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Reception of American Television in Canada and the Netherlands:

Meaning Making and National Culture

by

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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies for acceptance, a thesis entitled "Reception of American Television in Canada and the Netherlands: Meaning Making and National Culture" submitted by Lori Yanish in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.



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Abstract

This study brings a model which defines culture as processes of constructing meaning to the discussion surrounding the relationship between Canadian culture and American cultural products. Cultural processes and structures used in receiving television that are specific to Canada are identified through a comparison with those used by viewers in the Netherlands. An episode of the American situation comedy, *Seinfeld*, was shown to focus groups in both countries. The program was discussed in the group sessions and the discursive structures used by each of the national groups to frame their talk about television are compared. The Canadian and Dutch participants in general constructed different readings of the program. The differences in the strategies that each of the groups used to negotiate those readings are detailed.

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CHAPTER ONE:

INTRODUCTION

This study explores the way that an American television program is made meaningful by viewers in Canada and the Netherlands.

The study of reception is the study of culture. Culture here is considered to be socially constructed and shared processes of making meaning and will be studied here specifically as the processes of receiving a television text and making it meaningful. In comparing the frames of reference that two sets of national viewers bring to bear on making television meaningful, the structures specific to each of the nations can be more clearly seen. Empirical evidence that illustrates that viewers in two nations receive a television text differently supports two notions. The first is that television texts do not necessarily contain an inherent meaning. The second is that, if television texts are made meaningful through the use of specific nationally shared frames, then a national culture is articulated through the activity of watching television.

Although research in the field of reception analysis has, for the last decade or more, demonstrated that the meaning of media texts is negotiated by viewers, the idea that these texts can somehow directly affect or change the cultures of receiving audiences has not been entirely abandoned (Sepstrup, 1989). Media imperialism is particularly

United States. Its logic follows that the exporting nations can impose their culture, values and ideologies on the viewers in the receiving countries through their media products. Much of the work in that field is concerned with measuring the amount of media products which flow between nations, and has attempted to document the cultural damage that imported media products might cause. In these types of studies, culture is conceptualized as a static set of values and attributes (Schlesinger, 1991). The stability or loss of these attributes is measured and used as a yardstick of culture. However, cultures do change over time, a fact that should not be ignored in theory or methodology. It is possible to study the fluid, changing nature of culture when it is defined as something that people *do*, rather than as a quality which is not open to change.

Two National Contexts

This study will mainly speak to the literature concerned with Canadian national culture. The analysis will focus on the Canadian reception of television, using the Dutch reception for contrastive purposes. The two countries from which the participants for this study are among those whose 'cultures' have at times been considered to be 'threatened' by imported American television.

In Canada, there has been much discussion about the fact that American programs occupy the majority of available airtime. The geographical proximity and the language shared by the United States and two thirds of Canada are the main causes for the concern that the small broadcasting industry of Canada might lose its audiences entirely to the giant industry of the United States. This imbalance in industry, it is suggested, affect

the cultural identity of Canadians. The defensive posture of policy literature has also can be observed in sociological research. A conceptualization of 'threat' has guided much of the research into Canadian culture and imported media for the past twenty years. Canadian culture is often considered to be a thing which can be protected or destroyed. The conceptualization of culture that American television has been presumed to injure has been depicted in a very static, monolithic fashion. Critics assume that Canadians inherently have certain characteristic attributes, and they have searched those characteristics out in Canadian media texts (for example, Miller, 1984, 1993) and in the persons of television viewers themselves (for example, Goldman & Winter, 1991). One goal of such studies is to ultimately demonstrate that Canadians have an identity different and separate from those who occupy our air waves, the Americans.

The choice of Canada as one of the nations for study, then, has been made because its culture is not often addressed in the literature as an activity. The attributes that make up Canadian-ness have been extensively considered and empirically studied. The present project can add a new dimension to the study of Canadian culture and its relationship to American television. Because this study focuses specifically on negotiating strategies that are revealed through language, the scope of inquiry must remain in one of the two language groups in Canada only. In this case, participants will be drawn from English Canada.

Critics from the smaller western European countries, including the Netherlands, have expressed similar concerns about the viability of their small broadcasting industries which must share a market with the giants. Similar to the situation in Canada, with

small populations and equivalent tax bases, public broadcasting systems cannot afford to fill the airtime with high budget productions and programmers import shows from the United States. Again, a concern that these nations might lose their identities among the imported cultural products has been voiced (Ang & Morley, 1989). In policy discussions in Europe, television is further attributed with the ability to build new cultural identities. In the European Union directive, *Television Without Frontiers*. Using a similar conceptual basis as the media imperialism thesis, this policy presumes that television content can break down old cultural attributes and build new ones (Morley, 1992; Schlesinger, 1987). Once again, this conceptualization of external media influences building and destroying culture, denies the fluid, changeable and active nature of culture.

Possibly a more central concern in the Netherlands is the tension between the social responsibility of public broadcasting and the popular enjoyment of commercial broadcasting. The public broadcasting system was developed with a mandate to broadcast a diversity of programming in a non-commercial environment (McQuail, 1992). The social responsibility placed in the hands of programmers has led to an climate in which, on one hand, public broadcasting has been criticized as cultural elitism but, on the other hand, commercial television is stigmatized (Niewenhuis, 1992). Particularly since the first commercial station began broadcasting in 1989 (Bilteryst, 1992), the tension between the high cultural and educational value of television and its simple entertainment value, often embodied in imported American programs, has been a central issue in the Netherlands. Hence, as a receiving nation of American programs, mixed with a public broadcasting system, the Netherlands offers a group of viewers who

are in a reasonably comparative viewing environment as Canadian viewers.

Culture as Reception

A conceptualization of culture that is productive for a study working toward an understanding of how media products are received in the cultures that they are imported into, is one in which culture is a shared system of images, signs and ways of understanding. By looking at the ways in which members of a cultural group make meaning from a televisual text, the ways in which understanding is shared by the members of a culture can be seen. The relationship between national culture and imported media products can be revised to include the idea that viewers bring television texts into their culture by constructing them according to their own strategies. Viewing imported television could then be considered to be the articulation of culture.

The variety of socially shared structures which are employed by viewers is far ranging and complex, and these structures are changed in their use over time. Methods used to study the use of these structures should remain exploratory because a complete and permanent body of knowledge about the changeable activities of human agents cannot be set. The primary interest of this field is the study of action, not of outcome. Further, reception analysis has not been employed in Canadian communication studies to a large extent and, therefore, there is little data available on which to base working hypotheses. The body of reception research conducted in the Netherlands is also not large (Ang & Morley, 1989). Ang's (1985) study of the reception of Dallas is a valuable and notable exception.

Yet there has been ample demonstration in other settings that members of a culture read an imported American television text in similar ways and that these patterns of readings vary across cultures. Liebes and Katz (1990) have demonstrated that members from different ethnic groups living in Israel have given varying readings of *Dallas*, and these readings also differed from those of viewers in the United States and Japan. This study demonstrated that the members of these cultural groups focused their attention on similar aspects of the program and used similar strategies for constructing meaning from the information provided in the text. The present study differs from that of Liebes and Katz because it asks questions about nationally shared patterns of reception, while Liebes and Katz used ethnic boundaries as the demarcation of cultural groups in their study.

Procedure

Similar to the technique employed by Liebes and Katz and other audience reception studies, focus groups will be the method of data gathering used here. Focus groups give some of the flavour of the social aspects of negotiating meaning. It has been argued that qualitative research is an essential method for the study of the social aspects as well as all the dimensions of how television is watched (Lull, 1988; Morley, 1988) and it has been demonstrated that television is a mode of communication that is embedded in the flow of daily life. It is viewed with a range of attention by people who are often engaged in other simultaneous activities, and who negotiate meaning from the televisual text with reference to their cultural framework and with the aid of the people

that they are in contact with. Although the present study acknowledges the complexity of television viewing, it does not presume to address all of its aspects and permutations, but focuses on how television is talked about between the members of a social or cultural group. Because the discursive aspects alone will be studied, focus groups will be used for gathering data, rather than a full-scale ethnography. In using group discussion as the sole method, the focus will be more limited and the setting for research will not be quite as 'natural' as would be possible with participant observation. The focus groups will be used to generate an environment where viewers can talk to one another about television, so that their patterns of communication can be observed.

The main goal of this project is to contrast the way that Canadian and Dutch television viewers make meaning from American television. In order to place parameters on talk surrounding the subject of American television, one television show, *Seinfeld*, has been chosen and the discussion questions will be focused on it. An episode will be shown in each of the focus group sessions in order to further limit and clarify the discussion for analysis. Through looking at how the participants talk about *Seinfeld*, the way that the participants organize their understanding of American television in general will be revealed.

After observing the way that the Canadian and Dutch participants organize their understanding of American television and the way they made a text meaningful, the unique aspects of the cultural processes shared by each of the national groups shall become apparent. Taking the precedent of Liebes and Katz (1990) and others, we can expect that there should be patterns of strategies of meaning construction in each of the

two groups, which differ systematically between the groups. This systematic difference should demonstrate what structures are specific to each culture. By further implication, it should also demonstrate that, if imported television texts are understood within a specific cultural framework, that culture is a framework of shared understandings, not a static set of images and characteristics, and therefore, that viewing imported television is a process of cultural assimilation of the foreign into the local.

CHAPTER TWO:

CULTURE AND NATION

It has been suggested (Schlesinger, 1991) that one way that the discussion of national culture and imported media can progress, is if a new working conceptualization of the term 'culture' is developed. Often a static list of attributes has been used to define a national culture. Ang (1990) argues that a study of culture which explores the activities that are shared by a national group, rather than its values and icons, can speak to the issue of imported television and culture in new ways. The study of culture as process can deal directly with the way that imported television is received and made meaningful by a cultural group. It may also offer evidence to explain how processes of meaning making may change over time.

The research that has been done in the area of Canadian national culture and imported television is illustrative of a body of work which has employed the same type of conceptualization of culture for many years. This body of work, for a large part, has examined the values, attributes and stocks of knowledge that Canadians may be observed to possess, as well as the way that such values may be identified in the media texts that were created by Canadians. Such values and attributes have been used as signposts which are seen to mark the presence and strength of Canadian culture. In this chapter

it will be argued that, although such identifiable values may be used by Canadians as part of their construction of a Canadian culture or identity, these sets of values cannot form a complete picture of Canadian culture as process. In the final section of this chapter, a theoretical definition of culture as process will be traced which can be used to present a different dimension to the study of national culture and imported media.

Canadian Culture: A Static Definition

The work that has concerned itself with Canadian culture and the importation of American mass media has often been an effort to define Canadian culture amid the sea of 'other' media products. The defensive posture taken by much of the literature suggests that its underpinnings are related to discussions involving media flows or media imperialism. In general, such discussions begin with the fact that a few countries, the United States in particular, dominate the export market of television programs world wide. These discussions are centrally concerned with the possibility that the values and ideologies of receiving nations will somehow be weakened or altered by the large presence of American media (Sepstrup, 1989). Indeed, through the history of broadcast policy in Canada, a central goal of the creation of a public network has been the promotion of Canadian identity and culture (Perlmutter, 1993; Raboy, 1990). Policy and the critics who adopt its logic argue that a strong broadcasting presence is indicative of a strong culture. Meisel (1986), for example, suggests that the presence of a large proportion of domestically produced programs in the television lineup are a signal of the strength of Canadian culture, while a large proportion of American programs signal a

threat. Ostry (1993) argues that protection of the Canadian production and broadcasting industry will buttress Canadian culture.

These types of arguments draw a link between culture and media ownership in a direct way (Tracey, 1985) and imply that the values held by the producers of a television text will somehow be transferred to viewers. Such scholars suggest that culture is a thing that can be built or destroyed by television (Morely, 1992). Therefore, the discussion of a threat to culture implies that culture is a static object, or a static state of being, and that any change to it is the result of an overt action. To a large extent, then, Canadian culture has been defined as a pre-existent set of values and the degree to which it remained intact was observed.

From the 1970s and into the 1980s, the influence of the effects paradigm seemed strong because much of the research attempted to demonstrate the way that American media might alter Canadian culture (Baer & Winton, 1983; Payne & Caron, 1983; Tate & Trach, 1980; Trenton, 1984). Later work sought to identify Canadian culture in textual analyses of Canadian television programs (Holmes & Allison, 1992; Lyons & Lyons, 1993; Miller, 1984, 1993; Tate, 1978). Primarily, Canadian culture has been presumed to be the values of collectivism (Arnold & Tigert, 1974; Baer & Winter, 1983), liberalism (Miller, 1984), fiscal conservatism (Arnold & Tigert, 1974), respect for authority (Holmes & Allison, 1992; Tate, 1978) and communal service (Miller, 1984). These kinds of liberal values have also been found to be reflected in similar artistic values which have been identified in the texts of television programs that have been produced by Canadians. When compared to American programs, the texts of

Canadian television programs have been observed to be more open-ended and complex (Miller, 1984, 1993) and characters from disempowered groups have been found to be better developed (Miller, 1984). This description of the values and attributes that comprised the brand of Canadian culture that was studied in these projects has remained quite constant over the years. Although methods of research have been revised, the same static list of attributes that defined proper Canadian-ness has remained almost unquestioned.

The normative values that Canadians have been thought to possess, relative to Americans, have been tested through experimental methods. The hypotheses which these experiments tested were not taken from exploratory empirical research, but were drawn broadly from historical precedent. For example, Arnold and Tigert (1974) argued that the United States, because of its birth in revolution, produced risk taking individualists and Canada, because of its birth as a quiet act of parliament, produced more conservative collectivists. They argued that these historical events produced personality traits in Canadian and American citizens which could be seen in the types of institutions that each nation created. To relate these values to the mass media, Baer and Winter (1983) surveyed Canadian viewers of American television in order to examine whether the values they held were becoming more like those of the Americans. They operationalized the concept of values as popular political agenda setting. They asked residents of Windsor, Ontario to rate the relative importance of the issues of the day. The researchers expected to find unemployment ranked highest in importance with Canadian viewers who had not been exposed to American television. Canadians who primarily

used American media were expected to, and indeed did, form different agendas.

The maintenance of a strong Canadian culture in the face of imported American media products has also been measured by testing the depths of the stocks of knowledge of the institutions and icons held by Canadian viewers of American television. Groups of viewers have been surveyed to determine how much they know about their own country and culture as opposed to those who were only exposed to Canadian television. At a time before the first Canadian legal dramas, Tate and Trach (1980) surveyed Canadian college students on both their knowledge of Canadian judicial procedure and their preference for Canadian or American television drama. A primary use of American media was found to be directly proportional to a low understanding of the Canadian legal system. This type of study has also been turned around to study American viewers by Payne (1978). He focused on observing the participants' stocks of knowledge of cultural icons to investigate the "cognitive effects" of Canadian television on American viewers by asking respondents to "provide the American equivalent of seven Canadian terms, some political (premier, Dominion Day, paks or paki) and some nonpolitical (chesterfield, grey cup, serviette, and back bacon) (p. 744). No strong correlations were found in this experiment. Although Payne studied cross-border effects occurring in the opposite direction, the theoretical framework that he employed still involved a static definition of culture and media as a threat to that culture remaining unblemished.

The same types of values that were investigated by testing the effects of imported media have also been sought out in critical readings of domestically produced television texts themselves. It has been argued (Holmes & Allison, 1992; Tate, 1978) that a

culture's tastes as well as values will be embedded in the production process of their own programs. Producers and writers are embedded in that value system and they produce programs for others within that value system. Tate (1978) looked for variations in themes in two episodes of similar programs that followed similar plots, the American program, *The Bionic Woman* and the Canadian program, *Search and Rescue* to illustrate this argument. His textual analysis was guided by the assumption that the difference between of the two nations lies in their histories of revolution and evolution and looked for values in the texts that were related to these histories. He indeed found that the Canadian program primarily developed themes of endurance and respect for authority while the American program developed themes of escape and rebellion. Similarly, Holmes and Allison (1992) found that *Street Legal's* plot tended to portray a typically Canadian respect for authority; its characters worked within the law as contrasted to American television renegades. They further assumed that the teamwork that the characters demonstrated must be palatable to Canadians since, "one feels that perhaps a heroic team is particularly acceptable to Canadians who defer to the collective rather than the individual" (p. 319). Finally, in a comparative look at television evangelism, Lyons and Lyons (1993) found that Canadian sermons dealt more frequently with quiet good works, while American sermons took on more spectacular themes of salvation.

Miller (1984) found production decision that were related to these types of Canadian values when she compared the 1960's Canadian western, *Cariboo Country* to American television westerns. She found *Cariboo Country* to be a more liberal program, both in its treatment of issues, and in its format. That is, Miller argued that Canadian

values of liberalism were embodied in a loose narrative structure and an open-ended text. *Cariboo Country* was not found to be as formulaic or ritualistic as its American counterparts. Likewise, in her comparison of *Street Legal* and *L.A. Law*, Miller (1993) found that the Canadian program had more complex plot lines and open-ended narratives. This type of textual construction, she argued, was more suited to Canadians' taste.

Although the methods for studying the relationship of Canadian culture and imported American television have changed in the last decades, the fundamental, pre-conceived assumptions of those studies have remained unchallenged. Whether framed in the effects paradigm, or as textual analysis, these studies were designed to test for the presence of the same list of characteristic attributes in Canadians. The values and attributes of Canadian-ness have not been observed to change, nor has the implication that those attributes might be destroyed by the presence of American popular culture. Implicit in the textual analyses of Canadian television programs is the assertion that Canadians can resist American culture by creating their own popular culture (Manning, 1993). This is also to say that Canadian culture needs a form of defense, which implies that it is a structure that would not change if it were better insulated.

This is a line of theoretical argument and methodology that is in a position directly opposite to a conception of culture as process. Popular culture and varieties of popular taste do, in fact, change over time. Methodologies framed in the effects paradigm cannot account for such changes within a cultural group. The validity of such studies is limited by the method's inability to isolate causes and effects which ignores the embeddedness of culture, the way that experience, interpersonal interaction, media and

an endless array of variables interact (Payne & Caron, 1983). Therefore, a study of cultural processes themselves may add a new dimension to the study of Canadian culture as it exists in a media system that is dominated by American products.

Culture as Process

Bauman (1995) terms the way that the concept of culture is used in the studies of Canadian culture discussed above, 'reified'; a term which describes culture when it is considered to be an object or a structure that exists outside or above individuals. He has pointed out that culture is usually spoken of in reified terms in debates of ethnohistory and multiculturalism. That is, in debates of policy, or in scholarly arguments as those discussed above, it is more convenient to depict culture as a single, definable entity. Such terminology can also be observed in more casual conversation. For example, the expression, 'I feel torn between two cultures,' suggests that culture is an external entity. Bauman also asserts that talk about culture in reified terms is not evidence that such phenomena exist, but rather presents evidence of the discourses that are in use. That is, when observing how a reified concept of culture is used by members of a cultural group, the types of images and discourses that are evoked can reveal something of how members of a group construct a cultural identity.

Hence, we must re-define culture if further study of the relationship of national culture or identity and the mass media can be pursued. It is most useful to take an anthropological view of the concept - one that views culture as processes and actions. Culture is a "system of ideas, signs, and associations and ways of behaving and

communicating" (Gellner, 1983, p. 7). By this definition, sharing a culture means the capacity to send out signs that can be recognized and interpreted by others and the ability to understand the signs that are transmitted in response. In this definition of culture, signs and ideas are not an over-arching structure, but are structures which are put into use by an individual agent, and shared through interpersonal communication.

The most important aspect of the concept is that culture and its ideas and signs only exist in their use by members of a culture (Giddens, 1984). Culture is not something that exists outside of and beyond individuals, it is something they do. One of the things that people who share a culture do is construct meaning. That is, the study of the actions of members of a culture putting their shared communications structures into use is the study of the culture of that group. This is the point at which a processual definition of culture makes its contribution to a methodology for empirically studying the use of imported television among a cultural group. When the patterns of the ways in which members of a group make television meaningful, it is their cultural processes that are being observed. Studying the processes of television reception can add a new dimension to some of the more static observations of national culture that have been made.

As the literature cited above illustrates, one central issue in the debate about the impact of imported American television is the threat to the national or cultural identities of the countries that receive American programs. Often in that body of literature, the terms culture and identity are used interchangeably. When culture is conceptualized as a set of attributes, it becomes almost synonymous with identity. However, when an

anthropological definition of culture is invoked, identity can no longer be conceived of as a static set of attributes, but it is an active process of construction (Ang, 1990, Hall, 1993). The act of forming an identity is one of the acts of negotiation of meaning that is a part of shared culture. Identity formation requires drawing boundaries to some extent, but these boundaries are continually negotiated (Hall, 1993). Individuals construct identities from the materials of their social system; they draw on the discourses of their society and situate themselves in it.

Hall argues that the discourses that are shared by a nation's members, are discourses of difference (see also Berger, 1992). Although identity is not wholly defined by exclusion, every national identity exists in a global system and, as a part of that system, the members of a nation construct a national identity by defining it against that which it is not. For example, Morley (1992) suggests that the new European identity is developed on the basis of being 'not American'. Vermeulen (1995) explains that history and current social and economic conditions provide the raw materials from which a national identity is constructed. Therefore, since national identity is a social construction, it is part of the system of cultural processes, and it cannot be a complete summary of the nation. One way to study the cultural processes shared within a nation, then, is to observe how people construct a national identity.

The Nation: A Unit for Analysis

Since the goal of this study is to investigate the use of cultural processes in specific national contexts, the question to be asked next is: how are the shared processes

which are created by people and brought into use by members of a group expanded to or limited by the borders of a state? That is, we must ask how cultural structures can be shared at a national level. Benedict Anderson (1991) defines the nation as an imagined community. Most of its members will never actually meet one another, yet they can envision their shared, simultaneous existence. That is, the ties between the members of a nation are actually their shared cultural framework. In the faith or the imagining that others are sharing their perceptions, people can feel a sense of membership in their nation. Further, a cultural framework can be shared across the geographical expanse of a nation through the mass media.

Gellner (1983) argues that culture can also be contained to some degree within the geographical borders of a state because the state's monopoly over the education system ensures that a great deal of the socialization of the members of a nation will occur in a similar way, which is different from the socialization of members of other nations. He explains that industrialization has brought about a system that requires workers that can move from one job to the next with a minimum of re-education. Unlike the preceding apprenticeship system that trained workers for very specific tasks, the modern education system gives students uniform instruction until a comparatively late age. These students are socialized in a uniform way and learn a context-free language that can be taken to a variety of employment situations. Gellner concludes that, since such an educational system is necessary, the nation state is necessary, for it is the only institution large enough to support such an undertaking.

The nation not only enables large scale socialization and shared culture, but itself

becomes an indispensable, overarching framework. It provides essential discourses from which people construct their identities. Although the nation is a modern, imagined construct, it provides its members with community association and provides the linkages in which cultural frameworks can be shared (Gellner, 1983).

The processual definition of culture explains that cultural processes are shared between the members of a cultural group when those processes are used in interaction. Therefore, the level of interpersonal communication is a prime locus for the articulation and perpetuation of culture. The simultaneous use of shared cultural structures by all members of a nation are imagined at one level, but because members of a nation often share a language and a level of the same socialization, and can be understood by one another as Gellner suggests, members of a nation actually experience the sharing of their cultural structures. Since members of a nation are likely to interact most often with other members, cultural structures can be shared within state borders.

The concern about the influence that imported cultural products may have on national cultures is the pivotal concern of globalization. However, the dynamics of globalization do not seem as threatening when culture is given a processual definition. It has been observed that globalization has not had such an adverse impact on local identities as had originally been predicted (Gellner, 1983; Hall, 1992). Hall (1992) suggests that it is because structures of interpretation and meaning making are shared at a local level, that the local is gaining significance. Although messages from around the globe are easily and abundantly available, they are still made meaningful by systems shared on a smaller scale. What Hall suggests is that the local is given a new articulation

in the global media arena.

Is it possible, then, to study national culture? A nation provides individuals with one uniform level of socialization. Certainly it is not the only kind of socialization that individuals will encounter, but it may provide a basis of meaning making structures. These structures are constituted in their use by members of a nation as they use a nationally shared media. Through mass media, the nation can be viewed as a kind of local cultural institution. If culture is considered to be the way that people receive and construct meaning from messages, then it can be said that the workings of national structures of meaning making - national culture - will be explored here. In the analysis that will be described below, the ways that television viewers receive and construct meaning from a televisual text will be explored. Through comparison, the activities involved in reception that are specific to Canada and the Netherlands will be outlined. This study is therefore directly involved in the discussion of Canadian culture that was described above, and it will add a description of dynamic cultural processes to that work.

CHAPTER THREE:

ACTIVE AUDIENCES AND THE ARTICULATION OF CULTURE

In the previous chapter, 'culture' was defined as a set of processes that people use to organize and make sense of their experiences. People who share a culture share an understanding of the categories and hierarchy of values that they use to interpret their experiences. One set of experiences which can be looked to in order to observe how such structures of understanding are used and shared is that of watching television. That is, the members of a culture share an understanding of and a competence in the use of strategies of making meaning from television. They draw from a shared stock of structures that organize the relative value of different kinds of programs and elements of programs. Watching television, therefore, is the process of interpreting information through a specifically situated cultural framework.

In order to make observations about specific television viewing activities, a theoretical model of the reception of television and the medium's audiences must first be traced. In general, the interpretations of a television program can vary across a broad range, but at the same time, similarities of interpretation can be traced within social groups.

An important element in the general picture of television viewing is the fact that

television is a medium of communication and a mode of entertainment that is embedded in the ongoing flow of everyday life. This is to say that, not only is television's information received by viewers as part of their familiar routine experience, but, as a part of a daily routine, it is sometimes treated as just another piece of household furniture. The set is not always paid close attention and its function as a communication medium is often altered.

It has been observed that the ways that viewers watch television could well vary endlessly (Ang, 1994) through the range of attention that people give to their set and through the variety of reasons they turn their set on (Lull, 1980; Morley, 1986). The steady and rapt attention of the viewer is by no means a constant in the activity of television viewing and, therefore, it cannot be assumed that the viewer is picking up on all aspects of a program. Intended meanings of televisual texts that may have been constructed by their producers, and all the pieces of information that such texts contain, could not likely reach every audience member. Meaning made from television programs can vary simply because of the wide range of ways they are received.

Yet, more central to the present study is the fact that, even if conditions differ among households, the stock of ways to make television programs meaningful is shared at a cultural level. The kinds of meaning made from television are very specifically situated in a social and historical context. Viewers use the organizational structures that are used and shared by the people that they interact with. We can know that such structures are culturally specific because readings of a television program have been observed to vary significantly across cultures (Liebes & Katz, 1990).

Since audience members negotiate various meanings from a televisual text, such a text must be polysemic and audiences must be active. The methodological models and empirical evidence from the field of television audience reception analysis provides the basis for the present study. Reception analysis is the observation of the way that texts are made meaningful by their consumers who draw on socially shared reading strategies. From this theoretical basis it can be further argued that, when the socially shared tools of meaning making can be observed, their variance across cultures can also be observed. Insights from reception analyses and the field's contributions to methodology will be outlined in this chapter.

Reception Analysis - An Overview of the Field

Reception analysis has developed from two different origins: literary criticism and sociology. Much of the sociological work in studying the activities of audiences has come out of the work done by researchers in cultural studies. Literary reader response criticism originated in the search to learn more about the qualities of a literary text by discerning the qualities of the audiences for which it was intended (Allen, 1987). Reception analysis' roots in cultural studies developed from questions of how media texts are used in specific cultural settings and of the imbalance of power that mass media perpetuate (Fiske, 1987). In the late 1980's and into the 1990's, the interests of cultural studies researchers in power relations and the reproduction of ideology has given way to a larger proportion of studies concerned with observing the activities of television viewing itself (Morley & Silverstone, 1991). One basic premise is at work in both the

literary and sociological arms of the field: the insistence on studying the audience as it is situated in a social and historical context (Jensen, 1987).

In reception analysis, the focus is on the receiver of a text. It is accepted that viewers use elements of their shared social knowledge to determine the relative quality and significance of a program. The interpretations of audience members, this theory suggests, should be in some ways related since their social knowledge and experience is shared. The underlying curiosity that fuels reception analysis is the question of how a text works when it is put somewhere else other than the place in which it was made, in the hands of someone else other than the person who made it. Beginning with Morley (1980), a methodology of canvassing reports from audience members has been developed. The reliance on viewers' own accounts of their activities underlines the goal of the research which is to observe the way that viewers play an active and significant part in the process of meaning making.

Although readers or viewers are active agents in the making of meaning, much of the work in cultural studies' reception analysis also presumes that there are boundaries to the variety of readings that can be made from one text (Ang, 1985; Brunsdon & Morley, 1978; Gripsrud, 1990). The text is not thought to be an empty vessel that the viewer can fill up with simply anything. Rather, a text is at the very least a skeletal structure with a plot, dialogue and emotional and visual attributes with audiences use as a basis to construct meaning, while adding their own nuances and shades of grey (Allen, 1987).

Literary Reader Response Criticism

In literary studies, work in reception began as an alternative form of textual criticism, not from an interest in the social context of the reader. Reader response criticism was a reaction against the traditional 'close reading' in which a critic peeled away layers of a text to reveal its one truth for a less informed reading public (Allen, 1987). Instead, meaning was attributed to active construction on the part of the reader and therefore the text was no longer considered to have a single, objective meaning (Liebes, 1989). The focus of reader response criticism was to examine the meaning that existed outside the literary text.

Early incarnations of reader response criticism proposed that each individual experienced a unique interpretation of a text. An initial goal was to find a more relevant reading or spectrum of readings from a text by projecting a picture of an implied or intended audience of a work. In this way, a critic could uncover a text's meaning as it was intended for an audience, rather than looking at the text in isolation from readers. Reader response criticism looked to the works of the phenomenologists who, beginning with Husserl, argued that to study an object is really to study an individual's experience of that object. This led to a notion of an implied reader or a vantage point from which one could experience a text in an ideal manner (Allen, 1987).

While the goal of reader response criticism was to re-define the literary text as constructed rather than as objective and self-contained, the fact that readings of a text do not vary infinitely and are often in most ways similar required an explanation. Stanley Fish provided a theoretical explanation by arguing that, while the literary text held no

intrinsic meaning itself, its meaning was not constructed by the subjective interpretations of isolated individuals, but by the shared conventions of interpretive communities (Fish, 1980). That is, interpretation is made by readers who socially share interpretive conventions.

In Fish's theory, the literary text is an event. It contains no cues or parameters that force a reader to interpret it in a particular way. Rather, the conventions of interpretation that are generated and shared by an interpretive community provide the parameters which limit readings. The literary text does not provide meaning, but the social context in which the reader is situated does. Readers do not act independently of their social environment, nor do texts exist outside that environment (Fish, 1980).

Fish's model of the interpretive community has been adopted into use in the study of the reception of mass, technologically mediated communication, particularly by Lindlof (1988). Like Fish, Lindlof uses the concept of interpretive communities to explain the high coincidence of similar readings that viewers make from a media text. He expands on the sociological description of interpretive communities. Membership is based on use of particular genres of texts, not on socio-economic status, gender or other identifying elements. Interpretive communities are the points of intersection of these other factors (Lindlof, 1988). Jensen (1990) agrees that interpretive communities are not simply demographic groupings and expands the definition by arguing that interpretive communities can be equated with publics. The shared conventions of interpretive communities, Jensen argues, function as a form of public approbation. He underlines the fact that meaning cannot exist unless it is socially created and shared (Jensen, 1991).

Therefore, the notion of interpretive communities imported into studies of mass communication from literary criticism make some significant contributions to a theoretical understanding of media use as shared cultural process. The idea of interpretive communities underlines the socially situated nature of media consumption. Lindlof (1988) asserts that the occurrence of agreement in readings signifies a high frequency of communication between the members of interpretive communities. Further, because interpretive strategies are shared through the communication of members, Lindlof suggests that a study of agreements in interpretation is the study of cultural interaction itself.

Further, the work in literary criticism has cleared the way for studying popular culture texts by debunking the notion that a single value can be inherently contained in texts (Liebes, 1989). Radway (1984) argues that, if variations in readings can be judged as equally 'correct,' then various genres themselves cannot be declared as intrinsically better than others.

Yet, although the theoretical model of interpretive communities supports the notion that interpretive strategies are socially constructed and shared, it is not specifically designed for the study of social processes, but for the study of a text. Fish and Lindlof in particular are not immediately concerned with the interpersonal dynamics of interpretive communities, but are rather focused directly on the content of their constructed readings. This subtle distinction in the focus of study for which the interpretive community model is designed, places the work slightly apart from the realm of interest of the present study. The goals of Fish and Lindlof lie more directly with

explaining the properties of specific genres of texts, as those properties are constituted in readings. The present project aims to describe the social, interpersonal processes through which interpretive strategies are shared. Viewers' interpretations are not the focus of analysis, but rather serve as signposts which mark the use of those processes.

The Birmingham School and Sociology

The present project is primarily concerned with observing the processes of reception that are put into action by television viewers. Therefore, it draws more specifically from the sociological arm of reception studies: the area of cultural studies. Cultural studies itself was developed at the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (Fiske, 1987). Specifically, its work with television reception studies began with Stuart Hall's (1980) development of the encoding/decoding model of the televisual text. In this work, Hall argues that both parties in the communication process, producers and viewers, play a part in making meaning, and that it is unlikely that a message that is encoded by a producer will be decoded in precisely the intended way by the viewer. This model, which was developed in the late 1970's and early 1980's, was modified and developed through empirical research to provide a more detailed picture of the complex process of making media products meaningful. It developed into a conceptualization of producers and audience who are both situated in social and historical contexts and who create meaning with the resources, and within the boundaries, of these contexts (Brunsdon, 1989). The Birmingham school advocated the notion that meaning is socially constructed and is not one single truth (Fiske, 1987).

The work of the Birmingham school has been marked by strong Marxist overtones. The early studies in particular (for example, Morley, 1980) were designed to examine the imbalances of power held by producers and various classes of audience members. Morley's early work sought to examine if and how disempowered audience members resisted the dominant ideology encoded into the texts by producers. However, Birmingham's work signalled a break with other Marxist sociologists. The Frankfurt school, which the Birmingham group reacted against, had subscribed to the hypodermic model of media effects, which assumed that messages were passively absorbed by the audience. Further, cultural studies took up a position opposed to the body of work published in the journal, *Screen*, contemporary work of the Birmingham school, which subscribed to the notion that televisual works are in a position of power over the audience and can transfer intact meaning to viewers (Morley, 1980). Therefore, although grounded in Marxist theory, the distinguishing characteristic of the Birmingham school was that it attributed agency to viewers.

Furthermore, in Morley's (1981) re-evaluation of his early work, and in subsequent ethnographic audience studies (Morley, 1988), the theoretical model of a 'resisting' audience has come to take on more of the colour of a 'negotiating' audience. Although the cultural studies school of reception analysis continues to concern itself with issues of power imbalances (Ang, 1994; Morley, 1993), the ability of viewers to negotiate meaning, rather than resist a dominant ideology in its strictest sense, has emerged. While Fiske (1994), among others (Carragee, 1990; Gripsrud, 1990) continues to argue that all communication and people are inherently political, Morley (1981) now

disagrees, particularly considering the act of viewing television itself. After more than a decade of detailed ethnographic research, it can be said that there are many different moments and circumstances of communication and not all of them are necessarily involved in a power struggle (Dahlgren, 1986).

The Polysemic Nature of Televisual Texts

Prior to examining models of the way that viewers negotiate meaning from television programs, the theoretical possibilities which can account for variations of readings should be looked at. Variations in interpretation are the result of two factors: the first is that televisual texts are polysemic and the second is that the contexts of viewing and the amount of attentions that viewers give to the television set vary to an almost infinite degree. That is, televisual texts themselves are open to interpretation (Brunsdon & Morley, 1978), and are indeed interpreted in different ways, because they are received in different ways (Ang, 1994; Lull, 1980, 1988; Morley, 1986; Morley & Silverstone, 1991).

Study of the polysemic nature of television texts was more prevalent in earlier research which, in particular, advocated an analysis of the text. In his encoding/decoding model, Hall (1980) postulated that meaning encoded into a televisual text by its producers was not necessarily the same meaning that was decoded by the audience. Brunsdon and Morley (1978) attempted to investigate Hall's ideas by looking for possibilities for different readings in the text itself. In *Everyday television: Nationwide* (1978), they traced out a "preferred reading," which is the meaning that the producers most likely

intended from the program. In *The Nationwide Audience* (1980), they compared that one reading to the actual readings described by viewers in interviews in order to document a typology of the various readings made from a single text. They took the differences between the actual and preferred readings as gauges of the audience's ability to resist the producer's ideology. Subsequently, the model of the process of constructing various readings was shown to be more complex than one that could be contained in a simple typology of clearly defined variation. In the "Critical postscript" (1981) to the *Nationwide* study, Morley retracts his advocacy of the analytic value of the preferred reading. He points to the nature of language and the impossibility of using it to encode a single meaning. That is, he criticizes his own work for confusing authorial intention with meaning. He continues by arguing that a conclusive analysis of a preferred reading is not possible; textual analysis is interpretation, the subjectively created property of the analyst, not an definitive definition of the text (pp. 4-6). Therefore, it is difficult, if not impossible, to pinpoint a preferred reading. Moreover, textual analysis does not seem to yield much evidence about how viewers go about constructing meaning.

However, one important lesson that textual analysis does provide is to underline the fact that texts provide boundaries to the varieties of possible readings. Texts supply character, plot, dialogue and visual elements. Such stylistic elements limit the possible meanings that can be derived from a text (Dahlgren, 1986). Readings are built from these elements and readings may vary in interpretation, but not with respect to the basic elements of plot and character.

Theorists (Brunsdon, 1989; Carragee, 1990; Jensen, 1991) have also suggested

that an account of the organizational and economic basis of Hollywood production institutions will supply the reasons television texts have their characteristic polysemic appearance. They argue that an institutional analysis can reveal how the high stakes involved in the risk of failure of a television show lead producers to stack the odds with proven formulas and homogenized characters and plots (Gitlin, 1983). Characters and plots in Hollywood programs are simplified to the most basic level so that they might appeal to the widest possible audience. The goal is to provide as little information as possible so that audience members can fill in the blanks in a way that appeals to them. Although such a study may provide evidence that the room to negotiate meaning from a television program is built into the unspecific structure of many Hollywood television texts, this again does not provide direct evidence of how viewers bring frames of meaning making into use. Even though an analyst may be able to demonstrate that creating polysemic texts is the usual order of business in American television production, such a critic would still have not demonstrated that viewers actually do negotiate various meanings from a single text.

Evidence that more clearly contributes to an understanding of television as a medium which offers room for a variety of readings, comes from ethnographic studies of television in people's homes. Ethnographic observations of how television is used and attended to by viewers in their daily life has provided texture to the idea that viewers construct different meanings, because their experiences vary. Such ethnographic observations also stack evidence against the notion that meaning or values can be transferred directly from producers to masses of viewers. The experience of television

varies too widely. Ethnographic studies reveal that television is not frequently viewed with rapt and undivided attention. A television set is usually located in the living room and it becomes a part of, or lost amidst, the ongoing flow of a family's daily life (Lull, 1980; Morley, 1986). Television is not always used specifically as a source of entertainment, but is sometimes used for background noise or for other such secondary purposes. This type of evidence suggests that it is quite unlikely that a television program could manage to transmit the same, homogeneous message to every viewer.

Lull (1980), for example, in his observations of television in the home, found that television can be used as various types of tools, rather than as an entertainment medium. He observed, for example, that solitary participants used the television as background noise to liven up a room and that parents used the schedule of nightly programs to remind themselves of their children's bedtime. It should be noted that a "social resource" is not associated with the suggestion from within the uses and gratifications paradigm that viewers use television to satisfy a pre-existent need (Ang, 1985). Lull also found, as did Morley (1986), that television became a part of family members' articulation of their roles and relationships. For example, male heads of households have been observed to reinforce their position by retaining possession of the remote control, thereby exercising authority over what the family watches (Morley, 1986). Lull (1980) observed that some families who watch television together took advantage of the opportunity for interpersonal contact and spent their time in front of the television set talking. He has also found (1986) that the extensions of social roles and situations that television facilitates differs between cultures. Not only are viewers paying widely

varying amounts of attention to television, but their distractions from it, and reasons for turning the set on, are specific to the viewers' own domestic context.

It would seem that a pattern emerges, suggesting that across various social and cultural contexts, television viewing may not involve the focused attention of the audience. Although focused attention is only one contributing factor to the process of meaning making, such ethnographic evidence suggests that there are an infinite number of permutations of context in which television may be viewed. It has also been observed that information provided by the mass media is not usually available for direct recall and regurgitation from viewers (Lewis, 1985). This body of evidence suggests that information cannot likely be directly transferred from producers to audience members; there are countless varying, intervening factors. Although it is possible that cultural values, meaning, or ideology can be transmitted via background noise, suffice it to say for the present purposes that the mechanism of transference must follow something more complex than a hypodermic model. If meaning is transferred across cultures through television, it is not done so only by engaging the rapt, unmoving attention of the audience.

The Negotiation of Meaning

Probably even more significant than the documentation of the varying viewing environments is the documentation of the varying readings that viewers have made from television programs. Some of the differences in readings have been accounted for by the different ways that viewers attend to the contents of programs. Several studies have

demonstrated that viewers construct readings of programs by excerpting and re-shaping the raw materials provided in televisual texts. They do not necessarily use the linear progression of the plot as a primary building block for constructing a reading of a program. Likewise, when viewers identify the characters or visual elements that are highlighted in a program, their choices can vary, indicating that the focus on elements is more a function of subjectivity than of textual cues.

Lembo and Tucker, Jr. (1990) explore subjectivity in their discussion of what they call image based viewing. They explain that the forms and genres of television become so familiar to audience members that the images begin to blend and to operate in a realm outside of instrumental rationality. Television may be enjoyed more as a flow of familiar images than as distinct sets of structured, linear narratives. Such image based viewing was described in Ang's (1985) exploration of viewers' preferences for various elements of *Dallas*. She surmised that, rather than being attracted to the plot and characters of *Dallas* themselves, audience members were interested in the human emotions depicted in the program. The intense personal conflicts and the extravagant lifestyles portrayed in the program were not as engaging as were the elements that were more familiar and accessible to the viewers - the emotions of love, hatred, grief, or guilt. These more abstract images engaged the viewers' attention more directly than the more concrete textual elements did. For example, one of the participants said:

I don't find everything [in *Dallas*] entertaining. The farm doesn't interest me much. Now and then you get a whole episode with nothing but cowboys and cattle. I find that boring. (p. 26)

Ang observed, then, that not all of the textual elements in *Dallas* were taken up by viewers and that some elements were ignored or discarded. Rather than following all the textual cues, viewers pick up elements that interest them.

Cultural Patterns

Yet viewers do not randomly extract elements from a televisual text which catch their 'fancy.' Rather, they draw on frameworks and hierarchies to organize the elements of a television program into a coherent meaning. Following such hierarchical structures which reference what is valuable or of interest in television, viewers can extract elements of a program and construct a reading from them. Such frameworks are developed and shared at a cultural level. Liebes and Katz (1990), among others, have demonstrated that readings of a television program vary in systematic ways across cultural groups. Such studies provide evidence strongly supporting the notion that meaning making structures are shared only in a bounded social context and have therefore been constructed within that context. Further, since social constructions cannot be overarching, pre-existing structures, nor innate psychological needs, these structures exist only in their shared use by social agents (Giddens, 1984). It follows then that, if meaning making structures exist in their use by cultural members, then through use, they can be adapted and changed. They are not fixed units. Therefore, meaning making structures are not only context dependent, but are necessarily situated in a temporal period. One can expect, then, that in a particular period, the interpretations of a television program would show similarities within a cultural group, and that larger differences would be seen across groups.

Groups that share meaning making structures have been identified at levels ranging from the micro to the macro. At the micro level, research has demonstrated that meaning is built through interaction with family and friends. That is, not only do members of a culture share decoding structures, but they put such structures into use in interpersonal interactions. Hobson (1989) found that a regular part of daily office life is the discussion of the soap operas that were broadcast the previous evening (including both domestic and imported productions). Television programs are incorporated into daily routines and meaning is made from them through interaction with the people in one's life. Therefore, not only is cultural competence used to understand the situations depicted in a television drama, but a text is also made a part of the daily interaction in the culture in which it is broadcast. Texts, therefore, have indeed been observed to become a part of contexts other than that in which they were produced.

Through a comparative methodology, Liebes and Katz (1990) have noted the same kinds of interaction at the level of cultural and subcultural groups. In their study, groups of recently immigrated Arabs, Russians, and Moroccans in Israel, as well as Kibbutz members, were interviewed, as were groups from California and Japan. All groups were composed of circles of friends and each viewed an episode of *Dallas* and were led in a focus group discussion afterward. Through group interaction and through using their culturally shared structures of meaning making, the cultural groups that Liebes and Katz observed tended to make similar readings of *Dallas* which differed from the readings made by other groups.

It has also been observed that one important element that was implicated in the

differences in readings was differences in viewers' understanding of references made specifically about the United States, and in their familiarization with the conventions of American television texts. Schrøder (1988) found that Danish viewers' unfamiliarity with American cultural references played a significant role in the way that they constructed culturally specific readings of *Dynasty*. When discussing one episode in which the Boston Tea Party is mentioned, they searched their memories for a previous episode in which the characters might have had tea in Boston. These viewers were competent in the use of soap opera serial conventions, but their reading was bounded by the extent of their stocks of American historical knowledge (see also, Gronbeck, 1991). Bilteryst (1991) observed that Belgian viewers did not have a well developed understanding of American situation comedy conventions. Their unfamiliarity with the conventions had a direct influence on their readings of American programs.

Beyond the limitations imposed by stocks of knowledge of American cultural facts and televisual conventions, viewers have been observed to treat programs as personal experience to varying degrees. Liebes and Katz were interested in observing the extent to which viewers saw, or did not see, the characters and action of *Dallas* as elements of their own real world. To study distance from the narrative, they took as signposts the critical statements made by participants which included comments on the cinematic and artistic value of *Dallas* and referential statements that treated the characters as if they were real or potentially real people. By tracing the use of each kind of statement, aspects of the distance between the narrative of *Dallas* and the audience members that were played out in group interviews could be observed. By closely examining the way

that participants spoke about *Dallas*, Liebes and Katz observed the way and degree to which participants were seeing the program through their own culture and incorporating its information into their experience.

Liebes and Katz found that western and Russian audiences seemed to exhibit a greater use of distancing mechanisms. The researchers surmised that the cultural groups that were most removed from *Dallas*, and from American entertainment and culture in general, became more personally involved with the program because they did not have as complete a set of western rhetorical tools for reading television fiction. Groups such as the Californians, who, from a closer cultural vantage point, could more easily recognize the artificial nature of the characters, and the Russians, who tended to read primarily in terms of the capitalist imperative of Hollywood entertainment, did not confront the lifestyles or actions depicted in *Dallas* on a personal level. Of course, not all groups were interested enough by the program to care to confront the cultural differences. Japanese viewers did not find anything interesting enough in *Dallas* to begin to discuss it.

As stated above, although both the Americans and the Russians approached *Dallas* in a critical way, their criticisms focused on different aspects of the program. Although both groups had a competency in the rhetorical tools that were necessary to read the program critically, they used the program in culturally specific ways. The Russian viewers' discussion focused on the obvious way that commercial concerns overrode production values and the deliberate portrayal of capitalist ideology gave the program a cheap, artificial flavour. The American viewers attended more to the ways that the

overly dramatic plot and characters were soap opera conventions rather than accurate representations of daily life in the United States. Therefore, competency with reading textual conventions is only one contributing factor to differences in readings of televisual texts. Differences in readings occurred between cultural groups and, therefore, it can be concluded that culturally shared frames of making meaning must also be a factor.

Culturally Shared Structures

What are these culturally shared structures of meaning making and how do they work? Anthony Giddens' structuration model (1984) is illustrative of how socially shared structures are created and maintained. He argues that structures, including those used to organize meaning, are created by the members of a society and are shared through use by those members. Daily experiences are made meaningful through interpretations made with socially shared structures that are used to categorize and assign value. Hence, the interaction of members of a culture creates the organizational structure through which those members make sense of their experience. Interpretation of experience, then, should vary between cultural groups.

As Liebes and Katz (1990) described, the participants in their study aided one another in filling in bits of information as they talked about *Dallas* and, as a group, they negotiated evaluations of the entertainment value of the program. They used their culturally shared meaning making structures so that they could be understood by one another. From these observations, it can be seen that interpersonal communication is a key component to the process of meaning making. Interpersonal communication is the

arena in which structures of understanding are communicated in conversation and are received and understood by other parties.

However, the dichotomy of structures, according to Giddens, is that, although they are socially created, they place boundaries on their users' perception. The ways in which people can make sense of their world is limited by their repertoire of meaning making structures. This is not to say that the interpretations of every member of a society would always be identical. Meaning making structures are limiting because they are the only available means that a person can readily draw upon, but they can be used and enacted by social agents in unique ways; agents can choose from their available structures according to circumstances.

Yet, although perception is limited by meaning making structures, the fact remains, in Giddens' model, that human beings are indeed free agents and, although somewhat bounded, are capable of creative thought. Meaning making structures can be re-interpreted, and, if a re-interpretation is shared and accepted, changes to culturally structures can be achieved (Giddens, 1990). Because structures are used by human agents, change is inevitable. Therefore, meaning making structures in specific forms are not only socially and culturally specific, but are historically specific as well. A study of shared structures, like that of Liebes and Katz, can only be a snap-shot. One cannot expect the types of readings of *Dallas* that their participants made to be identical with readings that might be made ten or twenty years in the future.

The Analysis of Spoken Discourse

This review of theoretical models and empirical observations of the activity of viewing television has demonstrated two main points. The first is the fact that the meaning of a television program is not fixed, a fact that must be qualified by the second central point, that patterns of similar types of meaning can be traced among socially connected viewers. Patterns of similarly constructed readings of television programs of television programs occur because the organizational structures that viewers draw upon to make sense of their experiences, including the experience of watching television, are socially constructed and shared. The task of the reception analyst, then, is to trace out these meaning making structures and to observe the way that they are used by viewers. Social reality is embodied in language (Roscoe, Marshall & Gleeson, 1995). The organization of expressions reveals the speaker's organization of meaning. Therefore, the appropriate method of tracing meaning making structures is to make a study of television viewers' spoken discourse.

The significance for study is the fact that discourse is not owned by individuals (Roscoe, Marshall & Gleeson, 1995). It is the vehicle through which members of social groups make themselves understood. In other words, a study of discourse can be particularly revealing because it represents the point of communicative exchange between members of a society. In such an exchange, players will put into use their shared ways of knowing in order to be understood by one another. The use and reciprocal understanding of structures will demonstrate the way that they function.

The study of reception, therefore, is the study of the framing of reality through

language. In the analysis that will be conducted in the present study, two types of frames will be looked at in particular: categorization and interpretive repertoires. Categorization is the expression of the action of organizing meaning and attributing value to experience. Interpretive repertoires are stocks of terms that can be used to express different meanings. An understanding of interpretive repertoires clarifies the variability and contradictions in spoken discourse.

Categorization

Potter and Wetherell (1988) have observed through discourse analysis that one way that people organize their experience is by categorizing it. New information that is encountered is made sense of by associating it with already established categories. Categories of meaning or value are socially constructed and shared structures. By examining the way in which people attribute levels of value to their experiences, we can identify the kind of categories into which the speakers are placing those experiences.

Categories are socially shared constructions. They are resources that are drawn upon for use as references. Discursive categories are not the same as static labels of role models; they do not always have set functions nor are they used to denote a set form of unchanging categorical content. They are rather looser sets of relationships of groups like people, things or phenomena, that can be drawn upon to give shape to experience and to draw conclusions through reference (Potter & Wetherell, 1988). For example, one focus of analysis in the present study is on the categorizations of television programs and audiences that viewers use to formulate predictions of the possible enjoyment they

may derive from a new television show that they encounter. Viewers identify textual categories of programs and they can draw conclusions by drawing on resources from the category.

Interpretive Repertoires

Another set of shared discursive structures that will be a focus of the analysis of this study are interpretive repertoires. Interpretive repertoires are distinct discursive structures which are storehouses of possible understandings, legitimations, and evaluations that can be brought to bear on any number of subjects (Potter & Wetherell, 1988). Repertoires are discourses that speakers use to frame their expressions. Hermes and Schutgens (1992) explain that, although the range of ways of framing expressions may be infinite, "the character of everyday reasoning is such that people will make do with the repertoires available to them as much as they can" (p. 310). Through common use, interpretive repertoires become familiar and mutually understood elements of social discourse.

The identifying characteristic of interpretive repertoires is that they can be used in a range of ways to express a variety of meanings. By gaining an understanding of how repertoires are used, conversation can be more clearly and effectively understood and analyzed. Speakers tend to contradict themselves and it may be difficult to step out of the 'natural flow' or play of spoken conversation and still be able to identify a precise meaning that a speaker may wish to convey. Intended meaning is not always a direct reference of each individual spoken word. Wetherell and Potter (1988) explain:

... discourse is variable in the sense that any one speaker will construct events and persons in different ways according to function. This is not to imply that there is no regularity at all in discourse - simply that regularity cannot be pinned down at the level of the individual speaker. There is regularity in the variation. Inconsistencies and differences in discourse are differences between relatively internally consistent, bounded language units which we have called interpretive repertoires. (p. 172)

Wetherell and Potter go on to explain that variation in expression is the analytic clue to function. When speakers contradict themselves, they are not negating their first statement, but are moving to a new function. An interpretive repertoire can be used to signal more than one meaning. Therefore, what at first may appear to be contradictions, are actually the expression of two different meanings. The interpretive repertoire that are used by viewers when they talk about television will be the second focus of the analysis of this study. One interpretive repertoire can be used to express a variety of ideas.

The goal of analysis in the present project is to identify the way that viewers construct meaning from television programs. Spoken discourse has been chosen as the site at which meaning making structures can be located. The strategy of analysis will be to trace the above defined discursive devices, categories and interpretive repertoires. The review of literature in this chapter has provided a theoretical basis which explains that meaning making is a culturally situated process. The discursive structures that are used in verbally expressing the meaning that is made from a television program are culturally

specific as well. The culturally specific nature of these structures and activities call for a cross-cultural methodology of study. Although it can be theoretically argued that meaning making is culturally specific, this cannot be demonstrated unless meaning making structures are empirically shown to be in use in one culture and not in another. Therefore, the use of categories and interpretive repertoires will be identified and compared and contrasted between two different groups.

CHAPTER FOUR:

METHODOLOGY

This project studies the shared structures of expression and meaning making that viewers use when talking about imported television. It compares the way that an imported program is received by two sets of viewers from different nations so that each national set of meaning making structures can, through the comparison, be seen more clearly. The emphasis of this study is not to document all aspects of the television viewing experience in Canada and the Netherlands, but is rather to focus specifically on the kinds of discourse that viewers in each country use to talk about television. The way that speakers organize discourse will provide signals as to the way that they are organizing meaning. The data required by such a study, then, is spoken discourse about television. Focus groups will be used to stimulate such discussion.

The goal of the research design is, within the artificial environment of the focus group, to stimulate talk about television that is as close as possible to the style and content of everyday chat about TV. This is an exploratory study, and it was not known at the outset exactly what is of interest to audience members when they talk about TV. Therefore, focus groups were employed, not only to mimic the situation of chat between friends, but also because of the value of focus groups for stimulating new information

(Morgan & Krueger, 1993). A modified grounded theory methodology (Strauss & Corbin, 1994) was employed to guide the data gathering and analysis. The type of discussion that the initial focus group interview schedule generated provided direction to the areas of interest of the participants. From this initial information, a program was chosen for the study, and, as new focus groups were held, new types of questions were developed based on issues that were brought up in discussion which seemed to be significant to the participants. In the analysis of the focus groups, repeated readings were employed to select and refine coding categories.

The American situation comedy, *Seinfeld*, was used to focus the discussion of television in the group interviews. Participation in the groups was loosely bounded demographically so that the cross-cultural comparison between the Dutch and Canadian groups could be more reliably singled out.

Seinfeld

This project differs slightly in its focus from the general trend of television reception studies. It is often the case that researchers are interested in the popularity of a certain program or genre and wish to uncover the reasons why it is particularly enjoyed by viewers (for example, Ang, 1985; Liebes & Katz, 1990). This study is more concerned with the meaning making structures that are related to imported television in general and how such structures differ between the viewers of two nations. The interest was not specifically in *Seinfeld*'s popularity. The selection of that series was based on the interest it might stimulate in the participants that could lead to an active discussion.

The American situation comedy, *Roseanne*, was initially selected because of its popularity in both Canada and the Netherlands. It was pilot tested with a focus group in Canada, with unsatisfactory results. Although all participants were familiar with the program, discussion was greatly restricted by this group's dislike of the program. They were agreed in their aversion of the characters whom they described as abrasive, aggressive and dysfunctional. Much of the time was spent in denouncing the value of a program which would present the light-hearted side of a family in serious distress. One participant explained that he chooses to avoid watching *Roseanne* because of the characters portrayed in it and that, "there are people like that out there, which I don't want to associate with. They are just not very, on the whole, very comforting." Because the discussion of *Roseanne* solicited discussion that seemed to generate a critical, negatively toned kind of consensus making, rather than active, provoking discussion, it was rejected in favour of a program with less initial baggage. The same participant quoted above, suggested that *Seinfeld* was, to him, a more enjoyable show and one that he would prefer discussing:

Seinfeld, or something like that, is, I guess, more toward our level of what we do in our lives and what type of things we do, the type of situations we might get ourselves into.

Seinfeld was then tested with a focus group and the discussion proved to flow with much more ease. It was thus chosen as the program to be studied in this project.

Unfortunately, *Seinfeld* is not a particularly popular program in the Netherlands. The American programs broadcast in both the Netherlands and Canada at the time of this

study generally attracted quite different levels of interest in each country. To select a program that would be familiar and popular among both Canadian and Dutch viewers did not appear possible. Therefore, *Seinfeld*, with an easily accessible audience in one of the two countries, was selected.

A brief outline of *Seinfeld* should be provided, not to offer a textual critique of the program, but so that the reader of this study can better understand the participants' comments which will be cited. The jokes in *Seinfeld* are often constructed in a manner similar to jokes characteristic of the genre of stand-up comedy. The show is set in New York City, and has four main characters who are single and in their late thirties. The main character takes the name of the actor who portrays him, Jerry Seinfeld. Seinfeld was a stand-up comedian by trade before he began working on the program, and portrays a stand-up comedian on the show. Each episode opens and closes with Jerry performing a stand-up comedy routine in a night club. The main, dramatized parts of the show are set either in Jerry's apartment or other locations around New York, such as the character's favourite coffee shop, restaurants, stores, health clubs, or in offices or other locations that are required by the weekly plots. The plots deal with situations such as waiting in a queue for a table in a restaurant, shopping, airplane travel, going to movies, dating and so on. The dialogue in *Seinfeld* has made reference to topics that are not often dealt with on North American television such as nose-picking and masturbation.

Seinfeld has drawn good sized audiences in Canada. According to the most recent statistics available at the time that the program was chosen for study, in May, 1994, *Seinfeld* was the number one rated program on the Global network (McElgunn & Leahy,

1994). It was perceived that the program was particularly popular with an age group approximately between twenty-five and forty-five. The focus group participants were selected generally from this age group. To place further boundaries on the factors which might affect group discussion (Knodel, 1993; Krueger, 1993), the participants generally had a similar level of education beyond high school. In Canada, inviting participants from this general demographic group seemed to provide enough group members who were familiar with *Seinfeld* for a meaningful discussion to take place. At the time that the Canadian focus group sessions were held, in December, 1994, *Seinfeld* was running in its fourth season. It was simultaneously broadcast on the Global network and on the American network, NBC, on Thursday evenings at 10:00 pm.

The Dutch focus group members were recruited from the same general demographic group as the Canadian participants. However, few Dutch participants had watched *Seinfeld* more than once and some did not even know of the program's existence. When the first sessions were held in the Netherlands in January, 1995, *Seinfeld* was running in its first season, on one of the commercial channels, RTL 5, on Tuesday evenings at 11:30 pm. By the time the final session was conducted in March, 1995, it had been moved to a time slot just after midnight. *Seinfeld* was both inaccessible and unfamiliar to the Dutch participants.

Although some Dutch participants were *Seinfeld* fans and some Canadian participants watched the show for the first time in the interview sessions, the comparisons are generally between Dutch first impressions and Canadian reflections on several seasons of viewing. However, although most of the Dutch discussion was based on first

impressions, the participants still drew on their available structures of expression and meaning making. This study is about the way people talk about television. The methods of talking should not be expected to change dramatically between talk about familiar or new programs. In fact, it is possible that without the benefit of seeing the programs several times, participants might rely more on their stock of cultural knowledge to help them to quickly make sense of *Seinfeld* in the course of a focus group session that runs less than one hour. Even though the participants might be encountering *Seinfeld* for the first time, they rely on their well developed system of expression and meaning making to talk about it.

The Canadian and Dutch participants viewed different episodes of *Seinfeld*, recorded in their own countries. This allowed each group to view an episode that was a part of the current season of their country; the series in the Netherlands was running two seasons behind Canada. It was also necessary for the Dutch viewers to have the subtitles with which *Seinfeld* is normally shown.

The series was recorded for one month in both Canada and the Netherlands. A single episode was chosen for the Canadian sessions. The criteria for selection were that the chosen program should be representative of the series and that its plot should not be dependent on specific American cultural references. For example, an episode about American Thanksgiving Day was rejected. Criteria for selection of an episode for the Dutch sessions was similar. However, the initial responses from the Dutch participants differed so strongly from those of the Canadian participants that two different episodes were tested to ensure that the stark contrasts were not the result of an anomalous episode.

The Focus Groups

Focus groups were identified to be the most productive methodology for this exploratory study. One-on-one interviews require more structured questions, which in turn require more developed hypotheses. The value of the focus group questions or the need for new questions can be more quickly determined and adjusted before the conclusion of data gathering (Frey & Fontana, 1993.) Most importantly, because this study seeks to identify the way meaning is framed and negotiated in particular social environments, the way that participants make themselves understood by one another is some of the most valuable data of the project. The focus group method has been criticized because group dynamics often lead to the suppression of some of the members' opinions (Höijer, 1990; Richardson & Corner, 1986). Such dynamics are not impediments, but are valuable data for this study. It is more centrally concerned with socially acceptable evaluations than with the private tastes of individuals. Even if some opinions and interpretations are lost or modified as participants make their talk more palatable for their peers, the patterns and structures of communication should still be evident, or could, perhaps, become more obvious.

In Canada, three focus group sessions were held, two in Calgary and one in Edmonton. Each of the three sessions were held in the home of one of the participants and the author served as facilitator. Every group consisted of four members, seven men and five women in total, who ranged in age from twenty-nine to thirty seven. Two of the participants had never watched *Seinfeld* before the sessions. After viewing the episode on video, discussion ran for thirty to fifty minutes.

Each of the four Dutch sessions were also held in the homes of one of the participants. Two were held in Valkenswaard, in the south of the Netherlands, one was held in Waddinxveen, and one in Utrecht, which are both in the central region. There was one group of four participants and three groups of three. In all, five men and eight women participated. In the Dutch groups, there were three exceptions to the general demographic guidelines; two participants were in their late fifties and one had less than a high school education. Only two participants reported that they watched *Seinfeld* frequently. Three more had watched it more than once before the session. The interviews ran from twenty to thirty minutes.

The first two Dutch focus groups were led in English by the author, though a Dutch-speaking facilitator was present and participants were encouraged to speak Dutch if they felt more comfortable doing so. By the end of the second session, it had become apparent that the discussion was moving slowly because participants were concentrating on speaking English at the expense of their concentration on the topic. Subsequent sessions were led by a Dutch-speaking facilitator and conducted only in Dutch.

The Focus Group Questions

The questions used to lead the focus group discussions were kept at as general a level as possible. They were designed to be open-ended to the extent to which participants would feel free to move the discussion in new directions and introduce their own ideas. For the most part, such a flow of discussion was achieved. The questions were also kept to a level of complexity similar to everyday 'chat' about television. The participants

were asked for their thoughts about the everyday nature of their television viewing, not for a depth of analysis more complex than they would typically consider. Most of the questions directly involved the *Seinfeld* episode. This placed parameters on the content of the discussions so that meaningful comparisons between groups could be made. It was hoped that, through discussing a particular program, more general patterns of talk about situation comedies, American programs and television in general could be discerned.

After the participants had watched the episode of *Seinfeld*, they were asked to recap its plot. It was hoped that this would act as a warm-up that all group members could easily participate in, and that it would encourage or guide the participants toward reflective thought. More importantly, the elements of the action that various participants brought into recall revealed what aspects of the episode caught their attention more than others. Few participants mentioned every detail of the action.

Liebes and Katz (1990) suggest that, in reception research interviews, participant informants express cultural distance from a media product by talking about it in critical as opposed to referential terms. That is, they suggest that when participants speak of the characters and events of a television program as if they were real, they are then incorporating the program's messages into their own world view. To ensure that there would be an opportunity for observing such discussion, the question, 'Would events like the ones that occurred in this episode of *Seinfeld* happen to you or to people you know?' was asked. A type of critical discussion was sought more directly with the question, 'Who do you think is the audience that *Seinfeld* is intended for?'

The question, 'Why do you like or dislike *Seinfeld*?' was asked simply to solicit the

participants' opinions of the program. For the first-time viewers, the questions was asked in terms of 'What were your first impressions of *Seinfeld*?' The question was provocative yet open enough to give the participants opportunity to move the discussion in alternative directions. Indeed, at this point of the discussion, many participants re-evaluated earlier comments that they had made and brought up points that had not fit into the discussion elsewhere. In the first Canadian group that was held, participants explained what type of program they thought *Seinfeld* was by comparing it to other programs. This seemed to be a valuable framing for expressing the kind of meaning that participants made from the program. Therefore, the question, 'What programs can you compare *Seinfeld* to?' was added to the roster.

The final question proved to be the most provocative one for the Canadian participants. In a second attempt to stimulate discussion about the cultural distance that participants perceived between their own national environment and the imported cultural product, the question was asked, 'Would you prefer to watch a show that is similar to *Seinfeld*, but Canadian/Dutch in origin?' In the Canadian groups, discussion became very heated. In every session, the topic turned to matters of funding for the CBC and to the overall quality of Canadian media products. Several participants directly offered messages for the facilitator to deliver to the CBC. Although the Dutch participants also interpreted the question by turning to a discussion of the quality of public television, it was not the question that participants spent the most time discussing as it was in every Canadian group.

Further differences in the responses between the Canadian and Dutch participants were

quickly and strongly apparent. Adjustments to the interview schedule were made to confirm that it was the Dutch opinions themselves that were actually different and that the variation was not a result of the way that the questions were voiced. For example, the first two Dutch groups did not seem to take much interest in retelling the plot of the episode and dispensed with the task in a few utterances. In the two subsequent groups, the question was moved to second place on the schedule and a more general question, 'What do you usually watch on television?' served the function of easing the participants into an active discussion. This question filled another gap in the comparison between the Canadian and Dutch discussions. The Canadian participants had volunteered a considerable amount of information about their viewing habits as well as who they have talked to about *Seinfeld* and what other people had said about it. The Dutch participants did not volunteer much information about their viewing habits or how and where they chat about TV. In order to ensure that the framing of the interview questions was not prohibiting participants from volunteering such information and in order to develop data for the comparison between the two national groups, such questions were put to the Dutch participants directly.

Analysis

All focus group interviews were recorded on audio tape and transcribed. All participants were assigned pseudonyms. The Dutch language discussion was translated into English for analysis by the Dutch language facilitator, a Dutch national who has lived in Canada for eighteen years. A conscious attempt was made to maintain the

mistakes and contradictions characteristic of conversational speech in the translations.

Data analysis was conducted using the written transcripts of the focus group interviews. The analysis was conducted qualitatively through repeated close, 'symptomatic' readings (Ang, 1985). An analytic program of taking coding categories from what the data offers, rather than from preconceived hypotheses, is also a strategy of grounded theory methodology (Lull, 1988). In the first readings, groups of similar comments were noted and initial coding categories were set. Although some types of comments were more common in one of the two national groups, the coding categories were kept constant for both sets of transcripts. The four main coding categories were, 'structure and content,' 'audience,' 'cultural similarity between the viewers and the program,' and 'domestic production values.' Each category was divided into subsections for the sake of clarity. A description of the way that each group summarized the plot of *Seinfeld* was also made, noting the parts of the plot that participants discussed or omitted, and the types of details that they gave. Finally all of the comments that participants made that were not solicited in direct questioning by the facilitator were noted. The unsolicited comments were considered to present the best evidence of the types of issues that were significant to the participants.

Through grouping the participants' comments, it became apparent that the categorization of types of television programs and comedies played a primary role in giving shape to the participants' discussion. In each of the Dutch and Canadian sets of interviews, certain types of programs were considered by the participants to be better crafted and more entertaining than others. Differences in the makeup of the hierarchies were quite

evident between the two national groups. Also, both groups of participants spoke of the characteristics of the audiences whom they perceived to watch the different kinds of programs in the hierarchy. Such a hierarchical structure was not usually directly referred to in the discussion, but through grouping comments made about similar types of things, the underlying framework, or the assumptions underlying the comments, became evident.

After several readings of the transcripts, and particularly while the coding was conducted sentence by sentence, it also became evident that speakers' comments were often contradictory. For example, an individual might comment that he or she did not watch television, and in the next utterance would go on to list five of his or her favourite programs. If generalizations or observations about the discussions were to be accurately and convincingly reported, such contradictions needed to be explained. It was postulated that such contradictions were not meant to be directly literal assertions, but were rather modes of expression. These contradictions were investigated as interpretive repertoires, stocks of expressions that were drawn on by speakers which can vary according to function (Potter and Wetherell, 1988). The transcripts were read through and all statements that were later self-contradicted were noted. Then the statements were grouped by similarity of content and categories were again condensed. The basic categories were labelled as interpretive repertoires. The initial contradictory statements were again looked at in the context of the discussion so that the function that the repertoires were serving could be understood. That is, once the use of the repertoire was determined, the flow of questions and answers and comments was re-examined so that meaning that the user of the repertoire intended to convey would become more evident.

The system of categorization and interpretive repertoires that were used and understood by the participants became the basis of the comparison of the Canadian and Dutch groups. That is, the main differences that were found between the two national groups as they talked about television were the way that they organized information about television, and the discourse they drew upon to speak about it.

Limitations

Focus group research, which relies on such small numbers of participants, is not highly generalizable. The findings reported here do not describe the activities carried out by all Canadians and Dutch people of negotiating meaning from all kinds of imported television. However, the intent of the study was not to catalogue the entire set of meaning making strategies available to Canadians or to the Dutch. Rather, the goal was to explore the possibility that negotiation strategies are in fact used, and, if so, how they are unique to each national culture. In having identified the presence of culturally specific meaning making strategies, research to expand our knowledge of them can continue.

Further, the observations that will be outlined in the next chapter are limited by the scope of understanding of the researcher. The author was born and raised in Canada, and therefore, participated in the Canadian discourse as an insider and the Dutch discourse as very much an outsider. Some of the discursive structures used by the Canadian participants could have been missed because they were understood in too normalized a manner to be seen from an analytical distance. Yet, an understanding of

the Dutch discourse was possibly even more limited, because only the most broad systems of discourse could be taken in. Smaller and more subtle distinctions in word choice or reference could not all be noted in the Dutch participants discussion that was conducted in English as their second language or in the analysis of the transcripts translated from Dutch. To study an unfamiliar culture gives a researcher the advantage of critical detachment, but gaining access to the intricacies of discourse and culturally shared categories of value is very difficult.

However, several observations were clearly distinguished. Despite the limitations imposed by language and cultural familiarity, categories of value and structures of expression were discerned. The observations drawn from the analysis of the transcripts can be divided into three broad categories: general expressive strategies, expressive strategies of organization and expressive strategies of domestic context. These will be detailed in the following chapter.

CHAPTER FIVE:

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Although in both the Canadian and Dutch sets of interviews the opinions of *Seinfeld* ranged across the spectrum, it was apparent that, in general, the Canadian participants tended to enjoy the program, while the Dutch participants did not. This overall contrast of opinion is significant to this study because it flagged differences in the meaning making structures shared by the two national groups. An examination of the way that each of the groups came to their conclusions about *Seinfeld*, and the way that they spoke about the program and television in general, reveals the distinct features of the cultural structures related to television that were put into use by the Dutch and Canadian groups.

Most of the Canadian participants found *Seinfeld* to be a quality production, cleverly written and creatively edited. Most of the Dutch participants found *Seinfeld* to be a simple construction at best, that was thought to be mildly entertaining by some participants and irredeemably bad by others. Yet this large distinction in itself does not necessarily serve to demonstrate a cultural difference between the two national groups, although it does provide clues as to where to find differences in cultural structures. The cultural structures that will be studied here are discursive ones. Matters of individual taste are not explicitly under study. The focus is rather on discourse. The means of expression that the participants drew upon in order to make themselves understood by their fellow group members, as well as the structures which were used to organize the

value of television programming that were mutually understood by fellow nationals, will be described. It should be noted that the differences in meaning making structures in the Dutch and Canadian groups did not vary in a uniform, binary fashion. It can not be said that for each Dutch structure there is an equal and opposite Canadian structure. Some of their repertoires of expression are quite similar, some vary in opposite ways and some ways of meaning making that are significant to one group are less significant or absent in the other.

Some of the most readily apparent signals that helped the participants to form their opinions of *Seinfeld* came from their previous knowledge of television programming and from their relative amount of experience with stand-up comedy, the genre upon which *Seinfeld* is based. Stand-up comedy is a new and not widely used form of comedy in the Netherlands, while it is a familiar form to Canadians. From these two different knowledge bases each set of viewers would observe different cues for humour in the program and would consequently not appreciate the same jokes.

However, such differences in the background knowledge of television schedules and stand-up comedy are not evidence of distinctions in the use of cultural structures between Canada and the Netherlands. We can begin to see evidence of differences in cultural processes in the first group of discursive strategies that will be discussed here under the title, "General Expressive Strategies." This is a group of interpretive repertoires that the participants drew upon to frame their discussion of their use of television. While some of the frames of expression used by both groups were similar - for example, participants in both groups prefaced many of their comments by saying 'I

do not usually watch television,' and thereby set up some distance between themselves and the medium - other repertoires were quite specifically used by only one of the national groups. The use of these interpretive repertoires limited the conversation to specific areas and may also serve to direct the viewers' attention to certain elements of the television text. For example, Canadian participants approached the conversation about *Seinfeld* through talking about the artificial plot lines of situation comedies. They expressed both praise and criticism through the repertoire. The Dutch participants expressed their dislike of *Seinfeld* through discussing the imposition of a laugh track on the show and the way in which the laughter laid over jokes that were not funny accented the show's faults. Through these differing means of talking about television comedies, the viewers' attention is drawn to certain qualities of the program and, possibly, different types of meaning can be made from the same text.

The main difference in the discussion that took place in the Canadian and Dutch groups was observed in their use of what is here labelled as "Organizational Strategies" which are categorizations of value of television programs that each group drew upon. It was in the differences in the organizational strategies that the Canadian and Dutch participants used, that their readings of *Seinfeld* differed. Both groups drew upon an established hierarchy of television genres and an image of the kinds of audiences that various kinds of programs attracted. Almost all participants placed themselves in the audience of 'quality' programming, although the definition of quality programming differed between groups. The Canadian participants assessed *Seinfeld* in terms of its place on a scale of sophisticated versus mass or low culture American television, and

labelled the show sophisticated. The Dutch participants employed a scale that contrasted all British programs as sophisticated with all American programs as low culture, and *Seinfeld* was therefore deemed low culture. Therefore, the Canadian participants approached the task of making meaning from the program by drawing on their expectations that *Seinfeld* would likely be sophisticated and entertaining, while the Dutch participants started from the expectation that it would be a poorly made, low culture product. The enjoyment that they claimed to actually have had tended to be a reflection of their expectations. It follows that differences in opinion of the program and the meaning that viewers make from it are the result of the employment of such culturally specific structures.

This difference in the frameworks that the two national groups employed to organize the value of television programs was also evident in the way that the participants constructed categories of audiences who would likely watch the different categorizations of programs within their framework. Not only did the participants talk about differences in types of programs, but they also had much to say about the kinds of people who watch those different types of programs. Not surprisingly, most participants took up membership in the audiences who were more educated and sophisticated. More Canadian participants were comfortable in expressing membership in the *Seinfeld* audience, since it was perceived to be a relatively distinguished group, while fewer Dutch participants admitted to being a part of the *Seinfeld* audience.

Finally, each of the two national groups employed different kinds of "Expressions of Domestic Context." All the participants engaged in a protracted discussion of their

own domestic broadcasting systems. Both groups compared the level of funding that their domestic broadcasting systems receive to the levels of financing in Hollywood and criticized the quality of the programs made in their own countries. However, the Canadian participants focused their discussion of their public broadcasting system on the issue of the representation of their national culture. In doing so, they constructed an image of an 'other' culture to which they contrasted their own - the American culture. Conversely, the Dutch participants did not relate the issue of domestic public broadcasting to the representation of their cultural icons, even when probed. These contrasts in the relevant issues that the national groups felt were connected to their public broadcasting systems underlines the fact that the Canadian participants considered television to be an arena in which negotiating a national identity is possible; that television and national identity have some relevant relationship. The Dutch participants, on the other hand, saw television as involved with other issues.

In this chapter, the textual cues that each of the groups of participants identified will be outlined, followed by discussions of the three main groups of discursive strategies, "General Expressive Strategies," "Organizational Strategies," and "Expressions of Domestic Context."

External Contextual Signals

There are several differences in the experience of viewing *Seinfeld* in Canada and the Netherlands. In one context, the program is broadcast in the viewers' first language, while in the other, it is broadcast with subtitles. Beyond this, the character of the signals

that the Dutch and Canadian participants received that could help them contextualize *Seinfeld* were different. The groups were each familiar with different types of comedy, and different amounts of media coverage and 'word-of-mouth' were available to each of the groups. Therefore, different signals that were available to each of the national groups contributed to their difference in readings.

Like all other adult programs imported into the Netherlands, *Seinfeld* is subtitled. Dialogue often proceeds too quickly for every word to be translated and subtitled; of the two hundred and thirty-three subtitles in one episode of *Seinfeld* studied, thirty-five subtitles omitted parts of the dialogue. Seven subtitles were complete changes from the original English. In some cases, the changes were choices of shorter equivalent expressions which could be more quickly read than the original. Others were presumably intended to create jokes that would be more familiar to the Dutch audience. For example, a dating couple was described in the original English to be "like Abe Lincoln and Mary Todd" while the subtitle read, "like Charles and Diana." Although many participants were proficient English speakers and reported that they listened to the English as they read the subtitles, the dialogue that the Canadian viewers and the Dutch viewers had access to can not be considered to be exactly the same.

A further difference in the experience of viewing *Seinfeld* in Canada and the Netherlands is the program's time slot. While in Canada *Seinfeld*'s prime time slot signalled that the show may have something to offer, its late night time slot in the Netherlands, preceded by *Ricki Lake* and *Sightings*, signalled the opposite. Another signal that the programming of *Seinfeld* sent to the Dutch viewers was that it was aired

on the privately owned channel, RTL 5. In the Netherlands, a position on a privately owned station sends out a strong message to the viewer, as one participant explained, "The stations who are for intellectual people have English comedies. And ... the two commercial networks... have all the American. Also the shows like *Beverley Hills* and *Baywatch* and all that stuff." From these comments it can be seen that a clear line is drawn for the viewer between public broadcast channels, which offer quality programming, and the commercial channels which offer mass or low appeal programs. Since *Seinfeld* is broadcast on the privately owned channel, it is immediately categorized by many Dutch participants as a low quality program, in the same vein as *Baywatch* and *Beverley Hills, 90210*.

Whereas *Seinfeld* had only been available for one season in the Netherlands, Canadian participants in this study had ample opportunity to become familiar with the series. Although not all the Canadian participants were avid viewers of the show, all had some prior knowledge of it. *Seinfeld* episodes were advertised on television and it has been covered in various media. Media representations of the series had apparently reached some of the Canadian participants who used the description of the show that had circulated through the media: "It is a show about nothing." Therefore, the Canadian participants not only had the opportunity to form an opinion of *Seinfeld*, they had access to media discourses which they could use to frame their discussion.

Many of the Canadian participants also had some direct knowledge of the demographics of the *Seinfeld* audience. For example, a participant in Canadian Group One noted, "I know that a lot of people who I work with who are young and single, they

get a kick out of it." Further, a participant in Group Two observed:

I just hear a lot of my peers talking about it all the time. So, yeah, I'd say [the audience is mostly] twenty-five/thirty to forty, white collar, like not necessarily professional, but white collar as opposed to blue collar, I would think.

Therefore, many Canadian participants began their discussion of *Seinfeld* with the knowledge that it was a program that was enjoyed by their peers. That is, there was a gateway open to the participants, or perhaps a cultural permission or invitation to enjoy the program. Some participants did not find it entertaining, including the two participants quoted above, but unlike the Dutch participants, the Canadians received more overt signals that *Seinfeld* should hold entertainment for them.

Seinfeld is a situation comedy that dramatizes the type of jokes used by stand-up comedians, or in some cases, merely exchanges the stand-up monologue for situated dialogue. Live and televised stand-up comedy has been accessible and popular in Canada for many years. Canadians with an interest in comedy would be familiar with the conventions of stand-up comedy and would know how to read a punch-line, whether they decided it was funny or not. Some Canadian participants were able to identify the finer points of *Seinfeld*'s use of the genre as illustrated in the following quotation:

...the focus or viewpoint is from basically well educated, New York, perhaps somewhat Jewish and somewhat intellectualized, neurotic point of view. There's a lot of analytical complaining and whining. It's not just 'you stepped on my toe, you big oaf,' it's, 'why do you have to say it that way when it can be said this way?' That kind of expostulating - oh geez, expostulating - that kind of talk, it's

kind of Woody Allen, New York humour.

The type of humour used in *Seinfeld* would therefore be accessible to Canadian audiences.

It was apparent that some Dutch participants were unfamiliar with the conventions of the stand-up genre and missed the cues of stand-up comedy. For example a participant from Dutch Group Two indicates an unfamiliarity and a distaste for the stand-up monologue that Jerry Seinfeld performs at the opening of every episode saying, "What I did not like was, in the beginning, those jokes. Then you really have to understand that American humour." He continues, "Because that beginning, that also turns me off. Those jokes, I mean." The Dutch participants' inexperience of the stand-up comedy genre prevented them from reading the conventions used in *Seinfeld*.

Perhaps because of this difference in background knowledge, the Dutch participants were looking for humour in different places than the Canadian audiences were. Both Canadian and Dutch participants brought up *Cheers* and *Murphy Brown* as examples of similar shows. However, while Canadian participants also indicated similarities between *Seinfeld* and *Ellen*, *Frasier* and *The Bob Newhart Show*, participants in two Dutch groups chose to compare *Seinfeld* to *Perfect Strangers* and *Herman's Head*. It would seem that, while Canadian audience members attend to the types of jokes that are used in a sitcom, the Dutch audiences pay closer attention to the kinds of relationships that are portrayed. For example, one Dutch participant appeared to take special note of the relationship between the characters Jerry and Kramer in *Seinfeld*. When asked to compare *Seinfeld* to another program, she chose *Perfect Strangers* because

in that program, "there's one mad guy and one smart guy." This difference between the Canadian and Dutch audiences can be seen further in the reasons members of each group gave for comparing *Cheers* to *Seinfeld*. To one Canadian participant, the comparison lay in both shows' basis in verbal humour:

The humour [in *Cheers*] was in the dialogue between the characters. That's where the humour lies, not in pratfalls, not in some guy calling somebody out or making someone look stupid or embarrassed... The characters all had this repartee between each other and were very witty and would click.

Dutch participants, on the other hand, noted the friendships of the characters in *Seinfeld* and saw a family-like grouping, which they also noted in *Cheers*:

Facilitator: Is there a reason why *Seinfeld* is comparable to *Cheers*?

Anneke: Now, I think you have to go back again to the relationship. Only that.

Nicolaas: Maybe the relationships and also the friends because with *Cheers* you are sitting at the bar. Always the same people.

Anneke: I would say the friends. The family group.

It would seem, then, that the different elements of television comedies capture the attention of Canadian and Dutch viewers. At one level, this difference in bases of comparison is not surprising since the number of American series that each of the groups are exposed to is certainly different. Yet even Canadian participants who were infrequent television viewers, and who therefore may have even less experience with American sitcoms than some of the Dutch participants, defined *Seinfeld* as belonging to the same general group of programs as their fellow nationals. The difference in the

aspects of situation comedies that the participants attended to, then, is more closely related to national group, rather than to a relative amount of exposure to television.

These differences in the types of signals that the two national groups were receiving, which so strongly affected the different readings that they made, are important to note. However, the work of this study is to trace the way that the Canadian and Dutch participants received and made meaning from these textual cues. Yet it is important to note that the Canadians received a more open invitation to enjoy *Seinfeld*, while the Dutch received warnings of its poor quality. The Canadians went on to express how, through their culturally shared structures of organizing meaning, they found entertainment in *Seinfeld* while the Dutch, through their systems of making meaning, found fault with the program.

General Expressive Strategies

The two largest elements of all the focus group discussion in both national groups was the talk about what television is, through the use of categorization, and the discussion of domestic broadcasting standards. Running through these elements were discursive structures that were used to frame the statements made on those topics. These framings were interpretive repertoires.

Because, for the most part, conversation flowed freely and group members seldom asked one another to clarify statements, it is also that the participants expressed ideas and opinions with explicit meanings. Yet, it can be quite difficult to observe an explicit opinion or conclusion, or even a tendency toward an opinion when reading transcripts

from spoken discourse. Speakers switch from one series of arguments to another without seeming to notice their contradictions (Potter & Wetherell, 1988). In spoken discourse, meaning is not always a straight forward matter of direct reference. Without tracing out the interpretive repertoires used by each group, the comments made by the participants may seem unreliable and their input may be lost. That is, we must look at the systems of expression, the discourses and the socially shared meaning that is attached to them, in order to more accurately follow spoken conversation.

Only the stocks of expressions that were used with clearly and uniformly varying functions, by several participants, are examined here. Contradictions that did not vary with some regularity through the speech of several participants were not considered to be interpretive repertoires. Likewise, expressions that were not as fluid, that seemed to have a less negotiable meaning were not considered repertoires.

The "I Do Not Usually Watch Television" Repertoire

That the meaning expressed through the use of interpretive repertoires is not directly referential and is variable can be illustrated by the interpretive repertoire that is here labelled, "I Do Not Usually Watch Television." As mentioned earlier, the structures used by the Canadian and Dutch participants were not always categorically opposed to one another. This repertoire is a prime illustration of the fact that some discourse operated similarly in the two groups of discussions. Often when such an "I do not usually watch television" statement was made by participants, its purpose was to act as a signal that distances the speaker from his or her own statements. Even if

participants seemed to know the names of many television shows and were able to speak at some length with some degree of sophistication about television and its content, they might preface or conclude their opinions with the disclaimer, "I usually do not watch television." Given the topic of the interviews, this repertoire was often expressed in the form, "I usually do not watch sitcoms."

The distance that this disclaimer places between speakers and their membership in the television audience varies and can only be evident in the context of the entire interview. For example, the statement made by one participant in Canadian Group Two, "I don't watch many sitcoms," is made in the middle of the interview and distances him only slightly from the comments he has made and is about to make. We can know this because he has already expressed a great deal of positive opinions about *Seinfeld*, and goes on from that statement to speak freely about programs that can be compared to *Seinfeld*. It is apparent that he has an easy familiarity with the TV schedule and that his use of the repertoire places him just slightly outside of a construction of the average audience of over-indulging situation comedy viewers. Through the use of this repertoire, the participants' construction of the mass, low culture sitcom audience can begin to be seen.

Another participant draws on the same repertoire in Canadian Group One, but uses it to signal a much greater distance from his own comments. At the beginning of the interview, he says, "Normally, I hate situation comedies." His comments to follow are much more critical of the sitcom genre than those made by the participant above. This participant is contextuallizing his comments by signalling that he certainly has

serious criticisms about situation comedies and that he is not prepared to accept any programs without challenge. Yet his statement, "Normally, I hate situation comedies," is still not a direct reference to fact. Apparently there is much about television and sitcoms that has caught his attention. He goes through the interview to speak about several different programs and offer well developed opinions of them. His statement is not meant to express that he has rejected all situation comedies. It is rather meant to situate his position relative to others which may be less critical of the genre.

These comments are considered to be part of an interpretive repertoire because, in the context of the entire interview, it is apparent that their meaning is not directly referential. Other participants made similar "I do not usually watch television" comments, but it is apparent that these statements expressed fact, rather than context. These participants did not have strong opinions about television or sitcoms and were not prepared to offer many examples of programs to which *Seinfeld* could be compared.

The Dutch participants' use of the "I Do Not Usually Watch Television" repertoire was also used to mark a distance between the participants and their own apparent familiarity with the television schedule. In fact, this repertoire was employed more frequently by the Dutch participants. Almost all participants prefaced or appended their comments by drawing on the repertoire, as, for example, the statement made by a participant in Dutch Group Three, "if there is a movie I want to see, then I tape it. For the rest, it doesn't interest me." This comment follows the participant's report that he watches two to three hours of television per day. Another version of the repertoire frequently used is, "You do not stay home especially for television (3.16)."

Distance from the medium is also expressed by Dutch participants when they describe their television use as primarily for keeping themselves informed about current events. For example, in Dutch Group Four, one participant initially reports that she primarily watches documentaries and current affairs programs and certainly not game shows. Through the course of the interview, she goes on to talk about a wide variety of programs, including situation comedies and even eventually admits to watching game shows. In this version of the interpretive repertoire, the reporting of one's own socially responsible use of television expresses a distance from the "escape" programs available. Once more, it is also apparent that such programs have indeed captured these participants' interest.

The Canadian Repertoire: "Situation Comedies are Phoney"

Both national groups employed the "I Do Not Usually Watch Television" repertoire, but they also each used repertoires that were completely absent in the other group's discussion. Many Canadian participants criticized the artificialness of the plot of *Seinfeld* and other situation comedies. When such criticisms are looked at in the context of entire interviews, it becomes evident that these comments are more like a game than serious criticism. It is only in the context in which such comments are made that the severity of the criticism can be determined. The following comments were made by Canadian Group Two:

Annie: [regarding the character Elaine walking out of a department store in search of a mirror to view the dress that she is trying on] Who would

wear it out on the street, number one?

John: How can you walk out of a store with... aren't the tags on it?

Doesn't... the alarm... especially in New York.

Nicole: Especially in an expensive store like Barney's.

John: You'd hear all the alarms going off, you know. So. That's not realistic.

Annie: And how realistic was it that they all met in the same place? Like, is it not supposed to be a huge department store?

All of the participants in this exchange also expressed warm praise for *Seinfeld*. They described it as one of their favourite television shows. Therefore, the above comments should apparently not be construed as expressive of criticism. Rather, these comments are a play with the nature of situation comedy and the constraints of developing a plot that must unfold within twenty minutes of running time. The participants are not offering serious criticism.

However, similar comments made by other speakers are used to express more deliberate criticism. Although focusing on the same characteristics of situation comedies, the following statement expresses a more serious criticism than those above:

I don't find *Seinfeld* particularly funny because it's so transparent what's going to happen. What idiot sells his clothes and gets stuck without them? And you go, 'This is too stupid for me.'

This speaker turns the object of the game to serious criticism; she truly does not enjoy *Seinfeld*. During the interview she mentions other sitcoms that she does enjoy, as well

as other genres of comedy. She is not, therefore, completely unappreciative of comic antics and extremes, but is using the repertoire to express criticism, rather than to further her appreciation of the program.

Potter and Wetherell (1988) have observed that the contradictions of interpretive repertoires can be apparent to other participants in conversations and to the speakers themselves. For example, one participant draws on the "Sitcoms Are Phoney" repertoire to talk about *Seinfeld* and is slightly puzzled as she notes that she has inadvertently criticized the show:

It's odd. You know one of the things, or a couple of the things that I find odd or unusual about it should be reasons for me disliking it. But I kind of bypass those. ... And a lot of it is just I find the things that happen really implausible. I've always found the situation implausible. Here's Jerry Seinfeld, here's his ex-girlfriend who wanders in day or night regardless, his other buddy who wanders in day or night regardless, Kramer who wanders in day or night regardless.

Participants also challenge one another on their use of the repertoire. For example:

Jennet: What guy would go into a women's dressing room and take his clothes off and sell them to some other guy?

Ronald: No, there is a suspension of disbelief and some absurdity. The basic set up of returning some clothes, being stuck in the clothing booth with, you know, in your underwear and needing to have someone have you your clothes. People sort of experience minor things like that. The basics are there.

The use of the interpretive repertoire is not necessarily an unacknowledged act. Although it is a tool used in conversational speech which facilitates the natural flow of expression, it does not necessarily go unchallenged. While the use of a repertoire seems 'natural,' it is also apparent to speakers and listeners that a repertoire is not always logical.

The Canadian participants' use of the "Sitcoms are Phoney" repertoire is significant to the present study for two reasons. First, an understanding of its functions allows the opinions expressed by the participants to become more clear. Although such criticism was offered, it does not, in the end, contradict the participants' reports that they enjoyed *Seinfeld*. Second, it is significant to this cross-cultural comparison that the Dutch participants do not use such a repertoire. They do not express themselves or engage television programs this way. The specific criticisms offered of *Seinfeld* by them are not open to a range of interpretation. The participants' criticisms tended to remain constant throughout the interviews. This difference in the available means of expression can be seen as a step toward the different meanings that the Dutch and Canadian participants made from *Seinfeld*.

The Dutch Repertoire: "Laugh Tracks Are Irritating"

When the Dutch participants pointed out that a program has a laugh track, they were usually expressing dislike for the program. Several participants who reported that they did not enjoy *Seinfeld* said that its faults were underscored by the artificial laugh track that provided canned laughter for jokes which were not even funny. For example:

Irene: I have said this before. Actually, their laugh track is really irritating.

Marie: Ha, ha, ha. Yeah, when there is nothing funny.

Irene: Indeed. If we can decide for ourselves when we laugh, I do not need to hear that laughter.

In this exchange, criticism is expressed about *Seinfeld* which is made apparent to the participants in their mutual understanding of the repertoire. When they hear mention of a laugh track, they understand that it is a signal for criticism to follow. Although this may not seem immediately apparent in the above excerpt, the context of the interview and the participants' mutual understanding makes the intended meaning apparent. Later in the interview, the participants recall their earlier use of the repertoire when they are discussing a program that they enjoy:

Lies: Is *Mr. Bean*, that laugh track, is that added in?

Irene: Yes, I think so.

Lies: In the background.

Marie: I do not know, but in any case, it does not bother me.

Irene: No, me neither, no.

Marie: Maybe I would still laugh.

The participants note their own inconsistencies that they have thrown out in the course of the discussion and question the repertoire. Although they note their own logical inconsistencies, they are not deeply confused about the meaning that they are communicating, that *Seinfeld* is not a very good program and that *Mr. Bean* is entertaining.

The interpretive repertoires that were used in the focus group sessions in this study have been mainly discussed as rhetorical devices. They are an available means of expression, chosen by speakers because of their goodness of fit in the flow of conversation. Their meanings are not lost by fellow participants. However, such rhetorical devices may play a role in directing viewers' attention to certain aspect of television programs. Viewers may attend to comedy's artificial nature or to laugh tracks at the expense of other elements. That is, the available means of expression may also play a role in the meaning that is ultimately derived from a program. Interpretive repertoires, therefore, mark the first distinction in meaning making between the Canadian and Dutch audiences.

Organizational Strategies

Having gained more reliable access to the participants' discourse through tracing out the interpretive repertoires they use in talking about television, we can look at their judgements of *Seinfeld* and some of the meaning they made from it. This initial categorization seemed to influence the amount of attention a viewer was willing to give to a program and their expectations of enjoyment seemed to directly influence the amount of enjoyment they in fact experienced.

The categorization structure of television shows can be seen in the kinds of comments that each of the groups of participants made about *Seinfeld*. The Canadian audience members, particularly those who watched *Seinfeld* regularly and enjoyed it, placed the show in a category of the more sophisticated American situation comedies.

They did not define the show by referring to any other American television genres and made only a few references to international comedy. That is, they did not go outside the realm of American sitcoms to find examples to explain what, precisely, *Seinfeld* is. To them, *Seinfeld* was a carefully constructed, adult show that relied more on verbal, cerebral humour than on physical slapstick. One participant commented:

The *Seinfeld* show is written differently than all the other sitcoms like *Roseanne* and that. It's complicated, writing it, I would think. The writers of the show... When they really put it together, the story, everything fits nicely, like a piece of literature almost. You know. It's not like the other shows where it's like slapstick and funny. You know, jokes here and there.

It seems that much of the admiration of *Seinfeld* comes from its structure. Several Canadian participants noted that the show is unique because each episode is comprised of several subplots that are edited together in quick succession. As the above quotation indicates, this style separates *Seinfeld* from the rest of the spectrum of American sitcoms. It was the structure that viewers found entertaining. "But the times I do like it, I find it interesting, I like the way they connect all the different subplots."

This was not the conclusion drawn by many of the Dutch participants. The quality of *Seinfeld* did not receive the same evaluation from them as it did from Canadian participants. Where Canadian participants thought the structure of subplots was entertaining, one Dutch participant said, "There are only two or three jokes. They do nothing but repeating and repeating, so it is very predictable." When probed further:

Facilitator: And you think that the little stories that kept repeating was

boring? It wasn't funny because it -

Willem: Predictable.

Frans: - because, you know, when at the start you know what is going to happen.

So. When I have heard or seen the joke one time, it is boring to hear it seven or eight times.

Although not all Dutch participants shared such strong distaste for *Seinfeld*, they expressed a general feeling that the program was, although mildly entertaining, a very simple construction. While the Canadian respondents commented on the attention that is required to watch the show, Dutch respondents spoke of the lack of effort that it requires. One participant explained that one of the reasons he liked *Seinfeld* was that "you can drink a cup of tea or go away for five minutes [and] it's still funny."

A flag that provided a clue to the way that participants assigned value to programs were the genericized labels that they used to describe their preferred programs. For example, the Canadian participants often contrasted *Seinfeld's* brand of verbal humour to the physical, slapstick humour of other situation comedies. That is, the term slapstick served as a division between the humour domain of *Seinfeld* and other comedies. For example, one participant remarked, "But see, *Roseanne* is a slapstick comedy. *Seinfeld* is a little bit more you can relate to." Although it could be argued that there are actually few elements of traditional slapstick in *Roseanne*, it is still a series that falls somehow outside the scope of the intellectual humour of *Seinfeld*.

In a similar manner, Dutch participants placed the genericized label, 'dry,' on their favourite British comedies, no matter how the humour was presented in the actual

show. Just as *Roseanne* was condemned by the Canadian participants as slapstick, the Dutch participants praised *Mr. Bean* as dry:

Marie: More subtle, it is -

Irene: A lot more subtle.

Marie: Yes, it is a lot drier... yes, he does do it to get laughs, of course, but it is not really exaggerated.

Lies: It is just very British, this series. I find... I really like that.

These labels provide a clue to the hierarchy of value that speakers place on the programs they are discussing. In this case, the participants want to express praise for *Mr. Bean* and therefore put it into the category of British quality comedy and apply the characteristics that are part of that category, dryness and subtlety.

Hierarchy of Value and Perception of Audience

The categorization of television programs was extended in both groups to categorizations of audiences. Discussion of audience takes opinions beyond viewers' comments about the plot, characters and structure of a program, into a discussion of what they might get out of it, what sort of pleasure or enjoyment they think the program might provide. Further, the extent to which viewers identify with the audience that they perceive follows a program, will speak of the amount of attention those viewers may be willing to give to the show. Participants in both groups worked out *Seinfeld's* probable audience by looking at who they in fact know watches the program and by making guesses at the target audience's attributes from clues from the text of the show.

Canadian Perceptions of Audience

Beyond their own observations of who makes up the *Seinfeld* audience, the Canadian participants made guesses to the membership of the audience by noting that, in the genre, *Seinfeld* is a program which requires the most brain power to be understood. Therefore, most participants envisioned an audience of more sophisticated viewers with higher levels of education for *Seinfeld*. The genre of situation comedy, in general, is considered by some Canadian participants to be insulting in its simple, physical humour. One participant remarked:

I generally dislike situation comedies because I find them almost insulting because they can be so stupid. Like, what idiot would get into that situation, or who would handle something like that, or this is so beyond belief that I can't even, you know, I don't find it funny. Someone like Jerry Lewis or whatever, the falling on his face, the slipping on the slippery floor, like, 'Crawl off the floor, stand up.'

Hence the boundary between *Seinfeld* and other American situation comedies is established between stereotypical, slapstick comedy and its counterpart, the cerebral *Seinfeld*. Many participants remarked that *Seinfeld* required more effort and attention to watch than the average sitcoms because of the structure of subplots. The following exchange contrasts the attention required by *Seinfeld* to its opposites in the genre:

Nicole: I hate to say it, like, *Seinfeld* is even more cerebral. Like you have to be, you gotta really think about the way the connections are like... because they're not like *Roseanne*.

John: That's right. If you don't think, if you're not really paying attention and thinking about the connections, I don't think you'll get them. You really have to reflect on the show a bit and you'll get these connections.

To the Canadian audience members then, *Seinfeld* stands out as a sophisticated program in the spectrum of American situation comedy. Its structure is more intricately crafted than the average of the genre. It is, therefore, a program that demands attention and therefore, an audience of sophisticated viewers.

Not only did the viewers predict an audience composition through *Seinfeld*'s content, but, conversely, the perception of a target audience served as an indicator of the kind of content of that program. The Canadian participants had heard a fair bit of chat about *Seinfeld*, mostly at work, and, generally, knew something about the composition of the *Seinfeld* audience. For example, one participant who reported that he had heard that his colleagues enjoyed the show, drew the conclusion that, "maybe a lot of this stuff blue collar people can't relate to." A knowledge of audience composition, it would seem by this comment, plays an important part in categorizing the type of content that a program would likely have. Because a white collar audience watches the show, this participant reasons that it has a brand of humour and type of subject matter that a blue collar audience, that which watches *Roseanne*, would not enjoy. In a similar manner, a participant from Canadian Group Three, explains the relationship of audience class to subject matter:

Maybe I'm completely wrong, but my perception is that maybe people with less education, or with lower income, focus on other things - trucks and fishin' or

something like that - might not enjoy that [*Seinfeld*] brand of humour as much as what's-his-name doing a pratfall on *Three's Company*.

The equation made in the above quotation relates lower education, trucks and fishin' and slapstick humour. Another participant attempted to explain the difference in sitcom audiences by relating the type of humour and lifestyle of the characters to audience interest:

I think *Frasier* is a lot like *Seinfeld*. Same kind of audience. Like they had the same kind of... you have to be really paying attention, and it's a subtle kind of humour. Like it isn't kind of a slap in your face. But the psychiatric... they're both psychiatrists and what they laugh at is really, is, is... to like that *Roseanne* audience is they think those guys are snobs, they're stupid, 'This is a dumb show.' But the urban professional kind of group would look at that and think it, 'Yeah, that's funny.' You know he has this, the dog that bugs him or whatever. That's, that would be a humorous thing. Where, in a *Roseanne* audience would go, 'Yeah, so big deal.'

Many Canadian participants expressed a perceived association between lower income, lower levels of education and physical comedy. This perceived audience division was summed up by a Canadian participant simply as, "People who watch *Roseanne* are not the people who watch *Seinfeld* and vice versa."

The Canadian participants, therefore, generally agreed that the audience of *Seinfeld* fell into the young, urban professional mould. A taste for the humour of *Seinfeld* has some relationship with education. For example, one Canadian participant,

a lawyer, situated *Seinfeld* in the following context:

I was robing for a trial in a locker room at the court house filled with lawyers. Half the lawyers were talking about *Seinfeld* the night before. Um, you know, usually they're chit-chatting about what judge is screwing who or this, that and everything else, but they were all talking about *Seinfeld*.

Through knowing the audience that the program generally attracts and that audience's attributes and tastes, a viewer can pull out established categories of taste. With this information, they can narrow the possible fields of quality, the program's appeal to themselves, and the meaning that can be derived from it. The decoding process comes not only from the information provided from the television text, but from the wider context of the program's audience. The entertainment that can be derived from a program is dependent on whether viewers feel that they are properly a member of its audience.

Dutch Perceptions of Audience

The Dutch viewers did not take up membership in the *Seinfeld* audience as enthusiastically as did many of the Canadian viewers. Their conclusions about the make-up of the *Seinfeld* audience were often not as flattering as those drawn by Canadian participants. Some participants in Group One in particular associated American situation comedies directly with an audience with lower levels of education, and an associated lower income and a somewhat less cultured taste.

In this group, only one of the participants had previously seen *Seinfeld*. She

worked in a factory while the other members had office jobs, with more responsibility. In the following exchange between the two, one of the members, a chartered accountant, supports his contention that *Seinfeld* likely appeals to a less educated audience:

Willem: Well, she [Gerda] saw it already and we hadn't. And she works in a factory and we go to... That's typical. She knew it better.

Gerda: His crowd watches completely different things than -

Willem: - than this.

The white collar participants used the blue collar participant's enjoyment of *Seinfeld* to demonstrate its audience and its attributes and to therefore suggest that it is not a "quality" program.

However, most of the participants in the Dutch groups did not express themselves in such explicit terms. Like their Canadian counterparts, when asked to describe the composition of the *Seinfeld* audience, the Dutch participants drew on their established knowledge of the typical demographic distinctions that separate various television audiences. Most participants agreed that *Seinfeld* would fall outside the field of interest of people who are in their early twenties or younger. Such an audience, they said, is generally attracted to *Baywatch*, MTV, or violent action films. However, there was less agreement on the upper age limit, education, or socio-economic levels of the *Seinfeld* audience. Many participants argued that the single, over-riding criterion that defines membership in the *Seinfeld* audience is a specific taste in programming, and in American comedy in particular. For example, one participant argues that age is not a factor in determining a taste for *Seinfeld*:

Some people, they, if they are sixty, then they are still interested [in *Seinfeld*].

And some people, who are forty, now, they do not watch it any more. They only watch *Het Nationaal* [a current affairs program] and that is it.

In this quotation, it can begin to be seen that there may be a lower value attached to a taste for American comedy or *Seinfeld*. That is, an interest in programming that *Seinfeld* is contrasted to one for current affairs programs. Several participants seemed unsure as to the relevance of the discussion of educational levels in the *Seinfeld* audience, when it seemed evident that there was nothing intellectually challenging in the show. For example:

Facilitator: Is there a specific occupation group that you think watches this more than others? Or a type of person that would watch this more than others?

Miep: No, I don't think so.

Facilitator: So you would say: everyone.

Miep: You don't have to think very hard.

Maarten: Has nothing to do with intelligence.

Margriet: No, it's nice to watch, but it has nothing to do

with intelligence, no. I don't think so. It's a nice watch for a half an hour.

Another participant from Dutch Group Three also rejects the relevance of the relationship of education to watching *Seinfeld* by asserting, "It is just what you have interests in. So you needn't have studied for it [*Seinfeld*] at all." The implication that a taste for *Seinfeld*

signals the very opposite of a refined, educated taste is clear in the above quotations. The direct relationship between this unrefined taste and American comedy was brought out explicitly in Dutch Group Four. Once again, demographics are rejected as relevant:

Facilitator: Is there a certain occupational category who would watch this perhaps more?

Marie: No, I don't think so.

Facilitator: Or is it more determined by age or type of person?

Irene: Whether it is American humour or not.

Marie: Yes, exactly. It is more the humour, I think.

Later in the discussion, this topic is brought up again and addressed in more explicit terms:

Irene: Now, it [*Seinfeld*] did not meet my expectations. I found it less appealing, and at least, yeah, less - how can I say it -

Facilitator: Just say it.

Irene: Dumb American humour.

Hence, Irene's original statement that the identifying characteristic of the *Seinfeld* audience is clarified with an explicit value judgement: American humour is low quality.

The positions that the Dutch participants took in the television audience further illustrates the value they gave to *Seinfeld* in the spectrum of television programming. For the most part, they took up membership in the audience at the opposite end of the spectrum from that of *Seinfeld*. Most of the participants who watched *Seinfeld* for the first time in focus group sessions declared that they had no interest in viewing it again.

For example:

Marie: ... I would have changed the channel.

Irene: Yes, but I would... I do not have to see this again.

A participant in Dutch Group One also agrees that he will not watch *Seinfeld* again, and positions himself inside a particular audience who also would not watch the program saying, "When I think about my colleagues, they won't watch this. And I won't watch it too." However, most participants did not entirely reject American situation comedies. Those who had watched *Seinfeld* a few times before the focus group sessions were less critical of the show. Although most felt it was a rather simple-minded production, they had found it to be relaxing entertainment. The comment from Dutch Group Two, "I think it was funny, but I didn't laugh very hard. So I think it is nice to watch, but it's not something I would stay home for," is representative. Most Dutch participants also seemed fairly comfortable discussing other American situation comedies that they enjoy. Not only were the participants familiar with a number of titles, but they were also comfortable in talking about why they liked them. For example:

Irene: [about *The Powers that Be*] But it is about a... he is a senator, I believe, and then his family, and then his has two children. Now, that is it.

Marie: Is that an English soap or an American?

Irene: I think American, I believe, but it is funny. And *The Nanny* I also like a lot.

Even though the speakers have already placed caveats on their opinions (even though it

is American, it is funny) there are further limits to such discussion. All participants denied ever entering into conversations about American situation comedies with their friends or colleagues. For example:

Facilitator: Do you talk with your colleagues or friends about television?

Anneke: The only thing you say is 'did you see that movie last night,' or 'did you see that.' But never that we would talk at length about it.

Nicolaas: About movies, not really. About documentaries or so -

Anneke: That we do.

Nicolaas: That is more frequently talked about.

Facilitator: Yeah. And about comedies or so?

Piet: No, I do not believe so.

Nicolaas: No. Not really. At least not with me.

Piet: And with me.

Anneke: Also not with me. Really only politics or documentaries, but a movie, uh -

However, the participants described the British comedy, *Mr. Bean* as a fair topic for chat at the office:

Nicolaas: What is talked about more for us is, for example, more of the laugh comedies. Just like *Mr. Bean*, for example.

Facilitator: Are there others that uh -

Nicolaas: Let's see. What else do we have? *Mr. Bean* and - what else is there? No. More of those really slapstick comedies. That dry humour.

And again:

Marie: Maybe someone at work says, 'Hey did you watch that yesterday?'

He could have said, 'What nice weather we are having today,' but -

Facilitator: So it does not happen often then?

Lies: It does, about that English comic.

Facilitator: *Mr. Bean*?

Lies: Yes, *Mr. Bean*.

Irene: I have often watched *Mr. Bean* and then everything he says is mimicked and laughed about.

The hierarchy that seemed to be revealed in the above exchanges is that British comedy, of which *Mr. Bean* was an example, fell into the same category as documentaries and feature films; fair topics for discussion in public. When the participants reported that they did not discuss television comedies with their friends, they apparently meant American comedies specifically.

It would seem, then, that there are degrees of distance that the Dutch viewers placed between themselves and American situation comedy. They did not seem to accept new programs as worth their time and effort at all. After some viewings, and having gained familiarity, the participants found entertainment in several American comedies. Yet they assigned those programs a lower value than British comedies. British comedies were held at a position at which participants felt comfortable talking about them in public. They did not mind admitting to membership in the audience of British comedies and, apparently, this membership was shared by their peers.

It has also been demonstrated that *Seinfeld* is constructed by the Canadian and Dutch viewers in different ways. They drew on different organizational schemas to make sense of the show. Canadian viewers tend to draw on an organizational frame that distinguishes sophisticated from low culture American situation comedies and situate *Seinfeld* in the sophisticated camp. Many Canadian viewers also had an image of the audience *Seinfeld* attracts as educated and upwardly mobile. Often, those who enjoy the show felt they belonged to the upwardly mobile group. Dutch viewers, conversely, divide television comedies into an American/low culture and British/sophisticated structure. The audience that *Seinfeld* corresponded to, then, is often a less educated group, since, to them, watching the program did not require any brain power or attention. This difference in methods of categorizing is particularly salient because, ultimately, the Dutch and Canadian groups generally come up with different opinions of *Seinfeld*. Travelling by different routes, the two audiences arrived at different points.

Expressions of Domestic Context

The final difference between the Canadian and Dutch structures of talking about television that is relevant to this study is the network of interpretive repertoires that the Canadian audience members use to sort out national identity and television that the Dutch viewers do not use. As mentioned in Chapter Four, the question of whether the participants would prefer to watch a program like *Seinfeld* that was produced in their own country struck a chord with the Canadian participants and evoked a type of discussion

that was markedly different from that of the Dutch participants. In both groups, the question led directly to a discussion of their country's public broadcasting achievements and shortfalls. The Canadian discussion quickly moved into the area of national symbols and cultural representation on television, and within that discussion, the construction of an 'other' identity (American) which illustrated the Canadian identity through describing what it is not, was constructed. The Dutch participants did not see a relevant relationship between cultural representation and television.

Dutch Participants' Talk of Public Broadcasting

When the Dutch participants were asked if they would prefer to see a program like *Seinfeld* produced in the Netherlands, their responses did not so much reveal their perceived cultural distance from the United States as it sparked a discussion of the state of the Dutch broadcasting system.

Many of the Dutch participants expressed dissatisfaction with Dutch television dramas and comedies. A central point of discussion was criticism of the fact that several Dutch situation comedies are based on programs originally produced in Great Britain or the United States. In each of the Dutch groups, the participants linked the question of their possible preference for viewing a program similar to *Seinfeld*, but domestically produced, to the issue of the copying of foreign programs in the Netherlands. Most participants were greatly unsatisfied with the results of such efforts. For example:

Miep: *Man About the House* is an English comedy. I like to see it on TV.

But now it is played in Dutch and I don't like it because the language, or

the actors, or - but it's the same comedy.

Facilitator: Uh huh. But in Dutch now.

Miep: In Dutch. And I don't like it in Dutch and I like it in English.

The discussion in all groups centred around the likely results of *Seinfeld* being filtered through the Dutch production system and coming out as another bad copy of an imported original:

Nicolaas: Now, if you would make exactly the same program in the Netherlands, then I would not think that it would amount to much.

Anneke: No, because I think that there is a very big difference between American and English humour [as compared to Dutch]. You cannot translate that and you cannot change that. So I think that this series, even if they were to compare [imitate] or copy it in Dutch, then it would come across very differently. Then it would not come across very well.

Those who did not enjoy *Seinfeld* to begin with, thought that it would be even worse if it was re-made in the Netherlands:

Facilitator: So for you guys, if *Seinfeld*, if there was a comedian from Amsterdam, and he has a bunch of friends, and this happens, then...

Irene: Then I would like it even less.

Marie: Maybe it does depend on how it is acted.

Irene: If they act it well.

Marie: But not if you copy it.

The discussion of the possibility of copying *Seinfeld* in Dutch led, in each

of the groups, to a discussion of Dutch broadcasting practices in general. The participants evaluated the success of productions of their public broadcasting system and compared and contrasted programs. Like their Canadian counterparts, the Dutch observed that their domestic public broadcasting system has only a fraction of the financing that the American television industry has. They noted the resulting differences in programs:

I think that the American programs are set up bigger. There is a lot more show around it, more glamour, and the Dutch cannot do that, they do not have that, they do not know that. That is the feeling I have. That with an American program, it comes across a lot nicer. They make a little bit more of it.

Many participants expressed criticisms about the quality of television writing, that Dutch comedies "are so weak. There is no story to them." Also, "the actors are not good. Really unnatural." However, it should also be noted that every group also discussed exceptions to the rule of poor quality Dutch programming. Among the comedies that the participants found funny and entertaining, *Vrienden voor het Leven* (Friends for Life) was mentioned most often. Group Four, in particular, discussed the high quality of domestically produced public affairs programs. In fact, when describing what they typically watch on television, many participants cited domestic news and public affairs programs. However, in a direct contrast, few participants took up membership in the audiences of what they considered the poorly crafted Dutch programs. They observed that such programs were indeed popular, but the audience that did not recognize such poor quality were people other than themselves:

Irene: Now, like I just said, I do not watch Dutch [shows]. The Dutch [shows], they have - no, I really do not like them.

Marie: Then I just want to leave.

Irene: Yes, exactly. That [watching] is not the first thing that I would do.

Marie: But there are thousands, millions of people who think that it is the best of the best.

In particular, Dutch soap operas were singled out as a combination of a low quality genre, produced with low quality standards. The participants noted the popularity of domestically produced soaps, but again, the speakers distanced themselves from less discerning audiences who they observe enjoy the show:

Nicolaas: What is in right now, where all of the Netherlands are, is *Goede Tijden, Slechte Tijden* [Good Times, Bad Times]. Uh, what else is there?

Piet/Nicolaas: *Onderweg Naar Morgen* [Underway to Tomorrow].

Nicolaas: Those people, they watch it every evening at eight o'clock...

Piet: Dutch soaps, let us say, that is something to talk about.

Nicolaas: I have never seen it.

Piet: I do not watch it either.

Nicolaas: Let us just say that there are those here in the neighbourhood who would first watch that program before they let the dog out.

Piet: They even record it.

The final question on the interview schedule, then, led to a discussion of quality and types of programming produced in the Netherlands. Although opinions about programs

varied slightly, the general themes centred around the low quality of production and the low levels of funding as compared to the American industry. The participants' organizational schemas for television genres remained consistent - they freely discussed their participation in the audiences of public affairs programs and some comedy programs, but either explicitly denied membership in soap opera audiences or tactfully withdrew from those portions of the conversation. The discussion did not turn toward issues of Dutch cultural representation in Dutch television. Even when probes were introduced by the facilitator, the participants were not interested in a relationship between their cultural icons and television drama. For example:

Facilitator: So it is more important for you to see something nice than to see

Dutch people -

Nicolaas: Yes.

Anneke: Yes.

Facilitator: - in it, or Dutch things, or a windmill or something.

Anneke: It is - if I really want to watch something, then I find it important that there is a story in it, that it is nicely put together. Yes. That is appealing to watch. Not that half way through you fall asleep. And you have that more frequently with a Dutch piece than with, for example, *Full House*, or so.

Hence, it would seem that for these participants, issues of public broadcasting were not related to issues of the representation of national identity in a direct way. Although they continue to categorize genres of programs produced in Hollywood through their culturally

shared system of hierarchy, they do not use television content as an arena to construct their national identity or to create an image of an "other" as their Canadian counterparts do.

Repertoires of Canadian Identity and Television

Unlike the Dutch participants, the Canadians located a site for the construction of national identities within the arena of television viewing. Many saw Canadian television as an important site for promoting particularly Canadian images, although they felt that many Canadian images portrayed in the media did not represent the realities of life in Canada. Further, they used the television programs imported from the United States as fodder to construct an 'other' identity which they could hold up as a defining contrast to their own. Yet, at the same time, the participants criticized Canadian television and asserted that there are, in fact, no differences between Canadian and American culture. Generalizations could not be extracted from the discussion without an understanding of the way that interpretive repertoires were used by the participants. The participants were not making mistakes and were not indecisive, but were rather using interpretive repertoires for different functions. This use of interpretive repertoires is also interesting, because, from the very high level of variation in the statements made by Canadian participants as they spoke about their own national identity, the American "other" and television, it would seem that Canadians have a well developed "storehouse of possible understandings, legitimation and evaluations" (Potter & Wetherell, 1988) to bring to bear on such discussions. Not only did the final focus group question strike a

chord with the Canadian participants, but they had a complex set of mutually understood discourses at hand, to use to talk about the issue.

The "All North Americans Share a Culture" Repertoire

Through the course of the interviews, many Canadian participants commented that there is little or no difference between Canadian and American culture. Often, such comments were made in reference to the fact that they thought the basic action and events of the *Seinfeld* episode were recognizable in their own lives. For example, one participant remarked:

It could be any urban area, really. They've picked New York, and there's some references to New York specifically, but it could be any group of urban friends. The fact that it's in the States or Canada - I don't think it makes really all that much difference. It could be any North American city.

Such comments are sprinkled through the interviews. One participant remarked about events in the episode, "people will look at it and say, 'Oh, gee, yeah, typical Vancouver or New York.'" Several participants also asserted that, in general, the nation in which a television show was produced or set in has no bearing on whether they will be attracted to it. For example, a participant from Canadian Group One commented, "I, myself, would not differentiate between Canada or the U.S. If [a program] appealed to me, I would watch it. If it didn't appeal to me, I wouldn't watch it." Although such comments might be taken as direct observations of a homogeneous North American culture, they should be viewed in the context of other repertoires.

The Construction of New York as a Strange Place

Throughout the interviews, participants constructed an image of New York City as a strange place; as something different from other places, almost with its own laws of nature and social norms. Such an image sets up an "other" which is different from the daily life of the participants or of the average television viewer. This construction of New York, then, serves to mark the variation in the participants' statements that North Americans share a single culture. This construction of New York can first be seen in the elements of the *Seinfeld* episode that participants noted and described as being distinctly specific to the city. For example:

I like some of the language that they use. It's very New York to me. Like Jerry says, 'You were stepping out with my... hound's tooth jacket.' Who says that, you know? Sounds like an old forties New York line. There is other small little things like that, you know, but just recognize them as not being, or like, being New York especially.

The construction is carried further when participants situate the specific qualities of the characters as ones which could only be found in New York. The character, Kramer, is situated specifically in New York in the following exchange:

John: Do you know anybody at all that would act like a Kramer?

Nicole: No.

John: And do you find these people in New York? You know. Where do you find them, a person like him?

Not only is Kramer outside of everyday experience, he belongs in New York City.

Participants go so far as to map out their image of New York City. In doing so, their construction of the city as the "other" seems apparent. One participant explains:

Everybody, all over the world, I think, that when you say 'New York,' you can almost expect things like that. You can expect the fashions to be outrageous. You can expect the people to be very rude. You can expect stupid situations such as finding a man in a women's dressing room, taking his clothes off. It's almost expected to see something like that in New York.

Therefore, New York City is set up to be something beyond everyday experience. Such a construction is directly at odds with the "North Americans Share a Culture" repertoire.

The "Canadians Are Distinctive" Repertoire

Participants also contradicted their comments that North Americans share a culture by pointing to the unique characteristics of Canadians. For example, the same participant who was quoted above as saying that a group of urban friends would be essentially the same from one North American city to another, had this to say about the television program *Due South*:

And the other trait, they have given [the Canadian character] this sort of like, this overt Canadian politeness, that the Americans don't have. We're overly polite people. We'll stand there letting a hundred people go through the door and we'll never step ahead of the line up. Or hold the door open for like twenty people and they'll just keep walking through in the States. You'll never go anywhere because we're Canadian and we'll be the last one to walk through the door

because we are so polite. I get a kick out of that because I sense it's true to some extent.

A clear use of the interpretive repertoire can be seen here. As the speaker switches function, he changes to a new repertoire, and his statement seems to fit in the immediate context of the conversation.

This repertoire is also manifested in assertions that participants made which expressed a wish for Canadians to be distinguished from Americans in the media. For example, in Canadian Group Two, one participant reported that the Canadian singer, Celine Dion's wedding was covered by CNN. In the discussion that ensues, the participants feel a sense of satisfaction that a Canadian personality is represented in the American media, and press the member that viewed the report to give details as to whether Dion was presented as specifically Canadian, such as, "You recall how they introduced that story? Like, what was the first line they said? " and again, "Did they make any reference that she's a Canadian and she...?" If the Canadian participants want the members of their nation to be identified outside their borders, then they must also feel that there is something characteristic and distinguishable about being Canadian. They seem to want a distinction that already exists to be maintained.

Part of this line of argument refers to the fact that the participants seemed to feel disappointment in the fact that, if Canadians can be distinguished at all by people beyond their borders, the Canadian image is usually unidimensional and unrepresentative. One participant, for example, explains that, "everybody, even people in the States, our neighbours in the States, the only way that they can relate to Canada is if they see a lot

of snow, igloos, beaver pelts, and that's Canada." Not only do the participants want a representative image of Canadians in international media, this call for a distinction also has an attached connotation that Canadians should put their best faces forward to the rest of the world. Canadian Group Two also discussed the Canada-U.S. co-production made-for-television movie about the Dionne quintuplets. Although the participants are enthusiastic that a Canadian production has gained access to an American network, they are more reserved about the topic of the film:

Annie: Because, uh, I knew that this was going into the States, filtering through, and I thought, 'Good, they see that, you know, here's a French Canadian family.' They probably had no concept of French Canadian in the States. There, they only have concerns about the black issues and whatever.

Nicole: But look at how they portrayed them. Pretty badly. But that was the Dionnes, I guess.

The final part of the "Canadians are Distinctive" repertoire is the professed support for Canadian cultural products. A participant in Canadian Group Two explained that when she sees a program on television, "I wonder whether it's Canadian. And maybe I'll just give it a chance. Just a little bit longer." This participant was the only one across all three groups who openly and directly expressed support for Canadian productions. Yet, as it has become apparent from the interview excerpts above, the participants have ample means at their disposal to express the idea that Canada is somehow different from the United States. Although, perhaps less directly than this

speaker, they indicated the attention they have given to Canadian television.

The "Canadian Television is Inferior" Repertoire

Like their Dutch counterparts, the Canadian participants observed that the financing for their domestic television production does not even begin to compare with that in Hollywood and that the programs that are produced in Canada do not compare to the polished quality of American programs. Also similar to the Dutch participants, the Canadian participants usually had ready a list of exceptions to the rule of Canadian programs which were, in fact, entertaining. What moves the Canadian participants' criticism into the realm of a repertoire is the way that they very definitely voiced condemnation, along with a set stock of criticisms, which were expressed in the context of the repertoires listed above.

The first part of the "Canadian Television is Inferior" repertoire is the direct assertion made by several participants that they prefer not to watch Canadian-made television. For example:

... in fact I almost have a strong bias against anything I know is CBC produced. And I will almost go out of my way to criticize it. So, anything there would start with a bit of bias. So I wouldn't go out of my way to watch anything that is Canadian. It would either have to depend on what it is and whether I - Having said that, it's neat to see things that are a bit more Canadian. I am trying to think of the one - I like *North of 60*, for example.

The distance that this speaker places between herself and Canadian television must be

understood in the context of her comments that follow. She uses the "Canadian Television is Inferior" repertoire to suggest a general dissatisfaction, not to literally indicate that she in fact watches no Canadian programs.

A criticism that plays a central role in this repertoire is that Canadian programs place too much emphasis on the depiction of Canadian cultural artifacts and hence become very artificial. For example, one participant remarks, "I don't think you need forced Canadianna with beaver pelts on the walls and, you know, pictures of Trudeau in people's bedrooms or something to make it a Canadian experience." Although such elements are likely not used to a great extent in Canadian television programs, these speakers' fellow participants understand his reference and intended meaning. This type of criticism continues by saying that images of Canadian culture that are depicted in television programs are unidimensional and unrepresentative of people's daily reality. In each of the sessions, the Canada-U.S. co-production detective series, *Due South*, was brought into the discussions by the participants. This program particularly provided grist for the mill of this repertoire because of the way that the plot is contrived so that the Canadian character is usually wearing a red serge Mounted Police dress uniform. The program was cited as a prime example of the unrealistic portrayal of Canadians. An example can be seen in an excerpt from Group Two:

Nicole: He's standing in this dress, you know, red dress RCMP uniform and this, you know, this cheesy Chicago cop in there chasing these drug guys.

Now come on. Isn't it too bad he sold out?

Annie: Instead of wearing a superman cape, you've got this uniform on. It's

just like a symbol.

And again in an excerpt from Group Three:

Ronald: In that show you got him walking around in a Mountie's uniform all day in an urban setting.

Edward: With a husky.

Ronald: Which is vaguely ridiculous.

Like other interpretive repertoires that have been discussed in this study, the meaning that speakers wish to express through this repertoire is varying and context dependent and is not necessarily literal. The meaning of the above quotations is, '*Due South* is a bad program,' which is signalled by the speakers' mention of stereotyped Canadian imagery.

In another conversational context, the repertoire can be used for another function, praise:

There is something called [*Due South*] which I tuned in and I thought was just hilarious, and I would like to find out if it was Canadian-made or not. It concerns this mountie, and I figured that since they have the mountie so down pat, it had to be Canadian.

Finally, the "Canadian Television is Inferior" repertoire includes the notion that Canada simply does not have sufficient talent capable of turning out entertaining television programs. The participant who above declared that she deliberately supports Canadian programming, later bemoaned the industry's limitations:

...maybe they can only do certain things. Maybe they can only do, like, the documentary and, you know, the variety half an hour show and sing-along or whatever. Maybe that's what they're good at.

Taken in the context of the conversations, these assertions that Canadians are untalented, may not be intended to literally express that idea, but rather are signal a more general and indirect sense of discontent with public television. For example, the following two speakers seem to indeed find entertainment on the Canadian airwaves:

Tom: And in fairness to CBC radio, for instance, *Canadian Air Farce* - I really enjoy that if I ever get around to ... it.

Robert: And *The Kids in the Hall* is O.K. Because it appeals to my warped sense of humour.

Yet seconds later, Tom remarks:

And the problem is, you couldn't do a comedy show. Fifty-two weeks of Canadian resource comedy show? No. What you need is like a mini-series. A five week run of it or so.

It would seem then, that specific types of criticism are not always meant to express a single, directly referential meaning. They evidently seem to be a stock of frames and available means of expression, the intended meaning of which does not seem to be missed by fellow participants in the discussions.

The significance of this set of interpretive repertoires that Canadians draw upon to discuss their cultural identity and its relationship with television is this: the Dutch participants expressed their opinions and criticisms without the aid of similar repertoires. It would seem then, that the shared discursive structures of Canadians do, in fact, have unique elements. The social environment and the television schedule in Canada have provided an environment where members of the society have developed a system of

speaking in a particular way. Interpretive repertoires are historically and culturally specific structures. Their use suggests a unique relationship among their users. Although interpretive repertoires cannot give us direct insight into the experience of television that Canadians may be sharing, their use does suggest that their users' attention to certain aspects of television. Canadians share a way of talking about television and are therefore likely attending to similar aspects of television.

Further, not only did the Canadian participants engage in identity construction in the focus group sessions, but the evidence also showed that their discursive structures in general differed from those of the Dutch participants. The interpretive repertoires and categories differed between the groups. The two groups, using these different structures, made different readings of *Seinfeld*. This comparative exercise has shown, therefore, that the Canadian and Dutch viewers are receiving television in different, socially situated ways.

CHAPTER SIX:

CONCLUSION

This study was designed to offer a contribution to the discussion surrounding the importation of American television into other countries, and the way that national cultures are involved in such broadcasts. At one end of the spectrum of this discussion is the position which holds that television can present a direct influence on culture; that the cultural products of one influential nation can change the cultures of other nations (such as in Goldman & Winter, 1991). Culture, in this formulation, is considered to be a static set of values and attributes, which can remain unchanged as long as outside influences are kept at bay. At fairly the opposite end of the spectrum in this debate, is the position which holds that television does not offer a direct influence, but is a component of daily experience which is made meaningful by viewers who process it through socially created and shared frames of reference. Culture, in such a framework, is conceptualized as socially created resources, and as the processes of giving shape and meaning to experience (such as in Schlesinger, 1991; Hall, 1992).

This study demonstrated that the meaning of a television program was not directly transferred to viewers. Rather, the participants were observed to construct meaning through referring to organizational frames and through negotiation with others who

meanings of an imported American television program were constructed by members of two different nations, and because those members employed different structures of meaning making, it supports the position that meaning making structures are socially situated and therefore, socially created. The American program was engaged by the Canadian and Dutch participants who constructed meaning from it through using their own structures of organizing meaning.

Through observing the way that the participants used these organizational structures, more general observations can be made about how the shared cultural processes were used in the discussions. It was apparent that, for the most part, the structures were mutually understood between the group members, and therefore, that they had been shared on some other social levels previous to the sessions. The participants assumed that their fellow group members could understand them, and indeed, explanations did not seem to be needed. Observations of the interaction and managed flow in the focus group discussions has provided evidence of the way that those strategies were used and mutually understood, and therefore, socially shared.

Therefore, since American television has been observed to be made meaningful through the active negotiation of viewers in ways that are nationally specific, this study provides evidence to support a stance opposite to the hypodermic model of American television export. Although this study cannot on its own provide enough evidence for a complete model of the reception of imported television within a national cultural context, it contributes empirical evidence which suggests that the process of reception of cultural products is indeed complex.

Summary of Observations

To briefly summarize the observations made in this study, it can be said that, although the Canadian and Dutch participants displayed some similarities in their discussion of *Seinfeld*, these were noted at only the most basic level. The two groups of national viewers shared the same basic impressions of the relationships between the characters and the 'situation' of the situation comedy. While these observations could be used to support the contention that texts offer some boundaries on the limits of interpretation (in support of positions such as that of Brunsdon & Morley, 1978), it should be further noted that the two national groups identified different characters to be the ones who played the prominent comedic role in the show. Although some basic elements of the texts seemed open to only one interpretation, those elements were from the outset combined in different ways.

The different perceptions of who the central players of *Seinfeld* were and which elements of action and pieces of dialogue functioned as jokes and punch lines seemed to be the result of different understandings of comedic genres and, more significantly, two different sets of systems of categorization. The Dutch participants placed *Seinfeld* in a category of low, mass culture material and thus expected to find few entertaining jokes in the program. The Canadian participants labelled *Seinfeld* as a sophisticated, well-crafted comedy and, in keeping with their expectations, they found many funny jokes in the show. In using their available reading tools, the national groups found entertainment in different places.

The two groups also expressed their opinions in different ways. All participants

drew on their available means of expression to talk about television. The differences in these available means of expression distinguished the content of the Canadian and Dutch discussions from each other. Because it was more common for Dutch television viewers in general to talk about laugh tracks, the participants did, and, likewise, because Canadian viewers in general talked more about the artificial nature of television comedy, the participants did so as well.

The significance of the findings of this study lies in the differences observed in the discussion of the two national groups of viewers. These differences reveal the negotiating strategies that are specific to each national context. Because these specifics of context were identified, this study supports the findings of other cross-cultural comparative reception studies. Liebes and Katz (1990) also found that textual readings and meaning making structures are culturally specific by revealing the differences between cultures. Where the present study extends the work such as that done by Liebes and Katz, is in suggesting that nations can produce a kind of shared culture. Liebes and Katz found cultural structures shared among ethnic groups. Although the participants of the present study may also have memberships in ethnic or sub-cultural identities, and in fact have different gender identities, some meaning making structures have been shown to be shared among them. Structures of meaning making were found that seemed to cut across some identities but did not cut across national boundaries. One type of cultural exchange, therefore, exists on a level of national culture.

This study also speaks directly to the issue of Canadian culture and imported American television. One contribution it makes to that dialogue is that, when compared

with other viewers, Canadians seem to receive and interpret cultural products with specifically Canadian tools. Beyond this generalization, the Canadian participants were observed to use the arena of television viewing as one in which to negotiate a cultural identity. They discussed Canadian iconography and evaluated its relationship to their own lives. Moreover, they took the material from the American program and used it to define themselves through similarity and difference. They observed that American culture and lifestyle was not completely different from their own, but more significantly, they used the elements of the American program to define what their identity was and was not.

Theory Building

A general model of television reception can be drawn from the analysis which can contribute to the theoretical base of further empirical studies. From the evidence drawn from these focus group discussions, it seems that viewers negotiate meaning from a television program by exercising their own culturally shared structures, not those that may have been used by the producers of a program. Viewers do not necessarily adopt a cultural frame which might be embedded in a televisual text, but rather articulate their own culture as they negotiate meaning from the text. This model of viewers articulating their culture can be drawn because the viewers in the two contexts that have been observed here used different negotiating strategies. Further, the Canadian participants were observed to go beyond negotiating meaning from the *Seinfeld* text to using elements from it to construct their own identity.

In addition to the theoretical contributions made by this study, the methodology employed in this study has proven to be useful in helping to focus observation on reception processes. The two most central elements of the methodology were the comparative aspect and the focus on the analysis of discursive structures. Because the comparative analysis of the Canadian and Dutch focus group transcripts clearly revealed the use of structures that were not common across groups, it can be concluded that comparison is one reliable method for tracing the boundaries of situated activities. Further, although differences in the readings of *Seinfeld* were evident at a superficial level, the examination of the discursive strategies employed by the participants revealed the processes by which those readings were constructed. Differences in readings are only symptoms of differences in negotiating strategy. To discern how discourse is put together by speakers is to observe the processes of the construction of meaning. Therefore, a focus on the observation of discourse has been shown, in this study, to be a significant part of the study of cultural processes.

Implications

The link between sociological research and public policy discussion in Canada was pointed to in Chapter Two. Much of the empirical research into Canadian culture and American television has taken a defensive posture. Research designs have been constructed to demonstrate that there is one correct set of attributes that make up Canadian culture which may be under threat from American cultural products. Such studies have the same theoretical underpinnings as Canadian Content policies which

suggest that domestic programming is fodder for a strong domestic culture.

Many of the empirical studies which have echoed and supported the theoretical framework of policy have been large scale statistical surveys. Their findings are generalizable to large populations. The goal of the present small scale, qualitative study is to build theory and to suggest definitions which might be useful in policy planning (Ang, 1994). In its theoretical stance it is not directly linked to protectionist policies as other studies have been. Yet the findings reported here indeed suggest definitions that may be useful in future broadcast policy discussions.

The most immediate goal of Canadian Content policy is the protection of the Canadian broadcast industry (Raboy, 1990). Yet at least a side benefit of the domestic industry continues to be the promotion of cultural identity. The contribution to the discussion of television and identity made here is that identities are not built solely from specific cultural icons. Canadian cultural products are not the only raw materials that are used in the negotiation of a cultural identity in the arena of television. The Canadian participants demonstrated a competence in the use of a complex system of repertoires that are available for talking about Canadian identity. Further, they used the materials of an American program for defining what their identity was not. Identities were negotiated in the play of similarities and differences, the American program was used to at least some extent by the Canadians in a constructive way. The evidence presented in this study can serve to expand the understanding of the scope of the activities of identity construction that are involved in the activity of watching television.

Future Directions for Study

The analysis of the focus group discussions has suggested several new directions in which further exploration may be taken to usefully provide further depth to the understanding of the social construction of the strategies used to negotiate meaning from television programs.

First, because this study has proved successful in providing useful evidence to support the assertion that Canadian and Dutch viewers negotiate meaning from imported television, it is likely that an expansion of the present scope of this study could also be useful. Particularly in the Canadian case, much of the direct evidence that supports a cultural sharing of structures has been taken from focus groups who have been recruited from a fairly limited geographic area. Expanding the study across the Canadian regions, and continuing to take it through more Dutch regions, should provide data that speaks more precisely to the kinds of structures that are used throughout the two nations.

Another way to expand or reinforce the findings of this study would be to expand it longitudinally. Cultural structures can be changed when variations or new ideas are developed and accepted throughout a culture (Giddens, 1990). The observations that have been made in this study are snap-shots on the use of meaning making structures in 1994 and 1995. A similar study carried out in future years could provide useful documentation of how the structures change.

An important new direction in which this study can be taken, is to explore similarities in the organizational structures used by closer geographic neighbours. Since interpersonal communication is the channel in which structures are shared, then one

might guess that there would be more similarities in the negotiating strategies of close geographic neighbours who have more chance of direct contact than there would be between two such distant nations as Canada and the Netherlands. To research the extent of a possible cultural blurring across geographical borders, the same types of focus groups should be conducted in the United States and Flanders, the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium. Indeed, the observations made by Bilteryst (1991) found that Flemish viewers did not exhibit a well-developed critical understanding of the American situation comedy genre are notably similar to the observations made of the discussions of the Dutch participants in the present study. The similarities between the present study and Bilteryst's suggest that it would be relevant to explore how negotiation strategies are used in comparison to those used by close geographic neighbours, who share a language and have exposure to much of the same media, and who, therefore, likely have a similar familiarity with the same types of television genres.

It was also noted in this study that the participants brought constructions of class to bear on their understanding of television programs. The meaning that they made from *Seinfeld* seemed to be directly related to the types of expectations associated with the class that they perceived they were a part of. Both national groups seemed to pay more attention to and had higher expectations of programs that they perceived were more acceptable to people with levels of education and a social position similar to their own. Different demographic groups could be questioned about their opinions of *Seinfeld* to see if viewers in different positions in society actually construct different readings as the participants in this study suggested. A study that focuses on demographic groups in just

one of the two nations would be valuable as would repeating the exercise with different demographic groups in both Canada and the Netherlands, to compare whether those readings again differed systematically by nation. Since the Canadian participants so often used the American sitcom *Roseanne* as the immediate low culture opposite to the sophisticated *Seinfeld*, the relevance of a study of *Roseanne* in different demographic groups is suggested by the data. Further, since Dutch participants gave less harsh opinions of *Roseanne*, a cross-cultural comparison of the reception of the show would also seem relevant.

Concluding Remarks

Is there a dimension to Canadian culture beyond the holding dear of the values of peace, order and good government? The observations made in this study suggest that the interactions of people inside Canada's borders have produced shared fames of understanding. What viewers in Canada do with television seems to be activities which are specific to the Canadian scene. Those who participated in this study seemed to make sense of their experiences in a similar way. The significance of this study is that it has suggested that Canadian viewers put their culture into practice as they watch television.

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