has been in either the nature of their modality judgements or their understanding of television as a constructed medium. There is conflicting evidence in relation to the hypothesis that the more 'real' one believes a message to be, the greater the likelihood of acting on it in some way, either by modifying
behaviour or incorporating it into attitudes and beliefs. Where there is evidence of a link between ‘perceived reality’ of television and perceptions of actual social reality, the research design often depends heavily on ambiguous ‘perceived reality’ questionnaires (e.g. Dominick and Greenberg 1970; Donohue and Donohue 1977) or the correlations are weak (Gerbner and Gross 1976; Gerbner et al. 1977). In other studies, no evidence was found to support a link (Wobber 1978; Teevan and Hartnagel 1979) and others were inconclusive or showed that perceptions of reality depended on the content being judged (e.g. Pingree 1978; Elliott and Slater 1980; Hawkins and Pingree 1980; Pingree and Hawkins 1981; Slater and Elliott 1982; Dorr, Kovacic and Doubleday 1990).

Some conclusions can be drawn, however, about the nature of older children’s and adolescents’ television modality judgements. In most of the research that concentrated on this question, it would appear that young people are considered to have more or less reached adult levels of ‘modality maturity’ - however that may be defined. For Hawkins (1977), it means having a sophisticated understanding of the constructed nature of television and a sceptical view about the plausibility or usefulness of television’s offerings. For others, it means an efficient ability to distinguish between fantasy and reality as conceptual categories (Morison and Gardner 1978; Morison, McCarthy and Gardner 1979). For Kelly (1981) and Dorr (1983) it means utilising the concept of ‘plausibility’ or ‘probability’ rather than ‘possibility’ as the principal means of judging whether television representations are ‘real’, but they differ about the age when this becomes a characteristic strategy. Hodge and Tripp (1986) and Buckingham (1993a) see the more extensive use of ‘external’ criteria as signalling sophisticated ways of thinking about television representations. That mature ‘reality’ judgements are distinguished by multiple criteria, complexity and flexibility is evident in many of the studies reviewed here (e.g. Kelly 1981, Dorr 1983, Hodge and Tripp 1986, Buckingham 1993a).

Some of these findings, of course, are contradictory or inconclusive. While no-one disputes that children’s understanding about television as a constructed medium increases with age, there is considerable lack of agreement regarding the extent to which a relationship between television and real life is perceived. While Hawkins (1977) found that older participants were sceptical about the plausibility of television, others (e.g. Kelly 1981; Dorr 1983; Hodge and Tripp 1986; Buckingham 1993a) found that older children (and, teenagers, in the case of Dorr 1983) are indeed interested in calibrating television realism against actual lived experience.

With the exception of Dorr (1983), studies that have been interested in the way children make modality judgements have generally not continued their investigations with young people over the age of 12 (viz: Hawkins 1977; Kelly 1981; Hodge and Tripp 1986;
### SUMMARY OF RESEARCH FINDINGS FOR OLDER CHILDREN (11 - 12 YEARS) AND TEENAGERS

1970 - 1993

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research</th>
<th>Findings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dominick and Greenberg (1970)</td>
<td>Low-income, black teenagers perceived the highest amount of reality on TV (falling between 'I'm not sure' and 'I agree'), followed by low-income white and middle-income white teenagers. Low and middle-income girls perceived more reality in TV content than boys.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'Perceived reality' and usage questionnaire</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>306 x 15 and 16 year olds</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lyle and Hoffman (1972)</td>
<td>In a questionnaire asking for possible reasons for watching TV, black teenagers had the greatest tendency and whites the least tendency to select items that had a 'learning about life' function.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'Perceived reality' questionnaire</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>800 x 11 year olds</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>500 x 15 year olds</td>
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<tr>
<td>Greenberg (1974)</td>
<td>In response to the question: The programmes on TV tell about life the way it really is, 84% of 15 year olds responded 'some of the time' and 58% responded 'now and then'. This was interpreted to mean that 15 year olds were therefore sceptical about TV's ability to accurately reflect real life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'Perceived reality' questionnaire</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>13 - 17 year olds</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teevan and Hartnagel (1976)</td>
<td>Most 11 and 15 year olds disagreed with the question: TV programs should be for fun, not education but 69% agreed that: You learn a lot from TV 'scene' or 'most of the time'. In view of the fact that these age groups do not show a preference for news, current affairs or educational programmes, the researchers claimed that this learning from TV came from their preferred entertainment programmes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questionnaire</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;2000 x 12 - 17 year olds</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gerbner and Gross (1976)</td>
<td>Perceptions that TV content approximates real life, in conjunction with viewing violent content, corresponded to beliefs that violence was the best way to solve interpersonal conflict.</td>
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<tr>
<td>'Mean World' questionnaire</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Adults</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>'Heavy' viewers (&gt; 4 hrs. per day) were less trusting of others, more fearful of being a victim of crime and over-estimated the number of people involved in law enforcement in real life than 'light viewers' (&lt; 2 hrs. per day).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>'Heavy' TV viewing causes a 'Mean World' view.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Study</td>
<td>Methodology</td>
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<tr>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gerbner et al. (1977)</td>
<td>'Mean World' questionnaire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donohue and Donohue (1977)</td>
<td>'Perceived reality' questionnaire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hawkins (1977)</td>
<td>'Perceived reality' questionnaire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Woebner (1978)</td>
<td>Interviews using 'Mean World' questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pingree (1978)</td>
<td>Viewing of selected segments followed by testing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hawkins and Pingree (1980; 1981)</td>
<td>'Mean World' questionnaire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study</td>
<td>Methodology</td>
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<td>-------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
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</table>
| Elliott and Slater (1980)                 | Few significant relationships between individual difference variables (i.e. age, sex, SES) and 'perceived reality' of crime shows. Overall crime show viewing fairly strongly related to perceived realism. Direct experience of law enforcement reasonably strongly correlated with 'perceived realism'; those with positive experiences saw the shows as being least real and those with negative experiences saw programmes as more realistic.
| 'Perceived reality' questionnaire         | Programme exposure was positively associated with 'perceived realism' however the direction of the causal effect was unclear. That is, were the programmes watched because they were seen as realistic or were they seen as realistic because they were watched? |
| 557 x 13 - 19 year olds                   |                                                                             |
| Slater and Elliott (1982)                 | Young people with negative law enforcement experience are more likely to have a 'Mean World' view. However, higher levels of crime show watching were positively linked to higher estimates of societal safety. Contradictorily, greater perceived realism of crime shows is negatively associated images of societal safety. |
| 'Mean World' questionnaire                | 'Perceived reality' rather than amount of viewing is the critical indicator for TV's impact on judgements about social reality. |
| 557 x 13 - 19 year olds                   |                                                                             |
| Dorr, Kovari and Doubleday (1990)         | Eleven and 15 year olds judged 'traditional' TV families to be more realistic than 'non-traditional' ones. Fifteen year olds judged 'feelings' and 'action' in family shows more realistic than their 'general realism'. Overall, children between the ages of 6 and 16 felt that roughly half of all real-life American families are like those in the family shows they most like to watch and how these families handle their emotions was perceived to be among the most realistic of all the content tested. |
| 'Perceived reality' questionnaire         | 'Perceived reality' varies according to the content being judged. |
| 307 x 11 and 15 year old children         | They suggest that as children may be more rather than less likely to take realistic content seriously, the idealised but healthy portrayals of emotions could be an important source of social learning for children and adolescents. |
| Duck (1992)                               | The more children identify with TV characters as ideals, the more likely they are to perceive these characters as real. |
| Survey using identification and perceived reality items | Reality perceptions are age-related with younger children believing TV to be more real than children in older age groups. |
| 313 x 10 - 16 year olds                   |                                                                             |

**INTERPRETIVE RESEARCH**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Methodology</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Morison and Gardner (1978)</td>
<td>Eleven year olds chose 'fantasy' pairs as often as 'alternate' pairs from 3-card selections. Large increase in 'fantasy' reasons for choices between the ages of 9 and 11. No difficulties in sorting real and fantasy characters into their appropriate categories.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sorting and matching tasks</td>
<td>Use of fantasy classifications and explanations, while not becoming dominant, increases steadily with age.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 x 11 year olds</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Morison, McCarthy and Gardner (1979)</td>
<td>Eleven year olds scored higher than younger children on reality/fantasy discriminations. For reality-fantasy distinctions, the 11 year olds scored 17.6 out of a possible 29 (compared with 8.3 for 8 year olds); for understanding of TV concepts, they scored 13.3 out of a possible 22 (compared with 7.4 for 8 year olds). Knowledge of TV production (but not amount of viewing) has a possible effect on the ability to discriminate TV reality.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Viewing of selected segments followed by semi-structured interviews 18 x 11 year olds</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Kelly (1981)</th>
<th>Eleven year olds appreciated the complexity of the term 'real'. Plausibility was the main criterion used in assessing the reality of media presentations (almost totally replacing questions of actuality and possibility used by younger children). Likelihood of the representation, probability of events/characters/plot and exaggeration all become important considerations. Even when discussing shows featuring blatantly fantastic elements, these older children overlooked or took for granted the obvious impossibilities and still preferred to invoke implausibility as their measure of reality. Evaluations of social-psychological reality are the means by which 11 year olds now judge the reality of TV.</th>
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<tr>
<td>Discrimination task 18 x 11 year olds</td>
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<tr>
<th>Dorr (1983)</th>
<th>Half the 11 year olds said 'real' meant something that could possibly happen; only a few said it was something that had happened to them or an acquaintance. 16 year olds defined 'real' as something that was probable, something that was representative of real life and like something they had personally experienced.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Semi-structured interviews 11 - 16 year olds</td>
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</table>

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<tr>
<th>Hedge and Tripp (1986)</th>
<th>Older children (9 - 12) predominantly paired 'real' characters from cartoon, drama and non-fiction character choices. In the triadic grouping task older children rarely chose the TV television construct. In the real/less real sorting task, 56% of the 12 year olds made judgements indicating they thought life was more real than TV and 40% felt TV and real life were equally real; 4% thought TV was more real than life.</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sorting and discrimination tasks 17 x 6 - 12 year olds</td>
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</table>

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<tr>
<th>Buckingham (1993a)</th>
<th>Older children more likely to use 'external' criteria (i.e. those relating the extent TV and real life are similar) than younger children. Older children (especially middle class ones) tend to use a range of reality/fantasy-related words in their discussions (e.g. 'illusion', 'overdramatised', 'exaggerated').</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sorting task in groups, focused discussions, 30 x 12 year olds</td>
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</table>
Buckingham 1993a). Perhaps it is assumed that at this point 'mature modality' strategies are in place and that there will be few changes, only perhaps refinements, as young people grow towards adulthood. If this is the assumption, it is not supported by research evidence.

While it may be the case that no further qualitative changes in cognition occur after about the age of 12, the model of learning described in Chapter 1 sees the processes of assimilation and accommodation operating throughout life, with cognitive disequilibrium continuing as a major means of developing new, more functional, more diverse and complex ways of adapting the individual to a changing environment, constructing new and more effective versions of social reality.

The research reviewed above and the analysis of the data presented thus far in this thesis have demonstrated that television modality is a very salient issue for children, even the very young. There is no indication in previous interpretive research, however, that modality continues to be of importance to teenagers. In view of this, the present study set out to explore, not only the nature of teenagers' television modality judgements, but also the extent to which television modality was a salient issue for them.

THE PRESENT STUDY

The research task for each of the younger age groups had been developed to make it genuinely challenging and, thus, to make it more likely that the children would be manoeuvred into a state where their modality constructs were placed under stress. A small pilot study suggested that the card-sorting approach was not going to be as productive with teenagers as it had been with the younger children. The adolescents tended to sort the cards quickly into genres along a modality continuum and engage in very little discussion or disagreement about their judgements, even when probed. Because of their long familiarity with television, this approach, it seemed, was not able to challenge the teenagers' modality schemes. The greater sophistication of the teenage participants, and the desire to discover whether modality was a salient issue for them demanded a research approach that was different from that used for the younger children.

Early in 1994, a new Australian television series called Heartbreak High went to air. It was heavily promoted as being authentically, quintessentially, about the real life experiences of Australian teenagers in a culturally diverse community. Here, then, was a realist text which was ideologically challenging. For these reasons, the programme presented itself as an ideal vehicle for problematising teenagers' modality schemes. Another small pilot study, however, showed that the small group discussion method
produced reticence and what appeared to be 'safe' answers. These may have been encouraged either by the controversial topics around which the early episodes revolved (e.g. racism, violence, teenage sex, homosexuality), or these 'safe' answers could be explained by the widely reported desire of adolescents to conform to group opinion in matters of taste, clothing and so on (e.g. Rigby 1990).

It was judged that more open responses were likely to be generated if the participants could remain anonymous. Accordingly, a survey questionnaire, using open-ended questions was developed and administered two months after the series began. Such a data gathering technique had a further advantage in that it minimised the effect of cueing. While in the work with younger children the researcher deliberately and consciously structured the discussions around questions of the real, in the survey these issues were only visible if spontaneously generated by the teenagers' responses. The survey technique also provided a much larger body of participants from which to gather data.

The Series
On February 27th 1994, Channel 10 premiered a new teen soap/series called Heartbreak High. Initially screened at 6.30 on Sunday nights, it was intended to strengthen Channel 10's grip on the youth market which the success of Beverly Hills 90210 (screened at 7.30 on Sundays) had set up.

In contrast to Beverly Hills 90210, Heartbreak High was promoted as authentically Australian; a realistic depiction of teen life in Sydney's multiracial, multiethnic schools and suburbs. Heavily promoted, was the show's taboo-breaking depiction of racial conflict in schools. As Jane Fraser wrote in The Australian newspaper, days before the show premiered:

Grunge rules and seemingly every pupil is a cracker waiting to go off. Much has been reported in the past couple of years about the difficulties facing those who teach in schools rife with racial dissent and this teenage drama will be fuel for a lively debate that is bound to dog the show, which exposes the underbelly of prejudice.

(Granger, J. The Australian 23/2/94)

The cultural homogeneity and blandness that is typical of Beverly Hills 90210 or Australian soaps and sitcoms is startlingly missing from Heartbreak High. In the opening sequence of the first series, the viewer was taken for a drive through working class suburbs of Sydney with some young people, two of whom most certainly did not fit the blonde Aussie stereotype. The street scenes used to establish the setting for the series in this opening sequence were typical of working class suburbs in any major city in Australia; there
were shop signs in foreign languages and people, whose clothing declared their ethnic group membership, were seen crossing the road.

The cast of main characters initially included Nick, his younger sister Effie and their parents (Greek), Con and his parents (Italian/Greek), Chakka (El Salvadoran), Jack (Vietnamese), Rose (Lebanese), English teacher Ms. Milano (Italian) and Yola the student counsellor (Lebanese). The classes were assertively multiracial and multiethnic and many of the characters (apart from Sarah Lambert's Ms. Milano) did not look or sound like Anglo-Australians - their ethnic origins were obvious; languages other than English were spoken; clashes between students from different ethnic groups occurred and rivalry and violence were constantly present in the earlier episodes but so too were inter-ethnic liaisons, cooperation and respect.

Heartbreak High was thought to come close to the realities of adolescent life in Australia for two main reasons. Firstly, its depiction of the school as a culturally diverse community, with all the tensions that this can create, was recognized as an accurate reflection of many Australian high schools. Secondly, as Jane Fraser said: 'Beverly Hills is anodyne; Heartbreak High is full of guts.' (The Australian, 23.2.94). Unlike Beverly Hills 90210, the stories in the first series of Heartbreak High dealt with political issues and social problems with which young Australians would be familiar. In the programmes that had been broadcast prior to the survey, scripts had been written around a number of confronting themes such as racism, violence, sexism, social class differences, family breakdown, the exercise of power and control in schools, the appalling experiences of some immigrant refugee families (before and after arriving in Australia), homosexuality, safe sex and teenage pregnancy.

The Participants

The participants came from two secondary schools. Both schools, like the one in the series, have populations with students from diverse social class and ethnic backgrounds. Students aged between 13 and 17 (Years 8 - 12) who were familiar with the series were identified and 63 boys and 69 girls were invited to take part in the survey. From Glover High, 44 boys and 33 girls took part; from Maxwell High, 19 boys and 36 girls took part. Table 1 below shows the number of participants in each age group by sex.

---

32 Although a few programmes on Australian television have occasionally included some characters from non-Anglo Australian backgrounds, this practice has not been at all usual (Bell 1992; Goodall et al. 1990). A programme like GP stood out in its scripts and its casting of, for example, Greek-Australian actors like Marilyn Paspaley and Gia Carides to play Greek-Australian roles. A Country Practice and, more recently, Neighbours, have attempted to introduce characters/actors from different cultural backgrounds, but this has always been a rather token effort.
Table 1: Age Groups of Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Girls</th>
<th>Boys</th>
<th>Total Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>13 years</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 years</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 years</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 years</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17 years</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Participants were asked to indicate whether they or either of their parents was born outside Australia and 86 of the 132 (65 per cent) cited the countries of origin listed in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Participants’ Countries of Origin

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country of Origin</th>
<th>No. of Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Britain (England, Scotland, Ireland, Wales)</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern and Middle Europe (Germany, Holland, Poland, Hungary, Croatia, Serbia)</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southern Europe (Malta, Greece, Italy, Cyprus)</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle East/Asia Minor (Turkey, Lebanon, Egypt)</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Asia (India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Pakistan)</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indian Ocean (Mauritius, Seychelles)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North America (USA)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South East Asia (Philippines, Indonesia)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australia/NZ</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Information about parents’ occupations and teachers’ judgements about students’ social class background indicated that less than half the sample (38 per cent) came from working class backgrounds and 62 per cent came from middle class backgrounds.
The Survey

Given the potential for Heartbreak High to be viewed as a realistic representation of life for young Australians, it was used as a focus for a survey designed to examine the modality judgements of 13 - 17 year olds. There were ten questions (see below) all of which invited a written response. In order to discover whether television modality is still an issue for teenagers, modality was not cued in the questions; that is, participants were not directly asked to judge how realistic different aspects of the programme were. Rather, the wording of questions was designed to allow modality issues to be cited if they were sufficiently significant to the participant.

Ample space was provided beneath each question for the written response. The questions used in the survey are listed below.:

1. What is your general reaction to the programme Heartbreak High?
2. Are there any aspects of the programme that you really like? If so, what are they? Please give examples.
3. What about aspects of the programme that you really dislike (if any)? Again, examples please.
4. Some people have complained about the way certain students are shown having racist attitudes towards others. What do you think?
5. Some people say that fights and other violence that can occur in schools should not be shown on television. What do you think?
6. How about the relationships between the boys and the girls - what do you think about the ways these are shown?
7. Sometimes we see characters in the show at home with their families. Do you have any thoughts about these scenes?
8. Is this show similar to or different from other shows that teenagers like to watch? For example, how does it compare with Neighbours, Home and Away and Beverly Hills 90210? In what ways is it the same or different?
9. If you were in charge of making this programme, what changes (if any) would you make?
10. If you were talking to a friend who hadn't seen Heartbreak High, what score out of 10 would you give the programme and what would you say to him or her about it?

The nature of the data for this part of the study is different from that which was gathered from younger participants and, thus, different ways of dealing with it had to be devised. All participants' answers to questions were entered into NUD•IST verbatim and initially
these data were indexed under separate categories for each survey question and base data categories for age, sex, country of origin and class. Then, the process of refining the analytical categories occurred, in much the same way as described in Chapter 1, and as was employed for the verbal data obtained from the younger respondents. In view of the larger number of participants involved in this part of the study, simple, descriptive, numerical summaries of key data are provided to support the analysis of the written responses.

The results of the analysis will be presented in three sections. Firstly, the extent to which these young people still use the two key dimensions of ‘knowing’ about television modality will be presented. Secondly, it will be shown that the kinds of programmes that teenagers prefer to watch actually enable the exploration of social reality issues of great importance to them. Finally, the way these young people use the modality discourse to position and define themselves socially will be presented.

COGNITIVE JUDGEMENTS

Knowledge about the Constructed Nature of Television

There is no doubt that even the youngest participants in the survey (the 13 year olds) had a more sophisticated understanding of the constructed nature of television than had been in evidence in any of the younger age groups. Spontaneously, terms indicating the participants’ awareness of many of the processes of television production were included in responses to various questions.

Actors, Characters, Genres and Knowledge about the Production Process

There now appear to be no areas of doubt left about whether people appearing in programmes like Heartbreak High are actors playing parts. The terms ‘actor/s’ and ‘character/s’, for example, were used in responses from all participants, especially the younger ones (i.e. 13/14 year olds). The lingering doubts, apparent in some of the 8 - 10 year olds’ responses, that perhaps some television characters are not acting or that some television ‘families’ are really families off-camera too, are not evident in the responses of the 13 - 17 year olds. Rather, they refer to ‘...the actor who plays Nick’s Dad’ or they use the actor’s rather than the character’s name when describing family relationships, for example: ‘...Alex D.’s Mum’ or ‘...the way Alex and his father act towards each other is a bit over the top.’ and ‘I bet Alex doesn’t tell his real Dad about sex.’ The participants’ interchangeable use of the actors’ real names and their characters’ names indicates there is no confusion about actors’ real identities.
The identification of different television genres has been considered an indication of young viewers' awareness of television's constructed nature. Although there were few opportunities to demonstrate this in this particular survey, many students spontaneously described Heartbreak High as a 'soap' or 'a soapie'.

Several aspects of the production process were referred to in answers to various questions. Many responses, for example, referred to scripts (e.g. '...scripts are good.' and '...in desperate need of better scripts.') and plots/storylines (e.g. 'The girls are O.K. and the plot is good.' and 'The storylines are good with morals a lot of people have.') and setting (e.g. 'Change the setting - it's too dull.' and 'I like the high school setting.')

In the question where participants were asked how they would change the show if they were in a position to do so, many made reference to the role of the producer or director (e.g. 'I wouldn't want to be the producer of any show like this. If I had no choice, I would start from scratch: new scripts, characters, lifestyles.') and many showed, by their suggestions, that they knew what people in these positions did in creating a programme (e.g. hiring and firing actors; selecting or modifying scripts; choosing sets and locations and so on.)

**Acting Skills**

The most surprising feature of the participants' responses in relation to their understanding that television is a constructed medium took the form of a trenchant critique of the acting skills of almost every character in the series. Nearly half of all participants (48 per cent), male and female, across all age groups and ethnic affiliations, made sharply critical comments about the abilities of both the young actors, who are the 'stars' of the series, and the older ones who take the parts of parents and teachers.

The vast majority of the criticisms are non-specific 'They can't act', 'It would be a help if they could act', 'The acting is pretty poor', '...fake acting...', 'I do not like the acting. It makes Paradise Beach look professional.' Variations on this theme crop up in responses to all questions but especially in the earlier questions, where a general response was sought. A few criticisms were specifically targeted at individual actors, for example: 'I would change Rose with another actor,' and '...his father can't act so that sort of put me off the show.' A few referred to aspects of acting technique: 'They don't really look as though they really want to do it...', 'You can see them reading their cue-cards...'.

206
Table 3 below indicates the number of individual participants making critical remarks about acting, according to sex, age, ethnic affiliation and social class.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic Group</th>
<th>Number Making Critical Comments About Acting Skills</th>
<th>% of Total Number in Demographic Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sex:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
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<td>Age:</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 year olds</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 year olds</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 year olds</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 year olds</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17 year olds</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnic Affiliations:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aust/N.Z.</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Britain</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North/Middle Europe</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southern Europe</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle East</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>50*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Asia</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indian Ocean</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>33*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nth. America</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>100*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S.E. Asia</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>33*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Class:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working class</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle Class</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Forty eight per cent of participants take the trouble to single out the acting for criticism, however this does not mean that 52 per cent think the acting is good or even that they damn it with faint praise. Only two participants actually comment on the acting favourably; the others make no comment at all.

It is hard to make sense of these criticisms about the acting, particularly when the figures (in Table 3) indicate that no one demographic group uses this strategy dramatically more often than any other. Girls are somewhat more critical than boys; 13 year olds were more likely to make critical remarks than other age groups but they are followed by the 17 year olds and 15 year olds - a pattern suggesting that age is not an important variable here. Middle class participants make rather more critical comments than working class participants. A more promising explanation might involve ethnic affiliations; Anglo-Australian participants (i.e. those with Australian, New Zealand or British affiliations) might be using ‘bad acting’ as a disguised rejection of the programme’s ethnic emphasis. The Anglo-Australian participants, however, are only slightly more likely to be critical (49 per cent) than those with other ethnic affiliations (45 per cent), suggesting that some other factor is at work here.
A totally objective assessment of the acting, of course, cannot be achieved, however an informal survey of adult viewers, including a N.I.D.A-trained actor, concluded that the young cast in Heartbreak High was really very competent. It was felt that natural talent, good direction and the overall quality of the show’s production values and scripts tended to offset or disguise any weakness arising from the fact that, according to the pre-show publicity, most of the young actors had not had acting training. Three of the leads, however, were experienced actors: Alex Dimitriades (Nick Poulos) had played the title role in the film The Heartbreak Kid to considerable acclaim and Con (Salvatore Coco) and Jodie (Abie Tucker) had both had successful acting/show business careers before appearing in the series. The adult actor who comes in for most criticism, Nick Lathouris (Mr. Poulos), has not only had a distinguished career in Australian theatre and film but was also employed as the acting coach in the first series of Heartbreak High.

Given this strong response from so many teenage participants, it is possible that ‘Bad Acting’ is a modality strategy that has more significance than merely indicating either an awareness that parts are played by actors or a straight aesthetic judgement about acting skills. In much the same way as the 8-10 year olds in Chapter 4 used humour to distance themselves from the fear and shocks associated with horror films, the ‘Bad Acting’ response may be interpreted as a way of distancing the viewer from an unwelcome ‘reality’: in this instance the cultural diversity so foregrounded, not only in Heartbreak High’s characters, but also in its actors. The following responses provide evidence of overt anti-ethnic prejudice being linked directly to ‘Bad Acting’:

I do not like it very much because I don’t like the acting. It would help if they could act. Nick’s accent is a bit much - sounds like he’s fresh out of Greece. (F/14/Britain)

The acting is pretty poor and it is more Italian culture when it is supposed to be set in Australia. (F/16/Australia)

The actors. They are ugly and can’t act. (F/13/Britain)

There are these two Greek/Italian girls who can’t act and when they try to act sad or concerned, they just can’t do it. (F/15/Britain)

Throughout the history of Australian television broadcasting, the culturally diverse Australian population has rarely been represented (Bell 1992; Goodall et al. 1991). Rather, the myth of a culturally homogenous country has been perpetuated. Heartbreak High

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The coding in the brackets after quotes should be interpreted as follows: (M = male, F = female / age / country of origin).
radically changed all that and made people from different countries of origin highly visible, ethnic/racist tension highly visible and white Australian discriminatory and racist attitudes and practices also highly visible. Old schemes for conceptualising what it means to be Australian are likely to be placed under heavy strain here, not only for the Anglo-Australian young people but also for those from different countries of origin, for there is plenty of evidence that people who were born in Australia of overseas-born parents, still see an ‘Australian’ in terms of the blue-eyed, fair-haired stereotype (e.g. Castles et al. 1988). If an actor is criticised for ‘Bad Acting’, this is more than just passing judgement on his/her professional skill, it could be that the representation the actor is striving for is being rejected - it is not credible, it offends a sense of ‘the real’. The scheme of ‘Bad Acting’, then, may temporarily assimilate a disturbing representation of ‘real life’ and neutralise it. While there is some evidence in the transcripts to support this alternate reading of ‘Bad Acting’, it is one that needs to be explored further.

While at one level, commenting on the skills of actors is certainly a clear indication of being aware that television is a constructed medium, at another level it may be a comment on the modal fit between the representation of life being presented in the series and the young participants’ versions of social reality. Moreover, it will be argued later in this chapter, that commenting on the actors’ abilities also serves another more social purpose; a purpose related to the adolescent constitution of self as a sophisticated television critic.

The Relationship of Television to Real Life

As with the other age groups studied, the strategy of matching what is viewed on television with lived experience, or at least a model of life, is once again adopted by the 13 - 17 year olds in this study. The research previously reviewed suggests that rather than just looking for matches on the basis of possibility (i.e. things that are possible in real life), which was a strategy adopted primarily by younger children, older participants use probability (Dorr 1983) or plausibility (Kelly 1981) as the principal means of judging whether television representations are real. While the analysis to be undertaken in this section certainly shows that teenagers are using these constructs to judge the modality of television representations, it will also be shown that sometimes these judgements are not consistent with what is known about the participants’ experience. In these situations, it will be argued, older children and young people freely use the modality discourse to construct interesting and important subject positions for themselves. The ease and creativity with which they do this distinguishes them from younger children. This aspect of the analysis will be explored in the final section of the chapter.
Although the survey questions were designed not to cue modality, 117 participants (89 per cent) make modality references in one or more answers to questions. Some responses are quite general and unspecific (e.g. ‘It’s too fake.’) while others go into some detail about whether specific elements are convincingly depicted in the series (e.g. ‘I like it. It’s real how people act to different races and they all don’t live happily ever after.’). The breakdown of the 117 participants according to sex, age, country of origin and social class is provided in Table 4.

Table 4:
Number Of Participants Referring To Modality Issues According To Sex, Age, Ethnic Affiliation And Social Class

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic Group</th>
<th>Number Referring to Modality Issues</th>
<th>% of Total No. in Demographic Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sex:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 year olds</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 year olds</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 year olds</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 year olds</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17 year olds</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnic Affiliations:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aust./N.Z.</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>96</td>
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<tr>
<td>Britain</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>79</td>
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<tr>
<td>Northern Europe</td>
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<td>86</td>
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<tr>
<td>Southern Europe</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle East</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>50*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Asia</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indian Ocean</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>100*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nth. America</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>100*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S.E. Asia</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>100*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Class:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working class</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle Class</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There are few remarkable differences between the different demographic groups. Girls certainly raise modality issues more than boys, but not dramatically so; it is obviously an important consideration for both groups. The 13 - 16 year olds are consistent in the high frequency with which they make modality references whereas the 17 year olds make rather fewer of them. As Hodge and Tripp (1986) suggest, the whole notion of modality may have become rather boring for these older participants, while the younger ones may feel there is something to gain from being able to demonstrate these skills. For these teenagers modality judgements may be simply assumed as part of their commonsense world view, thus, it is not necessary to make a comment. It must also be born in mind that the numbers of 17 year olds in the survey were actually very small and, thus, these considerations must remain highly speculative. Modality is clearly a salient issue for all the ethnic affiliation groups: the Anglo-Australian groups (Australia, New Zealand and Britain) make the same percentage of modality references (89 per cent) as the other ethnic
affiliation groups combined. In terms of social class, middle class participants make rather more modality references than working class participants - a feature also evident in Buckingham's work (Buckingham 1993a).

Table 5:

Number of Participants Making 'Realistic', 'Unrealistic' and 'Mixed' Modality Judgements by Sex, Age, Ethnic Affiliation and Social Class

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic Group</th>
<th>Number with Realistic Orientation</th>
<th>% of all those making modality j’ments</th>
<th>% of total number in demographic group</th>
<th>Number with Unrealistic Orientation</th>
<th>% of all those making modality j’ments</th>
<th>% of total number in demographic group</th>
<th>Number with Mixed Orientation</th>
<th>% of all those making modality j’ments</th>
<th>% of total number in demographic group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sex:</strong></td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>67</td>
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<tr>
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<td>19</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>26</td>
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<td>41</td>
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<td><strong>Age:</strong></td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td>15</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>58</td>
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<tr>
<td>16 years</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>15</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>14</td>
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<td>25</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>54</td>
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<td>Britain</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>16</td>
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<td>48</td>
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<td>North/Middle Europe</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
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<td>13</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Working Class</td>
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<td>12</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle Class</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*NB Very small group numbers

There are several modality orientations that can be adopted in regard to a particular programme or series. One might be inclined, for example, to see the programme as generally pretty realistic or, on the other hand as generally rather unrealistic. Another orientation might be to see the programme as having both realistic and unrealistic elements. Participants’ surveys were classified according to one of these three orientations. Fifteen participants (11 per cent) made no modality references and thus gave no indication of any orientation; the majority, 72 (55 per cent), saw both realistic and unrealistic elements in the programme; 24 (18 per cent) saw only realistic and 21 (16 per cent) saw only unrealistic elements. Table 5 above shows a breakdown of these modality orientations by sex, age, ethnic affiliation and social class.

‘That’s What Really Happens’ versus ‘It’s All Fake.’

Bearing in mind that most participants made both positive and negative modality comments in their survey responses, 96 participants (73 per cent of all participants in the study) made one or more comments (272 in total) that could be classified as positive modality judgements; that is, one or more elements of the series was/were considered to be
realistic and this was often expressed by comments like ‘...That’s what really happens’. Ninety three participants (70 per cent of all participants in the study) made one or more comments (125 in total) that could be classified as negative modality judgements; that is, one or more elements of the series was/were considered to be unrealistic and that was often expressed by comments like ‘It’s all fake.’

In Table 6, the figures correspond to individual participants; an individual may make several comments about how realistic, say, school violence, is but is only counted once for this topic.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Content Area</th>
<th>Number of Participants Making Modality Responses</th>
<th>Number of Participants Making Positive Modality Judgements</th>
<th>Number of Participants Making Negative Modality Judgements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School Violence</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boy-Girl Relationships</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Relationships</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Real Life</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racism in School</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Four of the elements most frequently commented upon were, unsurprisingly, cued by the survey questions and concerned depictions of violence (20 per cent) and racism in schools (16 per cent), boy-girl relationships (20 per cent) and family relationships (19 per cent). Comments that were about general issues (e.g. ‘It is realistic and about real teenage problems and not a lot of unbelievable stuff.’) were placed in a general category of ‘Real Life’ (18 per cent) and 8 per cent of comments referred to the cultural diversity depicted in the series.

School Violence

The early episodes of Heartbreak High contained a good deal of school-based violence, largely revolving around the Anglo-Australians: Rivers and Bolton and their henchmen. Some of this violence involved vicious baiting of students from different ethnic backgrounds, school-yard fights, school buildings being daubed with graffiti, verbal abuse and wild, unruly, noisy behaviour in classes taken by the new teacher, Ms. Milano.

The question that produced most responses relating to violence was Qu. 5: Some people say that fights and other violence that can occur in schools should not be shown on television. What do you think?. Fighting is specified as one kind of violence but the participant was able to interpret ‘other kinds of violence’ freely. Fighting was cited most frequently in responses, but verbal abuse, uncontrolled classroom behaviour, racial violence, sports
violence and bullying were all mentioned in Qu. 5 responses and elsewhere when violence was commented upon.

Although other discourses could have been mobilised by the question (most obviously the traditional one about television violence negatively influencing people’s behaviour), only 10 students (6 per cent of all participants in the study) framed their responses in this way. That modality is still salient for these young people is indicated by the fact that 79 participants (60 per cent of all participants in the study) chose to comment one or more times on the extent to which the depictions of school violence were realistic. Of these students, 69 claimed the depictions were realistic and 10 claimed they were not. The breakdown of these numbers by age, sex, ethnic affiliation and social class is provided in Table 7 below and, as can be seen, the pattern of response is generally fairly consistent over all demographic groups.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic Group</th>
<th>Number of Participants Making Positive Modality Responses</th>
<th>% of Total Number in Demographic Group</th>
<th>Number of Participants Making Negative Modality Responses</th>
<th>% of Total Number in Demographic Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sex:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 years</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 years</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>54</td>
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<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 years</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
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<tr>
<td>16 years</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17 years</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnic Affiliation:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anglo-Australian</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Anglo-Australian</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Class:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working Class</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle Class</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The majority of responses regarding school violence emphatically agreed that it occurred in real life— even that 'most kids see it every day.'— but no participant referred to personal experience of it. The following responses are typical:

Yes the fights should be shown because it really happens. (M/15/Australia)

I think fights should be shown as it reflects what schools are really like. (M/13/Northern Europe)

I think Australia should wake up to the fact that this kind of stuff goes on in schools. (F/13/Britain)
Many called upon what they seem to see as television realism’s duty to ‘tell it like it is’:

It’s meant to be a realistic representation and this does happen. So, I think it should be shown. (M/16/Northern Europe)

…it’s a social/racial programme and these issues should not be hidden from the public. (F/13/Australia)

If they want the show to be as realistic as possible they should have the occasional fight. (M/14/Northern Europe)

In contrast, some participants claim the depictions are unrealistic and several state personal experience as the source of their judgements:

I have not seen a class at my school like theirs and it’s hard to imagine fights like that. Does this really happen or is it just made up? (F/16/Australia)

...there are barely any fights in my school. (F/13/Britain)

Dorr (1983) found that her older participants defined ‘real’ as something that was probable, something that was representative of real life and like something they or their acquaintances had personally experienced. Fifty two percent of all participants in this study claim that the depiction of school violence on Heartbreak High is representative of real life (‘...it happens...’) and is therefore realistic although they provide no evidence that they or those they know have actually experienced this violence; no one talks about violence occurring in ‘my school’ or ‘my class’ or to ‘me and my friends’. Despite this, their cognitive scheme for ‘school’ is able to assimilate these images of violence.

Those who judge the violence to be unrealistic (8 per cent) do draw on their own school experience to justify their claims (‘I think this rarely happens...’) and, it must be said, that from observations of both schools and from interviews with teachers, the levels and frequency of violence actually occurring in both schools appear to be considerably lower than those depicted in the early episodes of Heartbreak High. Despite the absence of personal experience then, the bulk of the young people here seem to use a scheme for school life that includes interpersonal violence. This model may be a generalisation from the incidents of physical violence about which they do know; it may come from rumours and myths which circulate among school communities about ‘other’ schools which have ‘bad’ reputations; it may be an extrapolation from other less physical forms of violence (e.g. ‘slagging off’) which routinely occur in school. Making statements about school violence, however, also enables participants to construct themselves and their lives in various interesting ways and this will be discussed later in the chapter.
Boy-Girl Relationships

There are two kinds of relationship between boys and girls on Heartbreak High: they are either romantic or based on friendship. Jodie and Nick fall in love fairly early in the series and begin a sexual relationship and Steve and Danielle start ‘going steady’ shortly after the series begins. Con, Rose, Jack, Chakka, Steve, Danielle, Nick and Jodie all form a close friendship group between whose members occasional romantic skirmishes take place. Rivers hovers around on the edge of the group but is not accepted until late in the first series after his character has been softened and made more acceptable. The focus is largely on friendships and occasional romantic attachments with boys and girls turning to both same-sex and opposite-sex friends for advice, to share confidences to discuss problems and gossip.

The bulk of responses concerning boy-girl relationships were produced by Q: 6: How about the relationships between the boys and the girls - what do you think about these? Given that at least one of the relationships in the series is explicitly sexual, a moral discourse could have been mobilised by the question and indeed elements of this are to be found in some answers, however 77 students (58 per cent of all survey participants) had a modality focus in their responses; 59 (45 per cent of all survey participants) claimed the boy-girl relationships were realistically depicted while 18 (14 per cent of all survey participants) claimed they were not. The breakdown of these participants by sex, age, ethnic affiliation and class is provided in Table 8 below.

Table 8:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic Group</th>
<th>Number of Participants Making Positive Modality Responses</th>
<th>% of Total Number in Demographic Group</th>
<th>Number of Participants Making Negative Modality Responses</th>
<th>% of Total Number in Demographic Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>16</td>
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<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 years</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td>14 years</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>48</td>
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<td>16 years</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>32</td>
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<tr>
<td>17 years</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>43</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Ethnic Affiliation</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anglo-Australian</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>20</td>
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<tr>
<td>Non-Anglo-Australian</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social Class</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working Class</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle Class</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Features of these figures are that both girls (32 per cent) and boys (27 per cent) have an interest in the topic of relationships but more girls than boys judge them to be realistic. More of the 14 and 15 year olds see the relationships as realistic whereas more of the 16 year olds see them as more unrealistic.
The bulk of responses claiming the relationships are realistic (40 out of the 59) do not specify whether they are referring to friendships or sexual relationships, they simply confirm that: 'It is like that in schools.' (M/14/Australia)

Ten responses emphasise the friendship element of boy-girl relationships. Relationships are judged realistic because they are close and caring and show friends getting along as well as occasionally falling out. Here personal experience is often adduced:

They all get along from what I saw, except for the bullies. (M/15/Southern Europe)

I believe this is one of the most realistic parts of the show. The closeness that all of the students has is good. They are able to relate to one another and this is the way it is for most people. (F/14/S.E. Asia)

The boy-girl relationships in the series is very well depicted as I have relationships with my friends like that, we all care a lot for each other. (F/16/Australia)

The sexual relationships are specifically discussed by 11 girls and 1 boy from right across the age range and among them there is some ambivalence (in much the same way as there was with the younger children's responses in the previous chapters). Although claiming that the boy-girl relationships are depicted realistically, half this group is uneasy about the sexual relationships and make responses that incorporate moral judgements:

...the show needs to bring in some other kinds of relationships to show not all relationships are sexual. (F/17/Australia)

... some of the relationships were good but others got involved too soon. (F/13/Australia)

Some of them are a bit too close. (F/14/S.E. Asia)

The other half finds them quite acceptable:

I feel these relationships are depicted well because in the later stages of high school your relationships become more physical. (F/17/Britain)

I think it's O.K. because sex is a normal reaction to boys and girls so sex is O.K. (F/14/Australia).

Sexual relationships and behaviour are also an issue for those who judge the depiction of boy-girl relationships to be unrealistic. Half of the responses in this category refer to Nick
and Jodie. Their relationship is judged unreal either because they never fight or they get away with kissing in the school yard or:

They seem too fake. One minute they totally love each other, the next they’re never speaking to each other. Things don’t work like that. (M/15/Australia)

...the couples sleep with each other too soon after they have begun to go out. (F/16/Australia)

Even though the question could have been answered in another way, the subject of boy-girl relationships produces the second highest number of modality judgements in the survey, suggesting that the topic of relationships and the question of modality are both very salient for young people. Young people’s preoccupation with relationships is, of course, well documented (see, for example, Heaven and Callan 1990). In talking about how plausible or probable these relationships are, the participants draw on both their own experience of personal relationships and on models of ‘relationships’ that they have acquired from a variety of sources. After years of coeducational schooling, these young people are likely to be experts at judging the plausibility of the friendships depicted on Heartbreak High and indeed these judgements are in evidence right across the age range. Girls have traditionally been socialised in ways that emphasise the cultivation and maintenance of relationships (see Gilligan, Lyons and Hanmer 1990), and this may account for the higher percentage of female participants commenting positively about the depiction of relationships in general.

While it may be the case that many teenagers are sexually active, the opportunities for ‘having a relationship’ like Nick and Jodie’s, especially among the younger participants, are likely to be rare. Once again, references to sexual relationships span the age range and, as can be seen above, some of the 14 year olds appear to speak as authoritatively about physical relationships as the 17 year olds. No-one, however, actually admits to basing their conclusions on their own real life experience. Here, it is likely that the participants are basing their judgements on a model of relationships drawn from a number of sources. These would include such social texts as: television soap operas, situation comedies, dramas and even quizzes (e.g. Perfect Match, Blind Date), pop songs and video clips, women’s magazines (especially young women’s magazines like Dolly and Cleo), and films aimed at the teenage market (e.g. Pretty in Pink, Sixteen Candles, Oxford Blues). A mass of ‘information’, both fictional and ‘factual’, about how successful relationships are to be conducted is provided in sources such as these. These schemes will be challenged as the young participants ‘have relationships’ of their own. A variety of subject positions can also clearly be taken up in regard to boy-girl relationships and these will be explored later in the chapter.
Family Relationships
A variety of family relationships was presented in the early episodes of Heartbreak High. Con and Nick are cousins and both have traditional families of mother, father and siblings at the beginning of the series, however Nick’s mother is killed in a car accident and his father is subsequently forced to employ a house-keeper. Jodie’s family is very shadowy and we never meet them. Chakka, a refugee from Central America, lives with her mother and brother. Her father ‘disappeared’ in the war in El Salvador and her mother, who speaks little English is forced into doing poorly paid piece-work at home in order to provide for the family. Danielle’s parents divorce during the first series and so do Steve’s and he discovers in the process that he is also an adopted child. Rivers’ mother is an alcoholic and totally incapable of organizing life for either herself or her son; his father is in prison. Rose lives at home with her well-to-do Lebanese lawyer father. We never learn anything about Jack Tran’s family.

The question that produced most answers about the depiction of family relationships was Qu. 7: Sometimes we see characters in the show at home with their families. Do you have any thoughts about these scenes? Once again modality is not directly cued. Other kinds of answers relating to the practices of families from other classes/cultures, or moral arguments about how families ought to behave, questions of divorce and so on could have been given and occasionally were. However, 76 participants (58 per cent of all participants in the survey) used modality to frame their response; 46 (35 per cent of all those in the survey) claimed the families were represented realistically; 30 (23 per cent of all those in the survey) claimed the families were unrealistically represented. These figures, broken down by sex, age, ethnic affiliation and social class are presented in Table 9 below.

Apart from the propensity of 15 year olds in particular to see the family representations as realistic, there are few outstanding features of these data. There is no strong modality response from Anglo-Australians concerning the foregrounding of Greek-Australian and Italian-Australian families; nor is there a strong modality response from Southern Europeans regarding the accuracy with which these families are depicted.

Seventeen of the participants simply claimed the family representations were realistic and did not elaborate. Another 17 who did elaborate, focused on family conflict. Arguments, fights, specific incidents where conflict between children and parents occurred are cited as examples of how family relationships are presented realistically; boys in particular focused on the sometimes fiery relationship between Nick and his father. Many appear to draw on personal experience in their comments. The following are typical:
Table 9:
Number Of Participants Making Positive and Negative Modality Responses about Family Relationships by Sex, Age, Ethnic Affiliation and Social Class

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic Group</th>
<th>Number of Participants Making Positive Modality Responses</th>
<th>% of Total Number in Demographic Group</th>
<th>Number of Participants Making Negative Modality Responses</th>
<th>% of Total Number in Demographic Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sex:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 years</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 years</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 years</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 years</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 years</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnic Affiliation:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anglo-Australian</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Anglo-Australian</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specific</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North/Middle Europe</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>36</td>
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<tr>
<td>Southern Europe</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indian Ocean</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>33*</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>33*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Asia</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S.E. Asia</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>33*</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle East</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>25*</td>
<td>* Very small numbers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USA</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>100*</td>
<td>* Very small numbers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Social Class:         |                                                          |                                        |                                                          |                                        |
| Working Class         | 13                                                       | 26                                     | 9                                                       | 18                                     |
| Middle Class          | 33                                                       | 40                                     | 21                                                      | 26                                     |

Yes. I think that one that was done well was when Nick left home because he had a fight with his father. It was good because you can relate to times when you have felt like leaving home. (M/14/Britain)

...[Nick's] relationship with his father is good and a lot of people have similar problems with fathers. (M/16/Australia)

Girls tended to be more broadly focused in their choice of conflict situations:

It is a true family which has its share of fights and arguments. (F/14/Australia)

These scenes are presented quite well with brothers and sisters arguing and parents also, with parents ganging up on the kid. (F/15/Australia)

When Danielle hated her sister. This happens a lot. (F/13/South Asia)

While there is certainly some family conflict depicted in the series, this is more than offset by examples of family members caring for each other. Only 5 participants however, claim the family scenes are realistic because of this:
Yes it’s true at home because it is a good home. (M/15/Britain)

When Nick’s Mum dies they showed the family together and helping each other cope. (F/13/South Asia)

Of the 30 who thought the family relationships were unrealistic, 14 were unspecific in their claims saying only such things as: ‘Not well done. It’s unrealistic to me.’ (M/15/Southern Europe). A further 10 chose to comment on family conflict and half of these participants argue that the family fights (especially those between Nick and his father) are exaggerated:

The way Alex and his father act towards each other is a bit over the top. (F/15/Australia)

I don’t really like these scenes, they are less realistic. I thought that the scene where Nick and his Dad were arguing at the dinner table about his school work was very badly done. (F/15/S.E.Asia)

The other half are critical of the conflict situations because the programme makers or the actors haven’t got them right; they aren’t plausible:

Not very realistic because they are nearly always happy and always make up after fights. (F/13/South Asia)

These scenes are not presented well. Like when Nick was asking his Dad to coach their soccer team. No-one’s Dad is going to yell at them for asking. (F/14/Northern Europe)

When asked how they felt about the family scenes in Heartbreak High, participants again focused on how realistic they thought these depictions were. All of the participants are, to a degree, experts on families - their schemes for ‘family’ are drawn from first-hand experience of their own families (however they are constituted) and experience, too, of the families of friends and relations. It is likely therefore, even though it is not frequently stated, that their judgements about the way the family scenes are presented on Heartbreak High are the result of comparing these representations with their own personal experiences.

It is interesting that about a third of the participants chose to focus on the depictions of conflict situations, with the majority claiming that these were realistically depicted. The scheme for ‘family’ clearly now contains the possibility of conflict (cf. the 8 - 10 year olds whose focus was often on family problem-solving and conflict resolution demonstrated in
their favourite programmes). It would be a rare family that did not experience some conflict as issues of power and authority, freedom and responsibility are negotiated between teenage children and parents and this more complex awareness of family relationships is reflected in the participants’ modality judgements here. The focus on conflict in family relationships here, it will be later argued, is also a reflection of teenagers’ central interest in both relationships and their management and questions of power and autonomy.

**Real Life?**

Several survey questions were not focused on any particular aspect of Heartbreak High but rather asked for general responses (Questions 1 - 3 and 8 - 10). Seventy participants framed their responses to one or more of these survey questions in modality terms and there were almost equal numbers of ‘unrealistic’ and ‘realistic’ judgements.

Thirty six participants (27 per cent of all survey participants) claim that various aspects of Heartbreak High are unrealistic and 34 (26 per cent) claim the opposite. The breakdown of these figures by sex, age, ethnic affiliation and social class are presented in Table 10 below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic Group</th>
<th>Number of Participants Making Negative Modality Responses</th>
<th>% of Total Number in Demographic Group</th>
<th>Number of Participants Making Positive Modality Responses</th>
<th>% of Total Number in Demographic Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sex:</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>35</td>
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<tr>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>14</td>
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<td>16</td>
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<td><strong>Age:</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>13 years</td>
<td>6</td>
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<td>14 years</td>
<td>10</td>
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<td>15 years</td>
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<td>31</td>
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<tr>
<td>16 years</td>
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<td>32</td>
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<td>24</td>
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<tr>
<td>17 years</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>57</td>
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<td>14</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Ethnic Affiliation:</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Anglo-Australian</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>24</td>
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<tr>
<td>Non-Anglo-Australian</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>15</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Social Class:</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Working Class</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>22</td>
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<tr>
<td>Middle Class</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>28</td>
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</table>

The data are fairly consistent across the demographic groups with the exception that girls make three times more ‘unrealistic’ judgements than boys and twice as many ‘realistic’ ones; 17 year olds make more ‘unrealistic’ judgements than the other age groups.

Judgements that Heartbreak High is ‘unrealistic’ fall into four main categories. In the first category, participants do not specify why they think it's unrealistic, they simply say

221
things like: 'It's O.K. I think it's a bit unbelievable.' (F/14/Britain).
In the second category, participants focus on the plausibility of the plots, criticising them for being unrealistic or exaggerated:

The storyline - some of it is so unbelievable like Jodie becoming a singer over night. (F/14/Australia)

Unrealistic storylines. Dramatic occurrences to the same group of people each week. Pregnancy, mother dies etc. (F/16/Australia)

In the third category, participants focus on teen behaviour, claiming that it is not accurately depicted:

The way Nick and Con are always trying to show off and always trying to pick fights. This does not always happen in teenage life and I find it very annoying. (F/17/Australia)

I would not recommend that [people] watch it for an idea of what teenagers are like. (F/16/Australia)

In the final and biggest category, participants claim the picture of school that emerges from Heartbreak High is unrealistic even though many of them, contradictorily, also claim that depictions of school racism and violence are realistic:

The situations aren't realistic. Not everyday high school teaching and students reactions. (F/17/Britain)

I like it but it does not realistically represent my school. (M/17/Australia)

This is not realistic to me and my school life. (F/15/Britain)

I hate the way the class just calls out and the teacher doesn't even give them a detention. Yeah sure! (F/13/Britain)

Many of those who judged Heartbreak High to be realistic did not elaborate, simply saying: 'It shows how things happen in life and it is not too far out.' (F/15/Australia). Some participants refined this judgement by claiming that the depiction of teenage issues or problems was what made the show realistic:

It is realistic and about real teenage problems and not a load of unbelievable stuff. (F/15/Britain)

I really like the show because it is about teenagers and things that can happen in real life. (F/13/Southern Europe)
Others provided examples of the sorts of issues and problems that they considered realistic. These were wide-ranging and included sex, problems with parents, fighting, multiculturalism, breaking the law, relationships and friendships, problems at school and pregnancy.

Questions as neutral as: What is your general reaction to the programme Heartbreak High? and Are there any aspects of the programme that you really like or dislike? produce answers strongly oriented towards modality - both positive and negative - especially from girls. Plausibility and probability are again the chief means by which modality is judged and personal experience and/or a model of the world form the baselines for modality comparisons. Some participants show in their comments, that they are well aware of the rules of narrative and that real-life issues can be rendered less realistic by going 'over the top' or exaggerating dramatic events. In addition, issues picked out by students, without being prompted by focused questions, reinforce and extend the portfolio of issues that have already emerged as being of importance to young people.

Racist Behaviour in School

Some of the violence evident in the early episodes of Heartbreak High was produced by the racist aggression stirred up by Rivers and his mates against students from non-Anglo-Australian backgrounds. Ethnic insults and taunting were directed at the Greek and Italian-Australians who played soccer rather than Australian Rules Football in the schoolyard. This led on a couple of occasions to physical violence. Even more ugly was the racial abuse and the victimisation of the Vietnamese student, Jack Tran. These scenes were often very powerful and disturbing.

The question that produced the bulk of responses about racist behaviour was Q4: Some people have complained about the way certain students are shown having racist attitudes towards others. What do you think? Examples of 'racist attitudes' are not given in the question but responses specifically mention the use of racist language and name-calling, 'making fun of' different cultures, 'picking on' people for being different, harassment, fighting and arguing.

Several discourses were mobilised wherever this topic was raised. Twenty six students (20 per cent of all survey participants) take the opportunity to state their own opposition to racism ('I think there should be no racist attitudes.') or accuse the show of being racist ('I think the show is racist.') or agree that racism should not be shown either because of its capacity to offend ('Yes. It might offend some viewers.') or because of its capacity to influence behaviour ('In the show it shows
picking on you for being different. This gives children at home reasons to think that racism is O.K.'

Sixty three participants (48 per cent of all survey participants) made comments that involved a modality judgement. Fifty three (40 per cent of all survey participants) clearly indicated they thought the depictions of racist behaviour were realistic and 10 (8 per cent of all survey participants) claimed that they were not. The breakdown of these numbers by age, sex, ethnic affiliation and social class is provided in Table 11 below and, as can be seen, this pattern of response is again generally fairly consistent over all demographic groups.

It is interesting that the students with non-Anglo-Australian affiliations who are the most likely to have suffered from ethnic/racial abuse or victimisation, do not, as a group, see the depictions on Heartbreak High as being any more realistic than do the Anglo-Australians. When these figures are broken down into individual ethnic groupings however, those participants from Indian Ocean islands, South Asia and S.E. Asia appear more inclined, as might be expected, to perceive the depictions as realistic than other groups, although it must be borne in mind that the S.E. Asia and Indian Ocean groups contain quite small numbers.

Table 11:

Number Of Participants Making Positive and Negative Modality Responses about Racism in School by Sex, Age, Ethnic Affiliation and Social Class

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic Group</th>
<th>Number of Participants Making Positive Modality Responses</th>
<th>% of Total Number in Demographic Group</th>
<th>Number of Participants Making Negative Modality Responses</th>
<th>% of Total Number in Demographic Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sex:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Age:</td>
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<tr>
<td>15 years</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td>14 years</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>15 years</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>42</td>
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<tr>
<td>16 years</td>
<td>8</td>
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<tr>
<td>17 years</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ethnic Affiliation:</td>
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<tr>
<td>Anglo-Australian</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>42</td>
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<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Anglo-Australian Specific</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North/Middle Europe</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>14</td>
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<tr>
<td>Southern Europe</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indian Ocean</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>67*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>South Asia</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>33*</td>
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<tr>
<td>S.E. Asia</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>*NB Very small numbers</td>
<td></td>
<td>*NB Very small numbers</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social Class:</td>
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<tr>
<td>Working Class</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle Class</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Some participants, claiming that depictions of racist attitudes and behaviour on *Heartbreak High* were realistic, drew on personal experience:

**THE TRUTH should be shown on T.V. It really does go on in schools in some cases this one. (M/15/Southern Europe)**

I think that it's good because that is a very big issue in our school. (F/14/Northern Europe)

I think it's disgusting, but I guess I can put up with it. I'm black and heaps of people say racist comments to me. (F/13/South Asia)

As was the case with school violence, many participants relied on a general model of the school as a place where racism occurs: 'I think that's what happens in some schools and it's not wrong to show what happens.' (F/14/Britain).

People in general, not just school children, are also guilty of racism. Some examples of this are:

I think this is O.K. because it happens on the streets and at school. (F/13/Australia)

I think the element of racism in the show is a true representation of society today. (F/16/Australia)

I think that this is a fact of life, although I do not agree with it, it shows what really exists in the world. Not just the happy nice and sweet things but the truth. (F/14/S.E.Asia)

The ten participants who thought the depictions were unrealistic did not claim racism did not exist, only that it was exaggerated:

I think they've overdone the racism side of things. (M/13/Britain)

That's what I mean by going overboard. Too much racism. (F/15/Australia)

The schools from which the participants are drawn have a wide range of students from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Teachers' accounts of racial tension between students indicate that while there is a good deal of low-level name-calling and cruel taunting, violent racial/ethnic aggression or victimisation is rarely exhibited on school premises (although they have no doubt that it occurs elsewhere). In both schools, Australia's cultural diversity is featured as an integral part of the curriculum and racial/ethnic tolerance is heavily promoted and enforced as a key principle of the schools' behaviour policies. Knowledge about racism in all its forms, then, is to be anticipated in
young people, especially in view of the public awareness campaigns and the high-profile legislation that exist to combat racism, discrimination and prejudice in the wider society. These participants may draw on their own experiences and/or on a model of the world that includes the actuality or the possibility of racist behaviour in forming their judgements about the reality of racism on Heartbreak High.

Hardly any participants felt it necessary to show their disapproval of violence in school however 43 students (33 per cent of all survey participants) felt the need to respond with comments that showed their disapproval of racism. The important subject positions that can be constructed around this topic and will be discussed later in the chapter.

**Ethnicity**

As outlined in the earlier description of Heartbreak High, many of the characters are not Anglo-Australians and are played by actors who come from a variety of ethnic and cultural backgrounds. That this is a feature of the series can be seen by comparing the casts of Heartbreak High and, for example, Home and Away. Not only do the Heartbreak High characters not conform to the blonde, blue-eyed Anglo-Australian stereotype that the cast of Home and Away typifies, many of them also speak with detectable non Anglo-Australian accents.

No survey question asked directly about participants’ attitudes to the depiction of Australia’s cultural diversity in the series, but 32 (24 per cent of all survey participants) made one or more comments about this in their responses to various questions. Twenty one (16 per cent) made negative comments and 11 (8 per cent) made positive ones. The breakdown of these data by sex, age, ethnic affiliation and social class is presented in Table 12 below.

Thirteen year olds appear more inclined to make critical comments about the multicultural nature of the series than any of the other age groups - younger teenagers may have rather more to gain from an anti-ethnic stance or perhaps they have yet to acquire the skills of disingenuity. As might be expected, the Anglo-Australian group (i.e. participants from Australia, New Zealand or Britain) make more critical comments than the non Anglo-Australian group (which, in this instance, comprises participants from Northern and Southern Europe and South Asia). The negative responses show few remarkable patterns except Anglo-Australians make many more negative comments than non-Anglo-Australians.

A pervasive feature of the negative comments, apart from implied criticism that the depiction of cultural diversity is somehow unbalanced or inaccurate, is an inability or an unwillingness to differentiate between the characters’ different ethnic affiliations. In the
Table 12:
Number Of Participants Making Negative and Positive Modality Responses about Ethnicity by Sex, Age, Ethnic Affiliation and Social Class

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic Group</th>
<th>Number of Participants Making Negative Modality Responses</th>
<th>% of Total Number in Demographic Group</th>
<th>Number of Participants Making Positive Modality Responses</th>
<th>% of Total Number in Demographic Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Girls</td>
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<tr>
<td>Boys</td>
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<td>13</td>
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<td>Age</td>
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<td>13 years</td>
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<td>28</td>
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<td>11</td>
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<tr>
<td>14 years</td>
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<td>15 years</td>
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<td>16 years</td>
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<td>20</td>
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<tr>
<td>17 years</td>
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<td>14</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ethnic Affiliation:</td>
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<tr>
<td>Anglo-Australian</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>20</td>
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<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Anglo-Australian</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Specific</td>
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<td>Northern European</td>
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<td>7</td>
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<td>Southern European</td>
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<td>12</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td>South Asia</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>33</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social Class:</td>
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<tr>
<td>Working Class</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Middle Class</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>8</td>
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</table>

following comments, participants also tie their criticism of the cultural diversity depicted in the series to criticisms of the acting:

It's too much Greek. I think the multiculturalism should be more widespread. And I think some of the acting is weak and unrealistic. I think it is like Beverly Hills 90210 in a multicultural (Greek) area. (F/14/Australia)

The acting is pretty poor and it is more Italian culture when it is supposed to be set in Australia. (F/16/Australia)

It's O.K. but I think they tend to exaggerate on the Italian side of it. And the actors need much more practice. (F/17/Australia)

One thing I don't like is that the main group is Greeks. I don't have anything against Greeks but maybe they could have different cultures as well. THE ACTING IS BAD!!! (M/15/Australia)

Others base their unrealistic judgements on a perception of 'Australian' that excludes people from non Anglo-Australian backgrounds:

There are too many Italians in it, it's supposed to be an Australian show. (F/16/Australia)
It's O.K. I don't think it's very Australian. (M/16/Australia)

I didn't think it was that good. Where are the Australians? (M/15/Britain)

It's O.K. If it's set in an Australian school, why are there so many ethnics in it? (M/15/Northern Europe)

I don't think it's an Australian show at all. (F/13/Australia)

I think there are too many Europeans in the show. It is meant to be Australian, so I think Australians should be the stars of the show. (M/13/Northern Europe)

It's supposed to be an Australian show but most of the actors are Europeans! (M/14/Australia)

It's alright but I think there is not enough Australians in it. (F/13/Southern Europe)

Some participants clearly feel uncomfortable about the multicultural nature of the series and about Anglo-Australians being depicted as racists:

There are a mix of people but I think this is carried to an extreme. (F/14/Australian)

[I would improve the show by] not having everything so rough and shown always from an Italian point of view. (F/17/Australia)

Again, it's the white Aussies that are shown as the racists. I think the producer is Italian or Asian. (M/16/Australia)

I think it full of wogs and they talk funny. (F/13/South Asia)

Those who comment positively, approve of the depiction of ethnic and cultural diversity in the series and see it as realistic:

In some ways this show is more realistic than the other soapies. Not many soapies show different races or cultures in their shows. These other soapies tend to focus on relationships between boy/girl. (F/16/Australia)

Heartbreak High are trying to have people from all backgrounds and the programme shows that people do make fun of different cultures. (M/16/Australia)
It shows real aspects of life and other races. (M/14/Southern European)

The only aspects that I like are that there is more than Australian actors on the show. Different nationalities that’s realistic. (F/14/South Asia)

I like how it is related to school life and they are all from different backgrounds. (F/13/South Asia)

Although participants do not use the words ‘realistic’ or ‘unrealistic’ frequently in the examples above, they are clearly framing their responses in modality terms. Some participants say they find the depiction of cultural diversity in **Heartbreak High** realistic and are clearly drawing on their own school experiences here - in both schools 22 different non-English speaking countries of origin are represented and no class is culturally homogenous. Others, however, make comments that appear to deny their personal experience of going to a school with a culturally diverse population; ‘plausibility’ or ‘probability’ does not seem to feature in these judgements and this links with the ‘Bad Acting’ judgement discussed earlier. Here, the rejection of representations of non-Anglo Australians is openly stated by a small group of participants (16 per cent), not disguised in a ‘Bad Acting’ judgement. The scheme of ‘Australian’ for these young people does not include those who are culturally or ethnically different. Modality statements about cultural diversity can also serve to construct subject positions in a nationalist discourse and these will be explored later in the chapter.

In concluding this section, it is clear from the forgoing analysis that modality is still a salient issue for teenagers although its function is significantly different in one respect from that adopted by younger children. The participants here are in absolutely no doubt about the status of television as a constructed medium and have achieved levels of understanding in regard to this dimension that have been evident only in developing forms in younger children. In their responses about **Heartbreak High** they demonstrate, for example, their understanding that parts are played by actors who have separate lives and identities, that individual shows are based on written scripts, that filming takes place in selected locations and that shows are shaped and managed by directors and producers. So secure are they in this knowledge that these participants are able to set themselves up as media critics, evaluating not only the plausibility of scripts and plots but also the cast’s acting skills.

In relation to the second dimension, the relationship of television to real life, the analysis here extends previous research with 11 and 12 year old children (Kelly 1981; Hodge and Tripp 1986; Buckingham 1993a), by showing that teenagers are also keenly interested in television’s relationship to real life and find much in its content that is plausible or
probable or the reverse. In the present survey, 89 per cent of all participants chose to make judgements about how realistic they thought aspects of the series were, that is they judged certain television depictions to be ‘realistic’ or ‘unrealistic’ by comparing what they saw with their own personal experience or with some working hypothesis of what life is really like.

The major difference between these older participants’ modality judgements and those of the younger participants, lies in the teenagers’ use of much more complex models of the real world in their judgements. There is now an awareness of moral, political and social issues (e.g. racism, violence, nationalism) and these form strong elements of their world view, irrespective of any direct personal experience the individual participant may have had. The concepts that they have developed here may, of course, be contradictory and require careful management if disequilibrium is to be avoided. For the 16 per cent who make overtly anti-ethnic or racist comments, there is little disequilibrium, but there may be many others who find their schemes of ‘Australian’ threatened by representations of cultural diversity, but are unable to accommodate with racist/anti-ethnic schemes (e.g. ‘wog’) for fear of social disapproval. Such disequilibrium requires an accommodation that avoids the minefield of race/ethnicity and it is possible that the pervasive ‘Bad Acting’ is a diversionary label providing one way in which this can be safely done.

Judgements frequently made in relation to such broad, abstract concepts as racism and the framing of certain responses in political or moral terms are ample demonstrations of the more abstract thinking skills associated with young people after the age of about 11 or 12 (Piaget 1952). There is also a degree of adolescent utopianism in many responses – evidence that the young people were speculating about how life ought to be, how society ought to be run, how people ought to behave towards one another. Both this and the dismissive criticism of others, presumed not to share the participant’s views, are similarly typical of adolescent thought.

MODALITY ISSUES AND YOUNG PEOPLE’S PROGRAMME PREFERENCES

For Australian 13 - 17 year olds, favourite programmes for the year 1994/5 included family and situation comedies like The Nanny, The Simpsons, Blossom and Hangin’ with Mr. Cooper; teen soaps like Neighbours, Beverly Hills 90210 and Home and Away; action/adventure/mystery series like Baywatch, The X Files and Lois and Clark and adult soaps like Melrose Place and Models Inc. (Nielsen Media 1995). In Britain, Gunter and McAleer (1990:8) reported the striking popularity of soap operas, with the Australian
serial Neighbours clearly emerging as the most watched programme of all in the 10 - 15 age group. American media organisations report situation comedies to be the top rating genre with 12 - 17 year olds (Nielsen Media 1994).

These same types of programme are also popular with children from widely different circumstances. In a British study, Hagell and Newburn (1994) examined the television preferences of 78 young teenage offenders between 12 and 18 and 538 school children of the same ages. When asked to name their five favourite shows, soap operas (e.g. EastEnders, Neighbours, Home and Away) were the most popular programmes for both groups.

It is a central argument of this thesis that children's and teenagers' favourite programmes have achieved this status because they enable the exploration of important social reality issues. In other chapters, the issues of importance to participants have been deduced from the topics on which they chose to focus when considering a variety of different television programmes. In this chapter, because participants have been considering only one programme, it will be necessary to extrapolate the issues they find important by looking at the chief concerns that are the substance of their favourite programmes as well as by looking at what they say about Heartbreak High.

In general terms, situation comedies, family shows and teen soap operas deal with personal strategies for living life successfully; these include overcoming the problems of daily life and the management of family, peer and romantic/sexual relationships. Many of these programmes, like Neighbours, Home and Away, Beverly Hills 90210 and Blossom have casts which include teenagers as central characters; others like Hangin' With Mr Cooper and The Nanny are family-based comedies with young adult leads whose love

34 Neighbours and Home and Away are very similar in style. Both deal with family, school, neighbourhood issues and both have casts which include young people. In Home and Away for example, as well as teenagers Shannon and Selina, there are also Shane and Angel, a young couple who are parents to Angel's child, Dylan. In Neighbours, the youngest cast members Hannah Martin and Billy Kennedy are in their early teens while Libby and Malcolm Kennedy and Brett and Danni Stark are in senior classes at school. Malcolm and Danni are having a sexual relationship and have moved out of their respective homes in order to live together.

35 Beverly Hills 90210 has a cast of all-white, well-off, attractive young people. Plots concern their romantic and career involvements and despite the excitiness of some storylines, problems are usually resolved in conventional ways.

36 Blossom is a teenage girl and the stories revolve around such things as the importance of personal appearance, dating, manipulating parents (in this case, a father only); friendships. Blossom is attractive, 'madcap' and manages both her romantic and her peer relationships very expertly.

37 The lead character in the all-black cast of Hangin' With Mr Cooper is a young sports teacher. He lives with his older sisters and his young niece. The humour arises from the fact that despite his size and sporting prowess, he's really just a big kid with lustful intentions and his sisters have to take care of him and sort out his romantic involvements.

38 The Nanny is a situation comedy with the humour arising from the exaggerated clash of
lives are often the focus of individual episodes. Action/fantasy adventures like Baywatch, The X Files, and Lois and Clark, feature young, glamorous twentysomethings doing exciting things, overcoming their adversaries with skill, talent, courage and ingenuity. Adult soaps like Melrose Place and Models Inc. again feature young and glamorous characters who through their egregiously good or bad personal qualities, model both how to live life successfully and how to make a real mess of it. What distinguishes all of these programmes is their ethnic/racial homogeneity, their comfortable middle class focus and their framing of conflict situations in personal rather than political terms. Only The Simpsons breaks this mould. This cartoon series features a working class family and although many stories deal with the typical family show subjects (how to deal with problems and manage relationships), many also deal with political issues like worker exploitation, sexual discrimination, business and political corruption - even the effects of television violence.

In many ways, the favourite programmes of the teenagers reflect a set of social reality issues that are a more sophisticated version of those that preoccupied the 8 - 10 year olds. Themes ‘...about life’, how to manage relationships (family, romantic and friendship), issues relating to sex, violence and power are present again in the favourite programmes for teenagers. In addition, in some of the situation comedies, the action/fantasy adventures and the adult soaps, images of glamorous adult life are offered, suggesting that anxiety or speculation about the future is also a major social reality issue for this age group.

The social reality issues featured in their favourite shows are the same ones that concern the young people who took part in this study. Although survey questions cues the topics of violence and relationships (boy-girl, family), participants did not have to respond to these questions in modality terms. The fact that they did, indicates the extent to which these topics are important to their developing senses of social reality. The emphasis on family conflict, racist attitudes and behaviour also suggests that issues of power are significant concerns in the reality of adolescent life. In the category of ‘Real Life’, participants mentioned a number of topics raised in Heartbreak High that they thought were realistic;

39 The life-savers in Baywatch have their physical skills, in the X Files the main characters use courage and intelligence to deal with supernatural phenomena and Clark, from Lois and Clark, is Superman.

40 In Melrose Place and Models Inc. the characters are generally all rich, successful, attractive and have a dominant characteristic: for example in Melrose Place, Billy is trusting, Kimberley is mad, Amanda is determined and ruthless etc. Racy and dramatic plots are often resolved showing which characteristics are desirable. For example, after Amanda connives to take over the company from her boss, an act which leads to his suicide, she gets cancer!
these included sex, problems with parents, fighting, breaking the law, problems at school, relationships and friendships. That relationship issues are very significant is emphasised by one 14 year old girl who stated that if she were the producer of Heartbreak High she would include more ‘...fights, relationships, more love, romance and sex – we need to learn more about it.’

Despite the fact that Heartbreak High dealt with many social reality issues of importance to young people, the programme achieved poor ratings both nationally and from the survey participants; in the survey question where participants were asked to give the programme a score out of 10, they gave it an average score of only 4.6. One explanation for this apparent contradiction can be found in the unconventional way in which the issues in the early episodes were handled. While many of the stories did deal with life’s problems, relationships of all kinds, violence, sex, power and so on, the issues were frequently located within a political or social framework rather than a personal one. For example, people were the victims of interpersonal violence because they were racially or culturally different; life’s problems included being discriminated against because of one’s sex or sexual preference; families were shown having problems because of poverty and disadvantage.

As indicated above, with the exception of The Simpsons (which is a comedy and, therefore, modally distanced), the programmes that rate highly with young people rarely deal with political or social issues, but tend instead to frame the ‘conflicts’ at the heart of plots in personal and individual terms. Making a success of life, managing relationships and overcoming problems are thus seen as the result of wise personal choices, individual skills and talents and even luck, rather than being determined, in large part, by one’s socio-political status. This privileging of the personal and individual over the social and political is, of course, a central tenet of conservative, capitalist ideology and it is likely that most teenagers, while cognitively capable of apprehending more abstract social, political and moral questions, will be more inclined to see their own important social reality issues in these personal and individual terms. Thus, Heartbreak High, in challenging this world view, went very much against the grain.

That the programme had indeed been too ‘radical’ for young viewers was demonstrated by its subsequent broadcasting history and from the ratings of the show that replaced it. When Heartbreak High was demoted (after 14 episodes) to a ‘grave yard’ spot in the schedules, Baywatch took over the 6.30 Sunday time-slot and attracted 1.595 million viewers on the last Sunday the programme was broadcast (The Australian 31/5/1995).
viewers in its first week; nearly double the audience that Heartbreak High had achieved the week before. Beverly Hills 90210 which followed at 7.30 attracted 1.568 million viewers, the bulk of whom fell into the 13 - 17 demographic age group (Nielsen Media Research 1994).

After Heartbreak High was rescheduled to its less attractive timeslot there began a deliberate reconstruction of the series which made it more like a conventional soap opera. There was a softening of programme content. The tough political themes of the earlier programmes (racism, sexism, poverty, family breakdown, the experiences of political prisoners, homosexuality) gave way to more personal ones dealing with love and romance, peer group and family-based issues. There was also a significant shift away from the emphasis on cultural diversity. Several of the non Anglo-Australian characters left the series and at the same time, the identifiably Anglo-Australian characters moved more to the foreground. Scott Major's brilliant characterisation of Peter Rivers as a young Australian fascist - a thoroughly dangerous and convincingly unlikeable character - was dramatically softened. His love life became more important than his politics and he was re-shaped sympathetically as a misunderstood working class rebel who ends up falling in love with a teacher. It is significant that by the end of 1994, Heartbreak High's ratings had improved, but they were never to reach the phenomenal levels that Baywatch and Beverly Hills 90210 could regularly command with this age group (Nielsen Media 1995).

Further evidence that Heartbreak High's unconventional approach was to blame for its lack of popularity came in responses to the question that asked participants to compare this series with three of the most highly rated programmes with this age group: Beverly Hills 90210, Neighbours and Home and Away. Heartbreak High was accused of being grim and depressing:

[The other programmes] are all much more happier. (F/14/Australia)

Beverly Hills, Home and Away and Neighbours only show certain bad parts but mostly good things. (F/14/Philippines)

Neighbours, Home and Away and the others are a lot less violent. The people show each other more respect. (F/15/Northern Europe)

Beverly Hills at least shows other teenagers to do well at school. And it deals with teenage problems and teenagers can relate to that. (M/15/Australia)

Beverly Hills has a better, more responsive attitude towards teenagers. (F/14/South Asia)
It doesn't have as much romance as Beverly Hills does and as Neighbours and Home and Away does. (M/14/Southern Europe)

Heartbreak High was promoted as a soap opera and yet instead of the simple moral dilemmas and clear social maps characteristic of soaps, it presented moral ambiguities and complex political and social issues. It also dared to challenge the myth that Australia is a culturally homogenous country, hitherto reinforced by every soap opera, situation comedy and family series made in this country. Heartbreak High certainly did deal with the kinds of issues that characterise teenagers' favourite programmes - issues that also loom large in adolescents' developing senses of social reality - however, the radical approach to framing these issues in political and social terms may have been too challenging for many young people, used only to seeing them in personal and individual terms. That important social reality issues are perhaps most comfortably contemplated at a safe 'modality distance' is hinted at by one 16 year old girl when she compares Heartbreak High with the other three soap operas:

[Heartbreak High] is not as fairy-tale-ish as the other three mentioned - life isn't perfect or full of disaster. Usually it's either one or the other - in this show there's a mixture of good and bad. It's not showing how you'd want your life to be (like the others). It's showing you what it's really like. (F/16/Northern Europe)

MODALITY JUDGEMENTS AS SOCIAL ACTS

When making statements about how real we think things are, we are also making statements about ourselves; in this way, consciously or unconsciously, we can construct social identities that suit our purposes. Unlike the participants in the other age-groups, the 13-17 year olds were not discussing their views publicly so there was no necessity to present themselves in various sorts of ways for the benefit of their peers. Nevertheless, an adult researcher, known to their teachers, does represent a significant audience because of the obvious alliance, not only with the older generation, but with teachers as well. It is therefore probably safe to assume that, essentially, participants were constructing themselves in their modality responses for themselves and the researcher, an unknown member of the older generation.

The fact that participants were required to write their answers to the various questions and that survey sheets were not identified with participants' names perhaps encouraged a somewhat more unrestrained set of responses than tape-recorded verbal discussions conducted in the researcher's presence might have produced. Certainly, a deal of
flamboyant language and swearing appeared in a fair number of responses and, given the prohibitions around pejorative terms like ‘wog’, it’s unlikely that this kind of language would have been used had the data-gathering process not been anonymous.

The Responsible Viewer

Violence and racism are highly charged topics about which to express an opinion. The publicly approved response is to deplore them but there are a number of other attitudes which can be struck, all of which serve to present the speaker in particular sorts of ways. The principal construction of self here proved to be that of the ‘responsible viewer’.

Many participants made comments which presented themselves as people who primarily use television as an educational tool, as a source of useful information. Violent or racist scenes were justified because they could teach you how to deal with these situations in real life. Girls and participants with different ethnic affiliations far outnumbered boys and Anglo-Australians in responses of this kind.

If they show [violence] on TV then maybe we can learn to handle the real life situation. (F/14/South Asia)

I feel that violence does occur in schools and it should be shown on a show like this so we can see why this violence occurs. (F/17/Britain)

Yes, they should be shown on TV because then we would realise what the consequences would be if we did start a fight and it does in schools. (F/14/S.E.Asia)

It’s good to show [racist scenes] because it develops into an argument or fights, it teaches others not to be racist. (F/14/Southern Europe)

Others adopting the ‘responsible viewer’ position claimed that violence or racism of the kind shown in the early episodes of Heartbreak High would have a bad effect on less responsible viewers.

This does influence the youths of society today to be involved in racial violence and can cause more conflict than resolution between races. (F/16/Australia)

In some ways it does harm what teenagers do in school grounds - it could influence fights. (F/16/South Asia)

I think it should not be shown because then students will copy what happens on TV. (F/13/Northern Europe)
I think they shouldn't. Young people also watch this show and it is shown at family viewing time. (M/17/Australia)

In the show it shows people picking on you for being different. This gives children at home reasons to think that racism is O.K. (M/13/Northern Europe)

This show seems to be very racist and should not be shown to people who would take it seriously. (F/16/Britain)

A further version of the 'responsible viewer' draws on the anti-censorship discourse. Distressing as violence and racism are, to ban them from the screen is to deprive people of the right to know about such things.

They should because, I mean if that's what's happening, let people know. It shouldn't be one of those things not shown. (F/14/Northern Europe)

I think it should because this does happen in many schools and we shouldn't try to hide it, otherwise it will seem that we are ignoring the issue of racial conflict in school. (F/16/Northern Europe)

THE TRUTH should be shown on TV. It really does go on in schools, in some cases, this one. (M/15/Southern Europe)

I think that the truth hurts!! Racism does exist and people who don’t like it should come back to earth. (F/13/South Asia)

One final construction of the 'responsible viewer' appears strongly in written responses about the racist attitudes of characters in Heartbreak High and hardly at all in responses concerning the depiction of violence. A third of all survey participants (33 per cent) feel it necessary to declare their disapproval of racism compared with only a tiny minority who use their responses elsewhere to express disapproval of violence. Some participants make no attempt to answer the survey question about the depiction of racist attitudes, instead they provide a brief belief statement such as:

I think the show is racist. (M/15/Australia)

People should not be racist. (F/14/Middle East)

I think it's disgusting. (F/13/Middle East)

Others incorporate their disapproval into their responses, as a kind of disclaimer:
I think it's O.K. because lots of this kind of stuff goes on in schools. I don't think racism is O.K. but at least the show is being realistic. (F/14/South Asia)

I think that this is a fact of life, although I do not agree with it, it shows what really exists in the world. Not just the happy, nice and sweet things but the truth. (F/14/S.E.Asia)

It is interesting that the participants here see disapproval of racism as an essential element in a construction of self as a mature and responsible citizen, but not necessarily the disapproval of violence. The social and legal penalties for using racist language (unless one happens to be protected by Parliamentary privilege) or for discriminating against others on the basis of race, are harsh and well-publicised. Social disapproval of violent behaviour, however, can sometimes be avoided or mitigated by appealing to extenuating circumstances ('broken home', 'drunk at the time', 'temporary loss of control', 'misjudged high spirits', 'boys will be boys'). There is even social approval for those who use violent means to defend themselves or beat an 'evil' enemy or succeed in sport. Given this kind of ambivalence, a construction of self as anti-racist but not necessarily anti-violence reflects a fairly accurate reading of contemporary cultural values.

The Nationalist Viewer

Racism is a risky topic for discussion - as demonstrated in the section above, some participants felt the need to make personal statements of disapproval when asked for an opinion about the depiction of racist attitudes on Heartbreak High. Others however, took the opportunity to engage in nationalist or racist rhetoric.

Criticism of the acting in Heartbreak High sometimes appears to be a device for expressing nationalist or racist views. Participants who feel inhibited from outrightly expressing their disapproval of such things as the ethnic origins of the characters can escape criticism themselves by linking their views or hiding them inside criticism of the acting.

I do not like it very much because I don’t like the acting. It would help if they could act. Nick's accent is a bit much - sounds like he’s fresh out of Greece. (F/14/Britain)

The acting is pretty poor and it is more Italian culture when it is supposed to be set in Australia. (F/16/Australia)

The actors. They are ugly and can't act. (F/13/Britain)

There are these two Greek/Italian girls who can’t act and when they try to act sad or concerned, they just can’t do it. (F/15/Britain)
Other participants were less cautious in their criticism of what they saw as anti-
Australian or un-Australian depictions and 11 of them (8 per cent of all survey participants)
chose to use the taboo word ‘wog’ in their responses:

See what really happens in schools and get rid of the actors
who act like they are acting for ‘Wogs out of Work’.  
(M/14/Australia)

Take out the wogs. (M/14/Australia)

It’s O.K. If it’s set in an Australian school, why are there
so many ethnics in it? (F/15/Northern Europe)

It’s not very good. Too many wogs! (M/14/Australia)

I think it full of wogs and they talk funny. (F/13/South
Asia)

It’s alright but I think there is not enough Australians in
it. (F/13/Southern Europe)

Whether these participants would have made similar kinds of comments in open
discussion, or in a form where their identity was revealed, is unknown. The responses of the
Asian and European girls may be ironic or an indication of an ‘if you can’t beat ’em, join ’em’
approach. For the others, the deliberate use of the disapproved term ‘wog’ and the anti-
ethnic comments may be designed to shock but they also serve to construct a sense of self as a
‘true’ Australian within a nationalist discourse. The definition of ‘Australian’ being used
here does not include people who have different ethnic affiliations. The daily experience
of working alongside people from many different ethnic backgrounds does not challenge the
view that the only people who can call themselves Australian are those that conform to
the blonde, blue-eyed, Anglo nationalist stereotype.

Their desire to re-create Australia as a culturally homogenous country is supported by the
very programmes that rate so highly with 13 - 17 year olds. Neighbours has made the odd
brave attempt to include guest actors from different ethnic backgrounds but the regular cast
are all Anglo-Australian; Home and Away has a regular cast of Anglo-Australians and
Beverly Hills 90210 has an all-white cast. Goodall (1990) recounts the story that when A
Country Practice (another Australian serial with a predominantly Anglo-Australian cast)
introduced an Asian doctor, the station was flooded with so much hate mail that the
character was rapidly removed, never to return. The participants above appear to be
defending their nationalist construction of Australia with as much vigour as the viewers of
A Country Practice did theirs.
The Gendered Viewer

Some female participants adopt a gender discourse in relation to Heartbreak High. From an adult and feminist point of view, the gender relationships in the programme are well depicted. All of the girls are strong, assertive characters, with strengths in different things - Jodie is a successful singer, Rose edits the school newspaper, Danielle is an aerobics champion and athlete. In their relationships with the boys, they hold their own and frequently challenge sexist behaviour. An early episode, in fact, showed the institutional and individual sexism that Danielle encountered in her successful fight to be selected as the goalie for the school’s soccer team. Given this, it is interesting that some girls claim the boy/girl relationships are sexist.

...the boys tend to pick on the girls. I think it should show the girls fighting back. (F/13/Australia)

I think the relationships are good, but the boys should show more respect towards the girls. Sometimes they are too sexist. (F/15/Northern Europe)

The relationships are pretty good except I think that the girls should be more forward and the boys not as coming on strong. (F/15/Britain)

By re-creating the gender relationships depicted in Heartbreak High as sexist, these girls present themselves as assertive young women who are not only fully aware of the potential for sexism in boy/girl interactions but who also know how to deal with it.

If girls had a strong investment in the ‘responsible viewer’ construction of self, the boys, were much more inclined to adopt a ‘macho’ position, claiming that television violence was exciting and desirable. It was only boys who made comments approving of the fights:

I like watching the fights, it puts excitement in the show. (M/15/Australia)

Fights make the show more interesting to watch instead of it always being classroom scenes. (M/15/Northern Europe)

I think they should show these fights because it makes it more exciting. (M/16/South Asia)

I think the fights are normal teenage behaviour. (M/14/Southern Europe)

I think it’s good because they fight like shiels. (M/14/Southern Europe)
This kind of response from the boys is to be anticipated, given the level of violence that is tolerated and even publicly approved in our society. The old stereotype of the tough male who resolves conflict with his fists and who enjoys violence because he’s genetically programmed that way still has currency in our society and certainly appears to have attraction for the young male participants above.

The Sexual Viewer

A number of subject positions were taken up when discussing how well the boy/girl relationships were depicted on Heartbreak High. Some participants concentrated only on the friendships while others chose to comment on the ‘relationships’. Without rehearsing the previous analysis, suffice to say that moral positions were adopted. There were those who disapproved of the sexual relationship between Nick and Jodie: e.g. ‘...couples sleep with each other too soon after they have begun to go out.’ (F/16/Australia) and others saw it as ‘natural’: e.g. ‘...in the later stages of high school your relationships become more physical.’ (F/17/Britain).

In the boys’ responses, sexual behaviour was often mentioned but usually in unromantic ways, full of bravado and redolent with (probably, imaginary) sexual experience. The construction of The Sensitive New Age Guy is clearly not one that holds much attraction for these young men:

*People don’t generally suck the face of their girlfriend or boyfriend in the middle of the school yard as depicted in the programme.* (M/16/Australia)

*On the show I watched, the father said to the son that he could have sex with a girl if he invited her over for dinner. This is very unrealistic.* (M/14/Australia)

*Pick the most gorgeous girl and set her up with a steamy episode, that will make it interesting.* (M/13/498)

*I think it’s dumb because they don’t know how to kiss.* (M/14/Middle East)

*Girls talk about sexual behaviour in less blunt terms and also mention ‘love’ – something the boys do not do:*

*I think they have exaggerated the relationships because as if any teacher would let the students kiss on the school grounds.* (F/14/Australia)

*They are always talking about sex. But they do show what really happens in teenage relations.* (F/13/South Asia)
That is how you do fall in love in high school. (F/14/Britain)

Yes, because if a boy and girl love each other there is nothing we can do. (F/13/South Asia)

Sex during adolescence is a hot topic, not only among teenagers themselves but also among the adults associated with them. Many of the participants in the survey would be sexually active but this is not necessarily something which they would wish to broadcast. There is safety, therefore, in the position of the sexual moralist and there is cachet in the position of the sexually liberated, either are credible positions to adopt vis a vis an adult/teacher researcher.

Some Summarising Comments

With this analysis of 13 - 17 year olds’ responses, the investigation into teenagers’ modality judgements concludes and, for the first time, interpretive research has focused on the modality judgements of young people older than 12 years of age. The understanding that teenagers now have about the constructed nature of television is free of the conceptual difficulties that characterised younger children. The belief that some television actors maintain their role or occupation in real life has disappeared, with most participants being very well aware of the fact that Alex Dimitriades and Abie Tucker are both show business personalities taking a part in a fictional programme. The participants’ scathing criticisms of the young actors’ acting skills is further evidence of awareness that television programmes like Heartbreak High are fictional and performed. There also appears now to be sufficient technical expertise about television as a medium to make the ‘How it’s done’ modality category, no longer necessary.

Not surprisingly, the technique of matching what is seen on television with personal experience or a model of the world was also adopted by the older participants, however, the model of the world with which they are now operating is more complex than the one used by younger children. The gaze of these young people not only takes in the wider society in which they are living but it also encompasses the ideological frameworks of that society too. They can see issues in moral, political or social terms although, in matters relating to their own developing senses of social reality, issues are frequently conceptualised as personal and individual rather than social or political.

Although knowledge about television’s representational nature has now become part of young people’s commonsense understanding of the world, the ability of television to represent that world realistically is still an important consideration. Uncued by the survey questions, a considerable number of participants chose to comment on how realistic such
things as the representations of school violence and racism, boy-girl relationships, families, ethnicity and so on, actually were. And yet, such verisimilitude does not guarantee popularity. In terms of both formal and informal ratings, Heartbreak High was not a winner with the target audience. The girl who wistfully wrote in relation to Heartbreak High: 'It's not showing how you'd want your life to be (like the others). It's showing you what it's really like,' is, perhaps, indicating that too much realism is uncomfortable. A programme like Beverly Hills 90210 satisfies a need for fantasy, escapism and wish-fulfilment in a way that (the early) gritty Heartbreak High could never do.

The modality judgements that the teenagers make are again best understood in terms of cognitive developmental theory and the theory itself is enriched by the insights into the way the participants judge modality. The fact that they could, for example, flexibly move between consideration of Alex Dimitriades as an actor and Nick the character he played, shows that there is now the capacity to hold in mind and coordinate at least two pieces of contradictory information - Nick and Alex are both the same person. They are both 'real' but in different ways - the scheme for realism that the 8-10 year olds appeared to be striving for is now secure.

The cognitive reach of the adolescent mind has also moved beyond consideration of the concrete; they are now able to contemplate the abstract elements which frame the social world and include power and politics, love, violence, cultural difference, values, ethics and morality. The fact that they can think in these new, more flexible ways, however, does not mean that they find it pleasurable. Encouraged, perhaps, by the individual/personal political perspective of much of their favourite television programming (and this includes news broadcasting although it's not considered a 'favourite'), these young people may well have found the early episodes of Heartbreak High just too demanding of their new cognitive skills - high modality may just be too much like (cognitive) hard work for teenagers.

Cognitive disequilibrium is less in evidence for the teenagers than it was for the younger participants partly, perhaps, because television has become such an everyday phenomenon for those adolescents who have grown up with it. A reading of the 'Bad Acting' response, however, may be an example of disequilibrium. As discussed above, part of the rejection of Heartbreak High may be accounted for by the foregrounding of Australia's cultural

Anecdotal evidence suggests that teenagers often consider questions that require abstract, 'higher order' thinking skills 'too hard', 'too much like school work'. Many adults do too, drawing a line between thinking and pleasure: 'I don't want to be made to think when I go to the cinema, I want to be entertained.'
difference in ways rarely experienced before. Clearly this is a sensitive and important area that requires further, explicitly focused, research.

The social interaction of the discussion group was not a feature of the data gathering for this part of the research, for reasons already outlined. It may well have been the case, however, that participants had discussed Heartbreak High independently. Certainly there was little reticence noticeable in the written responses and the respondents easily completed the survey within half an hour, suggesting that their views were already formed and spontaneously available. The lack of social interaction was compensated for by the sheer volume of responses. In these responses, it was reasonably clear that the participants were interacting (anonymously) with an unknown, adult stranger and were, in the process, constructing for themselves desired social identities. In many ways, the data collected here are very similar to those collected with the younger children in terms of the constructions of self that they afforded for analysis.

As each of the previous chapters has finished, more or less, with a quote from a participant, this chapter ought not to be an exception. The 15 year old Anglo-Australian boy who gave the quote that has been used as the title for this chapter captures something of the range of modality judgements available to this age group and it's worth repeating: 'They can't act. Jodie can't sing. No high schools wear casual.'
CONCLUSION

This thesis uses an eclectic, multi-disciplinary and cross-disciplinary approach to develop a way of answering questions relating to children and television. It acknowledges and draws upon the disciplines that have traditionally concerned themselves with such issues but it does not locate itself exclusively in any particular one - rather, it occupies the uneasy space between them. Some of that space is in the process of being mapped and claimed for, what is becoming known as, Critical Psychology. Here, scholars like Bruner and Haste (1987), Beilin (1987) and Harré and Gillett (1994) and new journals like Culture and Psychology, seek to go beyond the structuralism debate to effect a rapprochement between psychological and social approaches to questions of human knowing and understanding. This is where the present study most nearly fits. It seeks to be empirical but not empiricist; it tries to find ways of combining both individual and social perspectives to understand, more fully, children’s judgements about television modality. At the same time it pays close attention to television texts and to the ways in which multiple readings can be generated for a variety of social purposes. It does not, however, suggest that the readings offered here are the only ones to be drawn from the work. The use of the post-structuralist tool of discourse analysis sets this study apart from previous work in either the behaviourist or the cognitivist traditions.

The present study builds on and extends, but is also substantially different from, recent work in the area of children’s modality judgements (Hodge and Tripp 1986; Buckingham 1993a). First, this study is different in adopting an explicitly developmental framework and it produces new understandings about children’s modality judgements that may prove valuable in guiding parents, teachers and broadcasters. In addition, this study shows how a dialectic exists between theories of development and emerging schemes of modality, with each having the capacity to illuminate the other. In this way, this thesis expands theories of cognitive development in ways that previous work did not attempt.

Secondly, the present study uses a much wider age range of participants than either Hodge and Tripp (1986) or Buckingham (1993a). These earlier studies focussed on children in middle and late childhood (6/7 - 11/12 years of age) whereas the present study extends the participants’ age range to include both preschoolers and teenagers (3 - 17 year old). Indeed, the work presented in Chapters 2 and 5 represents the first time that preschoolers’

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43 I first became aware of this term when the chair of Critical Psychology was founded at the University of Western Sydney in 1996.
and teenagers’ judgements about television modality have been generated in a research situation and analysed in the interpretive way adopted by this study.

Thirdly, with a database of more than 123,000 words and the space of a whole thesis in which to explore it, this study is able to devote far greater attention to the detail of children’s responses than was possible in previous studies. In doing so, the present study is able to provide a far more systematic, comprehensive and textured description of the patterns that emerged in the participants’ judgements about television reality.

This thesis advances scholarly understanding in all five areas proposed in the abstract:

1. Modality judgements, issues and perceptions in relation to television programme content are significant elements in a complex, active and creative process of learning for children in the contemporary world.

Several writers, who have very successfully influenced popular opinion have claimed that children are passive absorbers of television content (see, for example, Mander 1978, Postman 1983, Winn 1985, Bennett 1994). This study supports previous work in refuting this claim (e.g. Palmer 1986) and demonstrates that television watching, even for the youngest children, can be a demanding, complex activity. From the analysis of the data here, making meaning from television and solving the modality dilemmas presented by its images, stories and representations are significant elements in an active and creative process of learning. Television watching, then, is not the passive, disengaged absorption so frequently claimed in popular writing on media.

It is of great concern that the old behaviourist construction of ‘the passive’ child viewer persists in the popular imagination, despite a considerable amount of academic research showing that children are in fact active viewers who think about what they are watching. Laying aside the possibility that the construction of the child as victim of television persists because it simultaneously serves to construct television as something to blame for the unpredictable and worrying effects of social/cultural change, it is true that there are very few books which both promote the construction of the active viewer and are accessible to a general readership. Only Maire Messenger-Davies’ provocatively titled Television is Good for Your Kids comes close to matching the accessibility of Marie Winn’s equally provocatively titled The Plug-In Drug, which is now in its second edition.

There is a clear need for academic researchers to disseminate their work to a wider audience than just their peers because research that simply contests the work of other
academics is not an effective way of changing public attitudes. Scholars need to bring into sharp focus those issues and themes that will serve to challenge the prevailing orthodoxies in popular opinion. Many, particularly in the Cultural Studies tradition, act as though there has been definitive disproof of rival research traditions. They take for granted, for example, that the behaviourist tradition has collapsed, but this is far from the truth. Ideas like Winn's are alive and well and still occupy the main ground. In lobby groups' pronouncements, in the press, on radio and television, on the Internet and in general discussion, 'it's common sense' that television is a powerful, negative force in the lives of children. In this thesis, a substantial corpus of work in the rival traditions has been assembled and critiqued and, thus, provides ammunition for the assault on public opinion in a way that work in the Cultural Studies tradition has rarely done.

This thesis did not set out to clear up the question of television 'effects', but it does provide the basis for making a significant contribution to this very important debate. The analysis of the data identifies at least two possible determinants of these effects - cognitive strategies and other social determinants of belief. For the children in this study, the cognitive strategy of making a modality judgement is an important one in making sense of television's representations. Generally speaking, these strategies involve referring back to either 'real life' experience or a model of 'real life' the participants believe is possible or plausible. While there is no necessary connection between judging something to be real and subsequent behaviour, attitudes and beliefs, it is plausible that children will act, think and believe in ways that coincide with representations they consider 'realistic'. The source of such an effect, then, is the 'real life' experience to which the television representation reflexively arcs back.

There is, however, another important class of determinants that is crucial to an overall account of the 'effects' of television - children's affective responses. With the exception of Buckingham (1995), little research exists in relation to children's experiences of fantasy, although it is clear that children can be affected emotionally by fantasy representations (see Laidler 1995). If, as Jajonc (1980) has suggested, affective judgements are in fact pre-cognitive and that affect and cognition are under the control of

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44 At present, browsing the Web for material posted under headings like Children and Television yields plenty of 'moral panic' material and little that suggests that children deal with television in much the same way that they deal with life's other demands - they think about it, puzzle over it, try to make sense of it and the category of modality is important in this exercise.

45 Fantasy representations are no proof against emotional effects. At the age of 8, I was taken out of the cinema in floods of tears after Bambi's mother was killed by the hunter. Later, as an adult, I watched as parents had to remove their sobbing 4 and 5 year olds from the animated Alice in Wonderland. Children who turned into pigs, animals that disappeared leaving bits of their anatomy floating in the air seemed too fantastic to be tolerable for many young children.
separate and partially independent systems that can influence each other in a variety of ways, then the importance of pursuing the question of children's affective judgements in relation to television 'effects' becomes an even more important area for further research.

2. Children's modality judgements and processes of understanding are significantly different from those of adults in important respects. They progress through a sequence of age-related changes, which, in their increasing complexity and abstraction, broadly correspond to the descriptions of cognitive development identified in the Piagetian tradition of cognitive developmental psychology.

The social provenance of objects of knowledge and ways of knowing is now fairly generally accepted. We teach children what and how to know through 'more competent other'-child talk, games and activities, direct instruction, modelling and so on and in these ways the culture passes on, amongst other things, its 'regimes of truth' about social reality. Insofar as children apply these ways of knowing to television's representations, this study has identified a loose heuristic model of progressive development which proceeds through identifiable, age-related phases. As children grow and develop, their modality judgements become more complex and sophisticated; they progress from simple modality dilemmas at the youngest ages through to quite sophisticated judgements about the status of television's representations of social reality in their teenage years. These judgements are best understood in terms of progression along two crucial dimensions, one of which concerns a developing awareness that television is a constructed medium while the other concerns the increasingly sophisticated relationship perceived between television representations and 'real life'. Both these dimensions are substantially dependent on specific social contexts and forms of learning and thus must be seen as social acts as well as products of interior, private cognitive activity.

When judging the modality of television's representations, the gaze of the children in the present study appears to move outwards, like ripples in a pond, from considerations of what is real in simple, personal and concrete terms to complex, nuanced, abstract judgements about the reality of the social world in which they live. Thus, the preschoolers were concerned about what was 'like me'; they concentrated on identifying human and animal attributes in television characters and egregiously different ones (like Bananas in Pyjamas) provided a focus for modality puzzles. The 5-7 year olds' chief strategy relied on matching their experience of real, concrete things and people in their immediate social world with their representations on television; these
judgements were unidimensional - if something was possible in the real world then this was sufficient to judge it real. The two ends of the modality continuum (cartoons and news broadcasts) were identified by children this age but recognition of the dual status of some representations as both real and fictional was rarely apparent. The 8-10 year olds, however, were capable of thinking about more than one dimension at a time and thus could contemplate representations being 'realistic' - that is, representations could be simultaneously real and fictional. Like the younger children, they focussed on concrete aspects of their social world but their consideration had now moved to more complex things, such as relationships of all kinds. The modality continuum was calibrated with different types of programme judged to have varying degrees of 'realistic-ness' according to complex sets of criteria. The one area of difficulty remaining appeared to be where certain programmes were perceived to be so realistic, so convincingly authentic, that, otherwise stable, modality criteria broke down - perception overrode logic and led to 'mixed modality' judgements for such live action dramas as Children's Ward and The Bill. These difficulties disappeared with the teenagers. Here, technical understanding of television's ability to produce illusions was well developed and automatic. Indeed, these young people had become so accustomed to seeing television drama as 'acting' that they tended to use actors' names interchangeably with characters' names. Interest in social relationships persisted but the framework within which they could be considered was now wider, more complex and abstract with modality judgements often having moral, political, and ethical dimensions.

While classic developmental theory concentrated on how children learnt to make sense of such scientific-mathematical matters as space, volume, mass, number and time\textsuperscript{46}, here, it is clear similar patterns of thinking are evident when questions of social reality are being considered. As Damon demonstrated in relation to the development of children's friendships (Damon 1977) and Kohlberg with the development of moral judgement (Kohlberg 1976), this study suggests that the child's cognitive awareness of the reality of the social world expands in fairly predictable ways. This is useful information for those who are concerned about children and television in areas such as Education and Broadcasting.

As far as Education is concerned, this study does two important things: first, it provides guidelines for the development of Media Studies curricula showing the types of media-related concepts most likely to be effective at different ages and, secondly, it makes a strong case for the inclusion of Media Studies in the primary school curriculum. In the

\textsuperscript{46} Indeed this theory has been criticised by some (e.g. Gardner 1983) for being too much concerned with logico-mathematical matters and insufficiently interested in other forms of knowing.
crowded timetable of the primary school it is hard to argue for the inclusion of yet another ‘essential’ subject, but this study suggests that television has value for children other than as entertainment or a popular pastime. If the participants in this study are any guide, primary school-aged children pay close attention to their favourite television programmes and these have the capacity to stimulate even the very young into thinking about such philosophical issues as the nature of social reality and questions of representation. In the media studies classroom this spontaneous intellectual activity can be supported and extended in the true sense of ‘scaffolding’. Collaborative discussion about television/reality schema can be encouraged and facilitated; important ‘technical’ information (e.g. how cartoons are made) can be introduced; issues can be raised and children can be allowed to explore them in ways that both acknowledge their pleasure and extend their understanding.

In the case of Broadcasting, this thesis provides useful insights for those involved in creating programmes specifically for children. In identifying what children focus on when they are watching television, the kinds of things that intrigue them and the ways they go about making sense of what they see, this thesis has the capacity to help programme makers in the difficult task of developing material that effectively combines useful learning and entertainment; that engages the attention of young viewers and encourages their intellectual curiosity.

3. A further significant developmentally-related phenomenon that emerges from the data is the importance of moments of rupture in developing modality schemata and strategies.

This thesis draws on Piaget’s general account of development but presents a significant difference in emphasis. As discussed in Chapter 1, while classic developmental theory has been attacked on a number of fronts, the model of learning and development it proposed is still widely accepted as viable (e.g. Papert cited in Piaget 1986: xi; Meadows 1993: 198). In this model, sense is made of new experiences by either assimilating them into old cognitive schema or accommodating them into modified or new ones. When a new experience cannot be assimilated into a previously established scheme, the result is disequilibrium or cognitive confusion. Where the present study moves beyond this classic model is in its identification of the significance of these moments of rupture (or disequilibrium).

Analysis of the data identifies episodes where the participants find the ways they have routinely used to make sense of the world on television, no longer adequate. These moments of rupture may be characterised initially by expressions of discomfort or
embarrassment but there is also evidence of a strong desire to solve the problem, to regain cognitive control and restore balance. While, in Piagetian theory, disequilibrium has been seen as an anomalous state, of interest only insofar as it preceded some new milestone of accommodation, this thesis suggests that it is, in fact, of much greater significance; it is a liminal state characterised by active, experimental, serious thought where children strive to make sense of experience and develop new, more viable cognitive schemes for making sense of the world.

The Vygotskian concept of 'zones of proximal development' better accounts for the sense of creativity and originality which is often apparent in the moments of rupture that occur during the group discussions about television modality. Here the children pool their knowledge, test and challenge each other's theories, brainstorm and negotiate their ways out of difficulty. For parents and teachers, these 'zones of proximal development', signalled by cognitive disequilibrium, present 'teachable moments' in which the advancement of children's television modality schemes will have significance beyond their understanding about television alone.

This thesis indicates some key modality concepts that appear to cause disequilibrium for children at different ages. Parents, teachers, curriculum developers and programme makers can usefully exploit these insights in order to provide the intellectual 'scaffolding' which will help children develop satisfying and useful new modality schema.

A further insight gained from the model of cognitive activity presented in this thesis concerns the modality 'errors' that children frequently make in relation to television. When young viewers make modality 'errors' they often confirm adults' worst fears about the corrupting, anti-intellectual effects of popular television. Adults might well be alarmed to hear preschoolers claiming that Big Bird is real; 5-7 year olds discussing Homer and Bart Simpson as though they were real people dressed in costumes; 8-10 year olds asserting that the actors playing police officers in The Bill are police officers in real life. Such judgements might well be interpreted as showing that television has indeed misled children about the nature of social reality. What this thesis suggests, however, is that there is another possible reading of the data - these 'errors' might better be seen as signs of ongoing, underlying intellectual activity. Children are attempting to assimilate television experiences into existing concepts and sometimes they over-assimilate them in an attempt to stave off disequilibrium. Given this interpretation, four year old Tim was over-assimilating Big Bird into a 'real TV character scheme' on the basis of his moving mouth; Sean, Blair, Seth and Con were over-assimilating The Simpsons cartoon characters into a 'people dressed up scheme'.
because they did not yet properly understand how cartoons were made; similarly, 6 year old Belinda invented a zip on Daffy Duck's back so he too could be assimilated into a 'people dressed up' scheme; the 8-10 year olds were over-assimilating the police officers in The Bill into a 'real police officer' scheme because their scheme for 'fictional characters in television realism' was still too unstable to deal with their perceptions of The Bill's authenticity.

The advantage of over-assimilation is that it is likely to be temporary. Sooner or later these over-large, unwieldy schemes will prove dysfunctional and disequilibrium will be unavoidable. Then, as this study has shown, children must think their way towards accommodation and cognitive equilibrium once again.

4. Children's programme preferences, as refracted through modality structures and strategies typical of different ages, reflect a coherent learning context in which children tackle modality experiences, problems and dilemmas that are well suited to their needs at that point in their development.

This thesis refutes claims that children are uninterested in or incapable of making effective modality judgements (a claim often made by those who see the child as a victim of television). The data clearly show that learning to distinguish between what is real and what is not is a major preoccupation of children and teenagers and one that television serves well. Even among the teenage participants, responses were strongly oriented towards modality issues despite the fact that they had not been asked directly to focus on such things.

In its continuing focus on what people see as well as how they see it, this thesis suggests that a reciprocal relationship exists between television modality and social reality issues of importance to children and teenagers. The programmes the young people prefer at different ages, the ones they generally choose to watch (according to research and ratings data) reflect a coherent learning context in which children tackle modality experiences, problems and dilemmas that are well-suited to their needs at that point in their development. One must assume that the insights young people gain from working on television's modality dilemmas reflexively feed back into 'real life' experience, which then helps advance them towards the next phase of television modality judgements.

In their discussions about the modality of television programmes, the participants' attention moved outwards and settled, for the preschoolers, on themselves and human and animal attributes. Then for the 5-7 year olds, the focus was principally on things in
their immediate social environment. The 8 - 10 year olds focussed on social relationships and the lives of people with clearly defined social roles - police officers, life-savers, hospital workers. Teenagers maintained this interest in social relationships but were also aware of and interested in the ways the society in which they live regulates and manages its members.

Certainly, the programmes which are most popular with these different age groups, according to ratings and other data, readily permit the exploration of these issues. Preschool programmes often feature a rich mix of various-sized humans, animals, costume characters and puppets, animation and live action which all help to delineate the differences between what is human ('I like me') and what is not. Cartoons with all their egregious lack of 'reality' are favoured by the 5 - 7 year olds, possibly because they help to establish a modality base-line from which to work. The 'junior soaps' and family shows that the 8 - 10 year olds prefer to watch reflect these children's growing awareness of a world of complex social relationships between family members, between peers, between members of opposite sexes. For the teenagers, the 'senior soaps', family shows and action adventures featuring glamorous twenty-somethings with exciting jobs reflect their interests in romantic relationships and adult life.

Television, as a multi-layered social text, is just as efficient a communicator of the culture's 'regimes of truth' as individual 'more-competent-others' in a young person's life. It seems likely that television programmes become favourites because they reflect opportunities to explore modality issues that are accessible to children at specific times in their development. This may, of course, lead to children appropriating programmes that they find particularly useful in this regard. Cartoons and soap operas, such as Neighbours and Home and Away, are good examples. These programmes were originally intended for adults (service-men in the case of cartoons) or family viewing, but they are now considered children's programmes and are scheduled accordingly. The appropriation of these programmes by children suggests that in their grazing through television fare, they found that these two types of programme met their (modality?) needs very effectively.

Money for the development of children's television programmes has never been lavish and in the present straitened times is becoming extremely hard to get (particularly for public broadcasting). The task of making programmes and writing scripts that will appeal to a young audiences is therefore more crucial than ever before. For this reason, the reciprocal relationship between modality issues and programme popularity, suggested by this thesis, needs to be explored further.
5. Children's talk about issues of modality is also a species of social action, in and through which children position and reposition themselves in a variety of social contexts, constructing not only maps and versions of the world but versions of their selves and tactics to maintain their specific interests.

Finally, it is clear from analysis of the respondents' discourse that talk about modality - specifically, making claims about how real or unreal television programmes are - is a form of social action; it enables young viewers to position and re-position themselves in the complex web of power relations that constitute their social worlds. Irrespective of age, respondents used talk about television's reality to construct maps and versions of the world, versions of themselves and tactics to protect and maintain their specific interests. Throughout the problem-solving exercise that the research task presented, the 3 - 10 year olds could be seen collaborating, sharing knowledge, constructing bonds through shared versions of social reality and in some notable instances, engineering some remarkable examples of good-humoured solidarity. The 13 - 17 year olds also used their written responses to construct personal identities and versions of the world.

The older children get, the more they seem to realise the potential of the modality discourse to carve out for themselves a social identity. Even the very young, however, are aware of how to use this discourse in their presentations of self - at 4, Willy and Barbara use it to be 'big'; Carl uses it to be more 'mature' than his sister; Kerry, Nancy and Sally use it to create bonds of solidarity with each other against the researcher. The 5 - 7 year old children negotiate their social world and position themselves in various ways through aligning themselves with people or ideas they admire and value or by constructing themselves as superior to others. Thus, alignment with parents' views is one strategy that the children use in order to achieve a sense of strength and solidarity. In terms of gender, girls and boys are seen adopting traditional, culturally-approved constructions and once again, the age discourse is also very useful for presenting oneself as superior and more sophisticated than those who have the misfortune to be younger.

The older 8 - 10 year old children could also be seen positioning themselves in terms of both age and traditional, culturally-approved gendered responses. Here they used talk about modality to present themselves as superior to those who were younger, less wise and experienced; their responses were often framed by culturally-accepted, gendered ways of seeing the world. Obvious signs of difference (e.g. ethnic affiliation, sex) were also used to separate, divide and marginalise. The greater range of social selves constructed by the teenage participants reflect their growing awareness of the political, social and moral dynamics of the culture. The young people here, writing for an unknown
adult, adopted a number of social positions - responsible, sexual, gendered, nationalist and in this they reflect television values even as they are constituted by them. These more sophisticated constructions, serve much the same purpose as the ones the younger children constructed for themselves - they provide status, they express solidarity with some and marginalise and discriminate against others.

Such a reading of the data serves to show the difficulties inherent in empirical research of this kind; the dangers of reading off ‘what children really think’ from what they say; the importance of seeing talk about television as a social act.

This thesis has offered a negotiated path between traditional positions that have either seen human knowing and understanding as driven by internal, innate, gradually unfolding systems or those that see such understanding as being entirely determined from without, by the social/cultural environments in which people are located. This thesis has begun a synthesis of elements of both positions by suggesting that as children grow older, a gradual, unfolding sequence of changes occurs in the way they judge the modality of television. These understandings, however, are determined and communicated in various ways by the child’s culture. Children of different ages in this study take up ways of knowing in relation to television modality that build on each other and become increasingly wide-ranging and sophisticated. The patterns that emerged from the participants’ responses suggest that this loose sequence of changes may be a general phenomenon and, as such, it provides valuable guidelines for parents, teachers and broadcasters who are concerned about television in the lives of children.

In this thesis, not only do we see the confident meshing of ‘real life’ experience and predominant cognitive schemes to produce new, broader, more complex versions of social reality in each succeeding age group, but we also get to see the cutting edge of modality - those places where the system breaks down and delivers partial, ‘incorrect’ or inadequate judgements. Here are revealed the outer limits of familiar social reality - the fuzzy edges, the shadowy areas, the bits of the map beyond the known world - and just briefly we are allowed to see what life looks like through the eyes of children.
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269


APPENDIX 1

TELEVISION PROGRAMMES USED IN THE STUDY
### 3 - 4 Year Olds

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Preschool Programmes</th>
<th>Cartoons</th>
<th>General Viewing</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sesame Street</td>
<td>The Simpsons</td>
<td>News</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Play School</td>
<td>The Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Mulligurs</td>
<td>The Bugs Bunny Show</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Book Place</td>
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<td>Bananas in Pyjamas</td>
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### 5 - 7 Year Olds

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<th>Preschool Programmes</th>
<th>Cartoons</th>
<th>Children's Drama</th>
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<td>Big Square Eye</td>
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<td>Wonderworld</td>
<td>Play School</td>
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<td>Pugwall</td>
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<tr>
<td>Couch Potato</td>
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<td>Captain Planet</td>
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<td>The Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles</td>
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<th>Game/Quiz Shows</th>
<th>Soap Operas</th>
<th>Teen Series</th>
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<tr>
<td>The Cosby Show</td>
<td>Vidiot</td>
<td>Neighbours</td>
<td>Beverly Hills 90210</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hey Dad!</td>
<td>Now You See It</td>
<td>Home and Away</td>
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<tr>
<td>Family Matters</td>
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<td>E Street</td>
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### General Viewing

- News
- Burke’s Back Yard
- Australia’s Funniest
- Home Video Show

### 8 - 10 Year Olds

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<td>Transformers</td>
<td>Double Dare (A)</td>
<td>Home and Away</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dennis</td>
<td>Now You See It (A)</td>
<td>Neighbours</td>
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<td></td>
<td>He-Man</td>
<td>Vidiot (A)</td>
<td>EastEnders (E)</td>
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<td>Look Who’s Talking (A)</td>
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<td>All Together Now (A)</td>
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<td>Bread (E)</td>
<td>Flying Doctors (A)</td>
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(A) Programmes used only in Australia  (E) Programmes used only in England
APPENDIX 2

EXAMPLE OF NUD•1ST CODING
NUDIST STAND-ALONE v.2.3.1c FOR MACINTOSH

Program & manual copyright of, and 'NUDIST' trade mark of
Reepie P/L, Eltham, Victoria, Australia, 1985-92.
All enquiries to NUDIST Project,
Applied Computing Research Institute,
La Trobe University, Bundoora, Victoria 3083, Australia.
Phone 479-1311, Fax 470-4915
STD prefix (03), International prefix +61-3

LICENSEE: HOWARD-JENITT

This file created on 1993 Sep 8, 12:01:34.

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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Programs/Game Show/Children's/Now You See It</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Programs/Magazine/Children's</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Programs/Magazine/Children's/Big Square Eye</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Programs/Magazine/Children's/Couch Potato</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Programs/Magazine/Children's/Blue Peter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Programs/Magazine/Adult</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Programs/Magazine/Adult/Burke's Backyard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Programs/Magazine/Adult/Aust Funniest Home Video Show</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Programs/Preschool</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Programs/Preschool/Playschool</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Programs/Preschool/Sesame Street</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Programs/Preschool/Sooty Show</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Programs/Sit Coms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Programs/Sit Coms/Cosby Show</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Programs/Sit Coms/Hey Dad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Programs/Sit Coms/All Together Now</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Programs/Sit Coms/Family Matters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Programs/Sit Coms/Only Pools and Horses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Programs/Sit Coms/Kate and Allie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Programs/Sit Coms/Roseanne</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Programs/Sit Coms/Bread</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Programs/News</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Programs/Drama</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Programs/Drama/Childrens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Programs/Drama/Childrens/Pugwall</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Programs/Drama/Childrens/Skippy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Programs/Drama/Childrens/Beverly Hills 90210</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Programs/Drama/Childrens/Knightmare</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Programs/Drama/Childrens/Land of the Giants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Programs/Drama/Childrens/Baywatch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Programs/Drama/Childrens/Bad Boys</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Programs/Drama/Childrens/Press Gang</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Programs/Drama/Childrens/Children's Ward</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Programs/Drama/Childrens/Grange Hill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Programs/Drama/Adult</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Programs/Drama/Adult/Flying Doctors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Programs/Drama/Adult/The Bill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>R.J.'s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>R.J.'s/Type of Programme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>R.J.'s/Type of Programme/Non-realistic fiction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>R.J.'s/Type of Programme/Realistic fiction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>R.J.'s/Type of Programme/Non-fiction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>R.J.'s/Type of Programme/Mixture fiction-non fiction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>R.J.'s/About People</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>R.J.'s/About People/Real people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>R.J.'s/About People/Real people/in non-fiction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>R.J.'s/About People/Real people/in Fiction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>R.J.'s/About People/Real people/in fiction-nonfiction mix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>R.J.'s/About People/Dressed up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>R.J.'s/About People/Not real</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>R.J.'s/About People/Not real/Colour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>R.J.'s/About People/Not real/Exaggeration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>R.J.'s/About People/Not real/Just a character (pretend)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
(3 2 3 4) /R.J.'s/About People/Not real/Puppet (Toy)
(3 2 3 5) /R.J.'s/About People/Not real/Magic powers
(3 2 3 6) /R.J.'s/About People/Not real/Don't look/sound real
(3 3) /R.J.'s/How its done
(3 3 1) /R.J.'s/How its done/(Not) Drawn
(3 3 3) /R.J.'s/How its done/FX
(3 3 4) /R.J.'s/How its done/Studio set v real location
(3 3 5) /R.J.'s/How its done/Just made up
(3 3 7) /R.J.'s/How its done/Looks (un) real
(3 4) /R.J.'s/About things
(3 4 1) /R.J.'s/About things/Real things
(3 4 2) /R.J.'s/About things/Inappropriate
(3 4 3) /R.J.'s/About things/Not real
(3 4 4) /R.J.'s/About things/Implausible
(3 5) /R.J.'s/Links to real life
(3 5 1) /R.J.'s/Links to real life/Own life experience
(3 5 2) /R.J.'s/Links to real life/Plausible
(3 5 3) /R.J.'s/Links to real life/Implausible
(3 5 4) /R.J.'s/Links to real life/Tells you things
(3 6) /R.J.'s/About locations
(3 6 1) /R.J.'s/About locations/Real places
(3 6 2) /R.J.'s/About locations/Not real
(3 7) /R.J.'s/Because I (don't) like it
(3 8) /R.J.'s/About Animals
(3 8 1) /R.J.'s/About Animals/Real
(3 8 2) /R.J.'s/About Animals/Not real
(3 8 3) /R.J.'s/About Animals/Implausible
(3 9) /R.J.'s/Different interpretations of '(un)real'
(3 10) /R.J.'s/Confusions
(3 10 1) /R.J.'s/Confusions/Effects in unreal & real shows
(3 10 2) /R.J.'s/Confusions/Real life v realism
(3 10 3) /R.J.'s/Confusions/Characters
(3 11) /R.J.'s/About themes
(3 11 1) /R.J.'s/About themes/Desirable
(3 11 2) /R.J.'s/About themes/Bad
(3 11 3) /R.J.'s/About themes/Comedy reduces modality
(4) /I'p I'actions
(4 1) /I'p I'actions/male male
(4 2) /I'p I'actions/male female
(4 2 1) /I'p I'actions/male female/female defers to male
(4 3) /I'p I'actions/female female
(4 4) /I'p I'actions/older younger
(4 4 1) /I'p I'actions/older younger/younger defers to older
(4 5) /I'p I'actions/same age
(4 6) /I'p I'actions/Change of mind
(4 7) /I'p I'actions/Having me on
(4 8) /I'p I'actions/Judgement affected by r'ship?
(5) /Knowledge about production process
(5 1) /Knowledge about production process/Terminology
(5 2) /Knowledge about production process/Cartoons
(5 3) /Knowledge about production process/Special effects
(5 4) /Knowledge about production process/recognition of genres
(5 5) /Knowledge about production process/Acting v not acting
(5 6) /Knowledge about production process/Representation
(5 7) /Knowledge about production process/Technical
(5 8) /Knowledge about production process/Narrative devices
(6) /Too Hard Basket
(7) /References to violence
(8) /Affective responses
(8 1) /Affective responses/Enjoyment of story
(8 2) /Affective responses/Dislike
(8 3) /Affective responses/It's funny
(8 4) /Affective responses/It's scary
(9)  /Cognitive considerations
(9 1) /Cognitive considerations/Drawings too abstract
(10) /Intense scrutiny
AN INVESTIGATION INTO CHILDREN'S PERCEPTIONS OF THE REALITY OF TELEVISION

by


A thesis submitted for the award of Doctor of Philosophy in The University of Western Sydney (Hawkesbury)

February 1997
PLEASE NOTE

The greatest amount of care has been taken while scanning this thesis,

and the best possible result has been obtained.
I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or a diploma in any University and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by any other person except where due reference is made in the text.

Susan Howard
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Writing a PhD thesis is a solitary, lonely business, particularly if you happen to be doing it in what is called the ‘Distance Mode’, however, it is a task that cannot be accomplished without the support and assistance of a good many people.

I could not have been more fortunate in having Bob Hodge as a mentor, guide and supervisor. It was work that he did with David Tripp that first made me interested in the field of children and television and it was his encouraging comments about a preliminary study that I had done that persuaded me to embark on a doctorate under his supervision. Bob’s impressive scholarship stands for all to see in his published work and he brings those same scholarly high standards to his role as supervisor. He has the wisdom to let you run with ideas, so that you feel the thesis is truly your own and he has the scholarly art of expertly guiding without taking over. On several occasions, as my ideas settled into comfortable ruts, well-worn by others, Bob would jolt me out of them, point me in the direction of the trackless wilderness and tell me to find my own path through that! He has been demanding and critical but always sensitive and kind. The greatest compliment I can pay him is to say that he is a creative and original thinker and I owe him a great debt of gratitude.

Writing a thesis takes a large amount of time, free of life’s normal constraints and obligations, and I have been extremely well supported in this regard, The University of South Australia generously awarded me a Cathie Scholarship, which together with Study Leave, gave me leave for a year in which to write. I am especially grateful to my colleagues, Tony Whittington and Joan Cunningham who, in taking on unlovely and unlooked-for extra work and responsibilities, made it possible for me to take this leave. Other colleagues in the Library at Underdale helped me in measureless ways and were always able to find the most obscure references.

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field of children and television, have, as will be seen in this thesis, informed my own thinking on the subject in many profound ways.

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When writing and thinking about social reality it is very easy to lose your personal grip on it, however, I have been blessed with friends who have made sure that I have been kept in touch with the real world throughout my retreat from it. Special thanks go to Dr. Judith Kapferer who had the good sense to build a wonderful house in the mountains and the great generosity to allow me to spend large periods of time there in comfortable seclusion. Her frequent despatches from 'out there' were always valuable. Fellow toiler, Gerry Bloustien has been a marvellous friend, always encouraging and always willing to discuss a point or listen to an argument. Dr. Jon Watts, having recently been through the whole process himself, saved me from many a Slough of Despond with much appreciated e-mailed humour and good advice. It is to Dr. Judith Gill, however, that I owe the greatest debt, particularly in the last few months. As a friend and colleague, she has generously spent time reading and commenting on drafts, supporting and encouraging me in ways that were more valuable than I can say. I admire her scholarship and tact and know that the only real way in which I can repay her efforts is to do the same thing for someone else.

Putting one's own life on hold to do something like write a thesis regrettably means those around you have to do so too. I will never be able to repay the loving, generous, good-hearted, patient support so abundantly given by my husband, Drummond Jewitt. Nor will I be able to replace his lost time. But I will try. If one can dedicate a thesis, this one is for him.
Substantial parts of this thesis have already been published:

Material from Chapters 2, 3 and 4 will be published as:

Material in Chapter 2 has been published as:

Material from Chapter 3 has been published as:

Material from Chapter 4 has been published as:
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Declaration

Acknowledgments

List of Tables

Abstract

## CHAPTER 1: HOW REAL IS TELEVISION?

1. Introduction

2. The Importance of 'Perceived Reality' Concepts in Public Debate and Academic Research

3. The Significance of Modality

4. The Theoretical Traditions

   - Behaviourist/Social Learning Theory Research and 'Passive' Viewers

   - Cognitive Developmental Psychology and the 'Active' Viewer

   - Cultural Studies, Television Texts and the Subject

5. Research Methods and Approaches

6. This Thesis

## CHAPTER 2: 'BANANAS CAN'T TALK': THE MODALITY JUDGEMENTS OF THREE AND FOUR YEAR OLD CHILDREN.

7. The Present Study

   - Cognitive Judgements

   - Modality Issues and Children's Programme Preferences

   - Modality Judgements as Social Acts

## CHAPTER 3: 'REAL BUNNIES DON'T STAND ON TWO LEGS': THE MODALITY JUDGEMENTS OF FIVE, SIX AND SEVEN YEAR OLD CHILDREN

9. The Present Study

   - Cognitive Judgements

   - Modality Issues and Children's Programme Preferences

   - Modality Judgements as Social Acts
LIST OF TABLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE</th>
<th>PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age and Sex of Participants</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary of research findings for 2 - 4 year old children</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary of research findings for 5 - 7 year old children</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary of research findings for 8 - 10 year old children</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary of research findings for older children (11 - 12 years) and teenagers</td>
<td>196</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 1: Age Groups of Participants</td>
<td>203</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 2: Participants' Countries of Origin</td>
<td>203</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 3: Number of Participants Making Critical Remarks About Acting, According To Sex, Age, Ethnic Affiliation And Social Class</td>
<td>207</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 4: Number of Participants Referring To Modality Issues According To Sex, Age, Ethnic Affiliation And Social Class</td>
<td>210</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 5: Number of Participants Making 'Realistic', 'Unrealistic' and 'Mixed' Modality Judgements by Sex, Age, Ethnic Affiliation and Social Class</td>
<td>211</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 6: Number of Participants Making Modality Responses, Positive and Negative Modality Judgements for the Most Commonly Commented Upon Topics</td>
<td>212</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 7: Number of Participants Making Positive and Negative Modality Responses about School Violence by Sex, Age, Ethnic Affiliation and Social Class</td>
<td>213</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 8: Number of Participants Making Positive and Negative Modality Responses about Boy-Girl Relationships by Sex, Age, Ethnic Affiliation and Social Class</td>
<td>215</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 9: Number of Participants Making Positive and Negative Modality Responses about Family Relationships by Sex, Age, Ethnic Affiliation and Social Class</td>
<td>219</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 10: Number of Participants Making Negative and Positive Modality Responses by Sex, Age, Ethnic Affiliation and Social Class</td>
<td>221</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 11: Number of Participants Making Positive and Negative Modality Responses about Racism in School by Sex, Age, Ethnic Affiliation and Social Class

Table 12: Number of Participants Making Negative and Positive Modality Responses about Ethnicity by Sex, Age, Ethnic Affiliation and Social Class
ABSTRACT

There is an increasing recognition of the importance of issues concerning modality (perceptions of reality) in relation to the media, both in academic research and in public debates about television's alleged effects; this is especially the case in relation children who are often seen as a particularly vulnerable category of viewer. Despite a considerable amount of research over several decades, however, there is no consensual understanding either about the kinds of judgements children make concerning television reality issues or about the ways these judgements develop over time. Indeed, there is an unrecognised and unresolved discrepancy between the assumptions and conclusions of all three major research traditions that have addressed aspects of this theme: behaviourist psychology, cognitive developmental psychology and cultural studies. This thesis attempts to adjudicate and mediate between these competing approaches, by establishing a multi-disciplinary empirical basis for generalisations on this subject, capable of further elaboration, contextualisation and policy proposals.

This thesis occupies an uneasy space: not within or even at the leading edge of any one tradition, but in the anomalous and almost unoccupied space in which the three traditions fail to connect. In keeping with this standpoint, it employs a range of approaches from a cross-paradigm perspective. It draws the main hypotheses that it tests from the cognitive developmental paradigm and develops its main methodological tools from methods of discourse analysis, supplemented by a variety of other instruments, quantitative as well as qualitative.

This thesis makes five main claims:

(1) Modality judgements, issues and perceptions in relation to television programme content are significant elements in a complex, active and creative process of learning for children in the contemporary world. It is a process that is active and important over a long period of children's lives - a period during which they undergo formation as adult citizens and 'mature' audience members.

(2) Children's modality judgements and processes of understanding are significantly different from those of adults in important respects. They progress through a sequence of age-related changes, which, in their increasing complexity and abstraction, broadly correspond to the descriptions of cognitive development identified in the Piagetian tradition of cognitive developmental psychology. The two main dimensions along which this development unfolds in practice, however, are both substantially dependent on specific social contexts and forms of
learning. Internal aspects of modality are built up from a developing knowledge of the nature of the medium itself. External aspects of modality derive from evolving (and highly conditioned) maps of how the world is which are then used to judge how real television reality is - this is the precondition for whatever learning takes place from television. The development of modality systems is a social act, always open to social determinations, while remaining located in an inaccessible inner space of the minds of children.

(3) A further significant developmentally-related phenomenon that emerges from the data is the importance of moments of rupture in developing modality schema and strategies. The Piagetian model of learning and development envisages a typical sequence in which schema move through stages of disequilibrium to new states of accommodation and assimilation, but in this model the moments of disequilibrium represent an anomalous state, only of interest insofar as it signals the imminent appearance of a new more functional cognitive scheme. The Vygotskian notion of the 'zone of proximal development' better captures the sense emerging in this thesis of the creativity and originality which often characterise these moments of rupture, where children become active and sometimes unpredictable agents of their own development.

(4) Children's programme preferences, as refracted through modality structures and strategies typical of different ages, reflect a coherent learning context in which children tackle modality experiences, problems and dilemmas that are well suited to their needs at that point in their development.

(5) Children's talk about issues of modality is also a species of social action, in and through which children position and reposition themselves in a variety of social contexts, constructing not only maps and versions of the world but versions of their selves and tactics to maintain their specific interests.

This thesis assembles a substantial corpus of children's talk about modality comprising over 123,000 words from over 200 young people whose ages range from 3 to 17. It organises and analyses this talk in relation to some of the key issues to do with children's perceptions of the reality of and behind television, situated against a background of the range of academic traditions that have addressed this topic. Many of its generalisations are still tentative, in need of further development. Some of them, however, are more solidly grounded and would be able to contribute to current debates in education and public life on the role and functions of television in the lives of children.