dichotomy underlying most discussions about gender and spectatorship is much too simplistic to capture the variety of female viewing pleasures evoked by looking at other women. The analysis of the unstable way in which the male body presents itself to the female spectator supports that argument. 'Masculine' voyeurism of the male body is prevented by visual and narrative codes that signify activity and control by the male pin-up. It shows that within patriarchy a simple reversal of the masculine structure of looking which is based on identification and voyeurism does not produce an equivalent female voyeurism. Female pleasures seem to have their own specific logic, evoked by traditional patriarchal codes of romance – as in the *Playgirl* case, – and by the more subversive codes present in some expressions of popular culture, like *Magnum* and *Miami Vice*, which undermine hegemonic definitions of gender.

Finally, one needs to bear in mind that 'the female spectator' as discussed here is principally an imaginary concept without a direct referent in reality. What is examined in analyses like these are the textual constructions of 'subject positions' to be taken up by actual audiences. In contemporary patriarchal culture, many of these subject positions have a gendered character, like voyeurism and masculinity, and romantic desire and femininity. Moreover, visual and narrative codes are often employed to realize an ideological 'closure' of the text, 'enforcing' a traditional gendered subject position. This does not mean, however, that female spectatorship can only be moulded in the traditional patriarchal framework, nor male spectatorship either for that matter. Texts themselves are seen to offer ample opportunities for cross-gender identification and voyeuristic pleasure, and in the eyes of some the demise of gender as a mechanism for structuring looking pleasure seems likely, turning it into a 'floating signifier . . . free to swirl around and substitute for its paired opposite at will' (Wernick, 1991: 63). Given such developments, the concepts of a 'male' or 'female' spectator position become problematic and too essentialist in character. However, we are still far away from such a situation, since society is permeated with successful discourses of identity that constitute human beings, and of which gender is not the least important.

Notes

1. Flitterman-Lewis (1992) argues that technical, textual and social aspects of film and television are so different that television needs a psychoanalytic theory of its own.
2 This chapter builds on a review essay of recent publications on gender and film published in the *Journal of Communication* (van Zoonen, 1992c).
3. Page numbers refer to the reprint of Mulvey's article in Erens, 1990.
4. Byars (1991) on the other hand points out numerous examples.
5. These films are titled *The Bad Sister*; *Riddles of the Sphynx*.
6. Reported in Modleski, 1990.
7. As referred to in Easthope, 1986.
8. Dutch *Playboy*, August 1992.

7

Gender and Media Reception

In the past decade a new interest in the audiences of the media has emerged, within feminist media studies and within media and cultural studies in general. A variety of media, technologies and genres have been subject to inquiry: popular music, women's magazines, communication technologies such as the telephone, the video cassette recorder (VCR) and the home computer, television and in particular soap operas.[1] A major reason for the increased popularity of studying media audiences lies in the shortcomings of the 'textual determinism' implicit in the content, semiotic and psychoanalytic approaches to media content that were discussed in the previous chapters. There is a strange mismatch between the textual focus of these feminist analyses and the concern of their authors with the cultural and political meaning of media content. In Chapter 2, for instance, the work of Tuchman (1978a) was referred to, who claimed on the basis of content analysis that the lack of positive female images on television would endanger the participation of women in the labour force. Likewise, psychoanalytic film theories, such as that of Mulvey (1975), contend that textual mechanisms place the audience of mainstream Hollywood movies and many other cultural products in the inexorable position of a 'male' voyeur of the female objectified body. While semiology posits less definitive effects, its scope remains restricted to the different meanings embedded in the text itself. However, the rather strong claims feminist media studies have made about the cultural and political meaning of media content seem hard to validate on the basis of textual analysis only: 'If we are concerned with the meaning and significance of popular culture in contemporary society, with how cultural forms work ideologically or politically, then we need to understand cultural products (or "texts") '*as they are understood by audiences*' (Lewis, 1991: 47, italics in original). Indeed, if we look again at the central questions about media, as put by various feminist theories, we recognize that audiences are actually at the core of their projects. To sum up briefly: some feminists charge media with maintaining sex role stereotypes, assuming that audiences will be affected by sexist media content. Other feminists add that media and pornographic media in particular instigate men into aggressive and violent acts against women. And again others incorporate insights from psychoanalysis and theories of ideology to support their claim that media contribute to the overall acceptance of the dominant ideology. In the typical research project such claims would be substantiated by a textual analysis of 'sex

roles', the 'construction of femininity', or the 'interpellation of the feminine subject' and other theoretical assumptions about the audience reaction and interpretation of the text. From such assumptions a view of the (female) audience would emerge as of passive individuals completely immersed in, incapable of and prevented from recognizing the ideological workings of patriarchal and capitalist hegemony.

Such analyses, however, do not explain much about the popularity and the meaning of popular genres to their audiences. Why are cultural forms like women's magazines, soaps and romances so immensely popular among women? Does their popularity also imply an acceptance of the dominant ideology embedded in the texts? How are they consumed in everyday life? What do they mean to women who enjoy them? Can the popularity of popular culture be reconciled with feminist concerns? What is the relation between audience pleasures and feminist politics? Such questions have neither been addressed nor answered by textual analysis while they are becoming increasingly pressing. A variety of new women's magazines have entered the market successfully adapting to the fragmentation of a formerly unified female readership: girls, young women, older women, career women, rich housewives, the avid cook or gardener, working women, secretaries, travelling women and the traditional housewife all happily subscribe to their own kind of women's magazine; romance novels have introduced new heroines profoundly touched by the feminist calls for independence, but still longing for and always rewarded with everlasting heterosexual romance;[2] soap operas like *Dallas*, *Dynasty* and their successors attract a predominantly female audience in spite of their 'sexist', 'patriarchal' and 'capitalist' content; and feminist media struggle to reach larger audiences, to attract advertisers and even to maintain their old readership (cf. Hermes and van Zoonen, 1988). On top of that, femininists themselves are 'coming out' in large numbers, admitting that they too are hooked on romances, soaps and women's magazines (Ang, 1985; Winship, 1987).

One of the reasons for the popularity of audience research is that these developments seem impossible to explain by textual analysis only. The new audience research assumes that the meaning of popular culture could be understood better if one would only ask the audience about their interpretations, use and experience.[3] Another important reason for the popularity of audience research has to do with the unsatisfactory politics hidden in the textual project. Feminist researchers analysing gender discourse in media texts implicitly claim to have access to the definitive ideological meaning of the text. They recognize the hegemonic thrust of media output and are able to resist its devastating effects, while the audience is still lured by its attractions and temptations. The aim of such research is, among other things, to raise the awareness of ordinary audiences to the extent that they too will recognize the patriarchal nature of media output and overcome their ill-informed preference for it. Dominant ideology expressed by mass media keeps women in their

subordinated position, so it is in women's own interest to identify the ideologies embedded in popular culture, and to refrain from their own consumption of it. Thus audience pleasures are not taken seriously as worthwhile in themselves, but are seen as a form of false consciousness. In a way, the feminist critic puts herself in the position of the benign teacher who is able to tell other women what is best for them. As said in Chapter 3, a deep gap is constructed between feminist media critics and other women, whose preferences and pleasures are neither taken very seriously, nor treated very respectfully.

Self-evident, straightforward and long overdue as the movement towards audience analysis may seem then, it is not simply a question of staking out a new terrain of analysis. It reflects a more fundamental paradigmatic shift that has taken place in feminist studies in general, from determinist explanations of women's subordination by, among other factors, mass media, as in the approaches referred to above, to a focus on processes of symbolization and representation which are central to this book, for example. Barrett (1992) claims that feminism has made a turn to 'culture' in the past decade, moving away from models of the social structure – be it capitalism or patriarchy – accounting for current gender relations, to questions of meaning, sexuality and political agency. Theoretically, this implies a change from social science disciplines to philosophy, psychoanalysis and linguistics. Empirically, the focus of attention moves from an analysis of social and economic structures, to the way people engage with these structures, how they make meaning of them, how they adapt to them and through which tactics they try to subvert them; 'making do' in the words of the French sociologist de Certeau (1984). Daily life is seen as the site where the concrete articulation of structures takes place and has become a major concern in contemporary cultural and feminist theory. In feminist media research this paradigmatic shift into 'poststructuralism' has produced new questions that can only be addressed by turning to the audience. A memory from the childhood of the black feminist critic bell hooks tellingly illustrates what one is looking for:

> When we sat in our living rooms in the fifties and early sixties watching those few black folks who appeared on television screens, we talked about their performance, but we always talked about the way white folks were treating them. I have vivid memories of watching the Ed Sullivan show on Sunday nights, of seeing on that show the great Louis Armstrong. Daddy, who was usually silent, would talk about the music, the way Armstrong was treated and the political implications of his appearance. Watching television in the fifties and sixties, and listening to adult conversation, was one of the primary ways many young black folks learned about race politics. . . . The screen was not a place of escape. It was a place of confrontation and encounter. (hooks, 1990: 3)

hooks' recollections show how hegemonic norms and values expressed in popular culture can be negotiated by ordinary people on a day-to-day basis. While the lack of black characters on the screen does not seem to have disturbed altogether the pleasures of watching TV, it nevertheless reinforced a social experience of being excluded and marginalized. hooks'

account suggests that television thereby contributed in some way to the family's construction of its black identity. Furthermore, her memories indicate that watching television was not an isolated individual experience but thoroughly intertwined with family life, generating conversation, interaction and critique that expanded to the church, barber shops, beauty parlours, bars and other places of social gathering.

In the theoretical framework developed in this book, the importance of audience experience is also paramount. Media are construed as 'technologies of gender', expressing and incorporating gender discourse that arises from and regulates social, political and other contexts. The questions to be answered by audience research concern the use and interpretation of gendered media texts by gendered audiences. How does audience reception interact with the construction of gender at the level of identity formation, subjectivity and discourse? How do media as 'technologies of gender' regulate and discipline various social contexts? And how does this process relate to a feminist concern, however defined? In this chapter I shall review the kind of research that has emerged around these issues and which is known under a variety of labels: qualitative audience research (Jensen, 1986); reception analysis (Morley, 1991); new audience research (Curran, 1990); critical audience research (Carragee, 1990); empirical reception research (Livingstone, 1991); ethnography (Radway, 1989); interpretative media studies (Carragee, 1990). I shall adhere to one concept throughout this chapter, reception analysis, claiming that processes of use, negotiation, interpretation and accommodation are central to the socially anchored interaction of audiences with media texts. Audiences should be understood as producers of meaning instead of as mere consumers of meaning taking up prescribed textual audience positionings. This production of meaning can only be understood in its everyday context which is, in its turn, located within social and power relations that circumscribe the potential of audiences to make meaning.

To begin with a concrete example of reception analysis, I shall extensively review Janice Radway's study on romance readers, which is by now a classic work, both in feminist and cultural studies. Then I shall review reception analysis in two areas that are of crucial importance for theories of gender and mass media: the uses of television within a domestic context, and the gender-specific pleasures of soap operas. Finally, I shall discuss the contribution of the research discussed to the understanding of mass media as 'technologies of gender'.

Reading the romance

In 1984 Janice Radway published her classic study *Reading the Romance*, in which she presented the results of a combination of textual and audience research into the meaning of popular romance novels. In order to examine how women interpret Harlequin, Silhouette, Mills & Boon and other

brands of mass produced romance novels, Radway sent questionnaires to about thirty women and interviewed some twenty women, living somewhere in the American midwest in a town Radway calls 'Smithton'. The majority of them were married and had children of school age. Some of them worked part time, though full time jobs were rare. The overwhelming majority of women Radway talked to read at least one romance a day. Radway's main informant was a Smithton bookseller who was an avid romance reader herself and who published a newsletter in which new publications were rated for their quality. 'Dot' as she was called by her customers advised women on good buys and introduced Radway to her respondents.

For the Smithton women, the quality of a romance appears to depend on the development of the relation between the heroine and the hero, and on their particular characters. The story should focus on a woman with whom the female reader can identify. The ideal storyline entails the slow development of a romance, with the heroine and hero only gradually becoming aware of their feelings and finally overcoming their mutual distrust. Explicit descriptions of sexuality are appreciated only within the confines of the romantic affair. The ultimate pleasure is to see how the hero's masculine defence mechanisms crumble beneath the love of the heroine. The transformation of the reserved and indifferent male into a warm and loving human being signifies a victory of female values of care and nurture. However, the hero is not a weak man, although strength and independence rank low in the ideal qualities the Smithton women ascribe to him. He should be a man confident in public life and ideally he is portrayed as intelligent, wealthy and acknowledged. He is unmistakably masculine, in his looks and his behaviour, but his capacity for tenderness is always betrayed by small hints at the beginning of the story such as the love for an old friend, the look in his eyes or the friendly wrinkle around his mouth. His transformation into a tender and loving husband therefore comes as no surprise. While the ideal hero of the Smithton women shows few signs of independence, the heroine on the contrary should be depicted as an independent, modern individual. She is an extraordinary person who does not live up to the traditional ideals of femininity. She has an unusual job, is sexually innocent and unaware of her own irresistible beauty. The Smithton women's evaluation of the heroine seems curious in the light of the many feminist accusations that romance novels only depict passive and vulnerable women in need of male protection. According to Radway, the readers judge the heroine's capacities on the basis of assertions that she is special and independent, ignoring the events and actions in the narrative that demonstrate otherwise. Radway sees this paradox as a hidden feminist fantasy: 'With a few simple statements rather than with truly threatening action on the part of the heroine, the romance author demonstrates for the typical reader the compatibility of a changed sense of the female self and an unchanged social arrangement' (p. 79).

The Smithton women also have very outspoken ideas about what

constitutes bad romances. Unhappy endings are obviously ruled out; they remove the romance from the genre since the Smithton women consider the happy ending as constitutive of romance novels. A male hero who is aggressive and takes to violence in order to convince the heroine of his love is despised. There is a thin line between the male hero's acceptable 'force' which originates in his inability to restrain himself in the face of the heroine's irresistible attractiveness, and unacceptable male violence. In the former case his persistence allows the heroine to give in to her own sexual desires without taking responsibility for it. When the 'hero' resorts to violence however, then the heroine is simply raped, something the Smithton women who identify intensely with the heroine obviously do not enjoy reading. As one woman said: 'That's why I avoid these books that are so depressing. All these terrible things that are happening to the heroine are happening to me – and I hold these emotions over' (p. 159). In bad romances the transformation of a cool and detached hero into a warm and loving partner becomes unconvincing given his previous record of aggression and violence. The romantic love between hero and heroine is then seen to subsist in a very unstable and threatening history. Promiscuous behaviour on the part of the heroine is also considered characteristic of a bad romance. Such 'bed-hopping' implies the adoption of male standards.

The Smithton women can hardly be considered the ignorant, dulled and misguided audience that feminist critics have usually associated with fans of mass culture. On the contrary, the readers demonstrate an intricate knowledge of the genre and their reading cannot be characterized as simply 'absorbing' romances on a daily basis. In some cases their expertise and involvement leads them to write their own romances. What are the particular pleasures reading romances offer? According to the Smithton women, romances provide them with escape or relaxation, and instruction. They experience their daily life as an unending sequence of looking after their husbands and children, in a material as well as an emotional sense. Radway's interviews made clear that the act of reading is at least as important in escaping from this burden as the stories themselves. Taking up a novel creates time and space in which women can be entirely on their own, temporarily released from the never-ending calls for attention of the family members. The Smithton women therefore always try to arrange their reading in such a way that they are unlikely to be disturbed by their family. It is a claim to leisure time otherwise denied to the ordinary housewife. As the discussion about the quality of the romances made clear, not just any book or genre will satisfy this need. The romances are expected to open up a world for the reader in which everything is different from their own everyday life. The romances are often located in exotic settings and promise to be all-fulfilling. Most important, however, is that the hero turns out to be a loving man who is capable of caring for and nurturing the heroine. Not only is the burden of taking care of others released by reading, the readers can also enjoy the experience of being nurtured themselves, albeit that this is only a vicarious pleasure. Radway

therefore thinks of romances as compensatory reading, providing women with the care and nurturance they miss in everyday life.

> Reading in this sense connotes a free space where they feel liberated from the need to perform duties that they otherwise willingly accept as their own. At the same time, by carefully choosing stories that make them feel particularly happy, they escape figuratively into a fairy tale where a heroine's similar needs are adequately met. As a result, they vicariously attend to their own requirements as independent individuals who require emotional sustenance and solicitude. (p. 93)

Radway uses Chodorow's psychoanalytic theory to account for the particular desires satisfied by romance reading.[3] The hero provides the all-embracing, unconditional love and care which children expect to receive from the mother. Under patriarchy women are the main providers of that care but have no one to be nurtured by, unless vicariously by the romance hero. The therapeutic value of reading only lasts as long as the romance itself, which might explain the almost addictive reading patterns, according to Radway.

A second pleasurable factor of reading which the Smithton women mention is the educational value of the romances. They have a particular preference for historical romances which usually provide well-researched and accurate historical detail. Radway's respondents feel that reading romances expands their horizon and enables them to gather knowledge of other times and places. Many of them surprise their husbands and children with facts and figures from the story and therewith gain a feeling of self-worth and approval. Others feel that the bits of information about exotic locations they find in romance novels are a good substitute for the travel they would like to undertake. The Smithton women's appreciation of the instructional value of the romances is expressed also in their hope that their own passion for reading will generate a love for reading in their children too. Reading is thus framed in a modernist ideology of self-improvement, progress and effort which enables the Smithton women to construct a self-image of intelligence and responsibility. Radway however interprets the emphasis on the instructional value of the romances as a legitimating practice to circumvent the feelings of guilt which the readers experience because of the time and money they spend on their books. Their families need to be convinced that reading romances is worth while, so they claim that there is a lot to be learned from them.

Radway's analysis of the pleasures of reading romances definitely undermines any conception of readers and audiences of popular culture as burdened by a 'false consciousness', so common in many feminist views. The Smithton women have very outspoken thoughts about each separate romance and have developed reading practices that meet the needs and preferences originating in their particular social situation. While the appeals and pleasures of romance reading are convincingly explained, Radway's approach to another key issue of feminist audience research – the 'politics' of pleasure – is much more problematic. Since the readers

themselves do not perceive their romance habits in political terms, Radway needs to concoct an interpretation of their reading practices as 'political' activities. Her claim that the love of romance can be seen as a hidden protest against patriarchal culture has much in common with the work of authors like Angela McRobbie, Dorothy Hobson, Mary Ellen Brown and John Fiske, who examine how women use traditionally female forms to resist their situation under patriarchy.[4] In the case of romance reading, this means a claim to leisure time otherwise denied to the ordinary housewife and a possibility of withdrawing from the caring and self-sacrificing role expected of them. Furthermore, the texts offer fantasies of a utopia in which women are nurtured by men, compensating for the lack of nurture they experience themselves. According to Radway 'critical power . . . lies buried in the romances as one of the few widely shared womanly commentaries on the contradictions and costs of patriarchy' (p. 18).

Left by itself, however, that critical power will not develop into conscious resistance against patriarchy, Radway fears, since the overall ideological effect of reading romance is to reconcile women with their unfortunate fate. She claims that several narrative and linguistic techniques render the romance itself a source of learning, as a description of reality. The fact that the romance is a story constructed by an author is denied by employing devices that position readers as if they were reading narratives of real events: historical accuracy and descriptive detail; realistic characters; temporal and spatial specificity; direct referential language and a limited vocabulary. Given that the readers take the historical and descriptive detail as true, teaching them about life beyond their horizon, it is likely – according to Radway – that they will take the romance's assertion that men can fulfil women's need as true also.

> It is precisely because the romance's surrounding universe is always portrayed so convincingly that romance readers might well be persuaded to believe that the romantic action itself is not only plausible but . . . inevitable. Repetitive engagement in it would enable a reader to tell herself again and again that a love like the heroine's might indeed occur in a world such as hers. (p. 207)

For Radway to argue convincingly that the hegemonic power of the romance will be more powerful than the hidden protest she sees embodied in its reading, she needs to deny that the readers will be capable of distinguishing between the different levels of the text: that of historical description and that of romantic fantasy. A collapse of the two would enable the ideological effect Radway fears and would deprive the hidden protest of its potential. The task of the feminist critic therefore is to exploit the threads of dissatisfaction expressed in reading romances and help the readers understand that a better world is possible in which 'the vicarious pleasure supplied by . . . reading would be unnecessary' (p. 222).

While Radway's attempt to understand women's pleasures under patriarchy has been widely acclaimed, her political recommendations and conclusions have been subject to considerable criticism (for example, Ang, 1988; Modleski, 1991). Being the feminist expert, knowing the true nature

of the romance and thus rejecting it, she constructs a considerable distance between herself and the ordinary romance fan who still enjoys romances and does not recognize her own dissatisfaction with patriarchy. Otherwise the fan would have found a lifestyle (or a husband) in which she does not need the compensatory literature. Radway puts the feminist critic in a position where it is neither possible nor necessary to resort to the vicarious fulfilment of romantic desires. Popular pleasures and feminist politics are constructed as mutually exclusive; being a feminist and still enjoying romance novels is seen as utterly inconsistent and undesirable. It is on such a conclusion that Radway's book has often been criticized, the critics raising the issue of how 'pleasure' and 'politics' can be related, rather than claiming that they cannot exist alongside each other. Ang (1985), for instance, proposes to consider the fantasies and pleasures involved in consuming popular culture as independent and relatively isolated dimensions of subjectivity that make daily life enjoyable in expectation of feminist utopias, but which do not relate directly to forms of feminist politics. Brown (1990a) on the other hand collapses the distinction between pleasure and politics by appreciating the gendered reception of popular culture as a form of 'feminine discourse' that resists hegemonic definitions of femininity and masculinity by privately making fun of it. The discussion on the (lack of) political or feminist potential of popular cultural forms has also informed research about soap operas, women's magazines and other popular genres, and is – as said earlier – one of the key issues in feminist media research. It will be taken up in more detail and depth in the final chapter.

Radway's analysis is an early sign of the changed focus in feminist media studies, now directed at the meaning of media in the context of everyday life. Radway showed how women use popular cultural forms to make do with their social situation, how they actively react to and shape their own pleasures and desires. Although the question of the subversive or repressive impact of these reading practices remains unresolved, Radway's analysis makes quite clear that the earlier feminist conceptions of the audience as 'mass', implying a composition of isolated individuals easily manipulated by media messages, needs revision.

Television and the family

In many societies the common social context in which individuals watch television is the family (or any other social arrangement that has replaced it). Of course, in student dormitories, kindergartens, schools and bars, television is important as well, but the home is the place where TV is watched most often and which is assumed in programme policies (Leman, 1987).

Increasingly therefore, researchers choose the family as the appropriate unit of analysis for the study of TV audiences. James Lull (1990), for

instance, has examined the way in which interpersonal communication in the family is structured by television and other media. Jan-Uwe Rogge (1989) claims that the media, and television in particular, form a part of the family system that define the interpersonal relationships and the emotional and communicative climate in a family. Both authors, however, ignore how power and gender relations within the family intervene in the interaction of the family with its media, in other words they neglect the gender politics of the living room. According to Brunsdon (1986), Gray (1987), Hobson (1980) and Morley (1986) it is crucial to acknowledge the different social positions that women and men have in the traditional nuclear family. Whereas for men the home is a site of leisure, clearly marked by a temporal and spatial distance from the workplace, for women it is a place of work inhabited by husband and children who require continual emotional and material care. It would seem inevitable therefore, that gender differences will occur in the use and appreciation of the family's media. Furthermore, contrary to the image of the family as a 'haven in a heartless world', it is the site where gender conflicts and power differences are directly and incessantly experienced, fought out, modified and accommodated, in an often tacit and inconspicuous process (Komter, 1985). Inevitably, the resulting gendered balance of power will be articulated in the use of the family's mass media too.

Informed by this perspective on gender and the family, David Morley examined how working class and lower middle class families in Britain actually watch television, and how this is linked with the family's particular biography, habits and rituals. He concludes that 'the one structural principle working across all the families interviewed is that of gender' (1986: p. 146), affecting among other things programme choice and preferences, style and amount of viewing, and the operation of the video recorder. It appeared that the men and women whom Morley interviewed have distinct programme and channel preferences which could be a potential source of conflict within the family. From Morley's data an almost caricatured gender difference emerges with women preferring fictional programmes, romances, local news over national news and ITV programmes (Britain's premier commercial channel), and men favouring factual programmes, sport, realistic fiction and BBC output. A similar picture comes from Dorothy Hobson's analysis (1980) of the media preferences of housewives and from Ann Gray's research (1987, 1992) on domestic uses of the VCR.

Both Morley and Gray warn against taking these gender differences too rigidly. In Morley's research, for instance, the few families in which the woman held a dominant position in terms of cultural capital did not follow the usual gendered pattern. He therefore claims that it is the confluence of gender and social position that accounts for particular viewing habits. On the other hand, Gray's respondents were drawn from various social positions, but still showed remarkable similarities in the way they spoke about their viewing practices. Against the backdrop of rating figures, which

generally show a less extreme gendered pattern of viewing preferences, Morley wonders how to interpret the data from his own research. The difference can be explained partly by the distinction between 'viewing' as measured in the ratings, and 'viewing attentively and with pleasure' as examined in Morley's research. More interesting however, is Morley's assumption that the way wives and husbands report their viewing preferences might be misleading because of their tendency to live up to their socially expected roles:

> The fact that the respondents were interviewed *en famille* may have predisposed them to adopt stereotyped familial roles in the interviews which, if interviewed separately, they would not adhere to – thus again leading to a tendency towards misleading forms of classical gender stereotyping. (1986: 166)

This misleading representation of the self is not only a methodological problem, but points to a more fundamental issue that Morley unfortunately only touches upon briefly. What might be involved is not so much a false and misleading account but a construction of an appropriate gender identity within the context of family relations. In that case, the relation of gender and media consumption would need to be conceptualized in a radically different manner. To (over)simplify: it is not the fact of being woman or man that explains programme preferences, but programme preferences that construct a particular and appropriate gendered identity. Such an interpretation is more in line with the overall theoretical position taken up in this book and will be developed in the conclusion of this chapter.

Despite the major differences in programme preferences among the members of the family, none of the families in Morley's and Gray's research reported excessive conflicts over watching television. In general, the husband (or the eldest son) decides what will be watched, a decision that is not so much the result of an open discussion but already taken for granted, being an extension of male power in the family. The use of the remote control is almost exclusively reserved to the men, making the device 'a highly visible symbol of condensed power relations'. This pattern is only slightly disrupted in the few families that have female breadwinners. Given such a division of power, it is not surprising that women do not often consult the TV guide, nor do they take much initiative in watching television. They do not seem to care very much about what is on, with the exception of their favourite serials. Still, they watch as much as their husbands and children do, only in a completely different way. While the husbands watch attentively, in silence and without interrupting the flow, their wives perform a host of domestic duties and leisure activities like ironing, sewing, crocheting, knitting or reading a book. Obviously, it is difficult for housewives to step out of their working day while still being in the home. From the many comments quoted in Morley's and Gray's research, it appears they consider 'just watching television' a waste of time. Another aspect of their particular style of viewing also testifies to their particular position in the family. Most women tend to talk while the set is

on, commenting on what they see and grabbing the occasion to divert into the family's daily life. Herman Bausinger (1984) has interpreted this kind of behaviour as an extension of the social and psychological tasks women are responsible for in the family, as an attempt to make and maintain contact between family members. Morley concludes in a similar vein that women maintain their role as domestic managers while watching television.

All in all, from the research on television and the family it appears clearly that within the context of the traditional western nuclear family, watching television is a leisure activity for husbands, but an extension of domestic labour for wives. To enjoy television as a leisure activity, women must take special measures which they occasionally do, although often troubled by feelings of guilt. A prerequisite for enjoyable viewing seems to be the absence of family members whose presence exerts claims on them as housewives and mothers, or who in many cases will ridicule their particular preference for romance and weepies. Many of Morley's female respondents say they enjoy watching television on Sunday mornings while the rest of the family are sleeping in. Others arrange to watch taped programmes or rented videos with female friends during the afternoon. Gray, for instance, reports that some of her interviewees living in the same neighbourhood come together weekly to watch videos. They also like soap operas and record episodes for each other. According to Gray, 'these popular texts form an important part of their friendship and association in their everyday lives and give a focus to an almost separate female culture which they can share together within the constraints of their positions as wives and mothers' (1987: 49). However, the experienced pleasures are not totally uncomplicated but are constrained by feelings of guilt and obligation. Taking time out to indulge in their own choices undermines their sense of being a good wife and mother, defined as the ever-available, self-sacrificing and happy housewife/mother. Furthermore, their particular programme preferences are often downgraded by their husbands, many of whom think their wives watch silly or 'badly acted' programmes. Clearly, domestic power relations also includes the definition of bad taste and forces women to watch their favourite programmes secretly. In this respect watching favourite television programmes bears the same feelings of guilt that Radway found among the romance readers.

Most of this kind of research has been carried out within traditional, white, nuclear families. It should be emphasized again that the observed gender differences are a product of the particular social positions that women and men occupy in such families. It is quite likely that other patterns will emerge in families from other ethnic and class backgrounds, and in less traditional 'family' arrangements such as working couples, single parent families, homosexual couples etc. Such research has not yet been widely conducted, although Frissen and Meier (1988) partially replicated Morley's research in the Netherlands and asked traditional housewives and single working women about the role of television in their

lives. The experience of the housewives was much the same as that of Morley's and Gray's respondents. They have similar programme preferences which most of their husbands despise and ridicule. They often find themselves watching programmes they do not particularly like, and perform a variety of domestic tasks while watching TV. Television appears to be much less significant in the lives of the working women. They watch only occasionally and prefer to fill their leisure time with social activities such as going to the movies, to the sports club or to the pub with friends. Thus television for them was found to be a second choice, a too solitary activity. Once in a while they would deliberately watch television for a 'good cry'. As one of them said: 'Then, I am totally absorbed by the programme, It is as if I inhabit the space they show. I become totally intoxicated. I take my handkerchief and cry. Wonderful!' (Frissen and Meier, 1988: 88).

Women and soap operas

The research on women and soaps is primarily cast in terms of the articulation of pleasure and politics. As Ien Ang wonders in *Watching Dallas*: 'The widespread and continuing popularity of soap operas among women has attracted a lot of attention from feminists. How must the fact that so many women obviously get pleasure from watching soap operas be judged politically from a femininist perspective? Is *Dallas* good or bad for women?' (1985: 118). The issue therefore is not only why and how women watch and interpret soaps but also whether and how the construction of meaning through the interaction between text and audience contributes to the subversion, negotiation or maintenance of hegemonic gender discourse. The answers to such questions vary as widely as do the ways in which they are arrived at. Tania Modleski contends that a certain critical distance from mass cultural products and their audiences is necessary to formulate a comprehensive cultural critique. According to Modleski audience researchers run the risk of falling in love with their subjects. 'As a result they may unwittingly wind up writing apologias for mass culture and embracing its ideology' (1986: xi). She therefore consistently employs textual analysis to explore the meanings of popular culture (for example, Modleski, 1991).

Many other authors, however, try to combine an empirical finding of audience pleasure with a critical feminist viewpoint. The first concern in these projects is to examine the particular viewing experience engendered by soap operas. Ang (1985), for instance, found that Dutch fans of the American soap *Dallas* experienced the series as realistic drama, in spite of the critics' claims that *Dallas* offers only fantasy and escape. While her respondents acknowledged the unrealistic nature of the complicated family relations and the excessive richness of the environment, they recognized the emotional predicaments of the characters, and found the tragic

sequence of rows, intrigues, happiness and misery 'realistic'. Ang therefore calls the realism of *Dallas* emotional realism: 'what is recognized as real is not knowledge of the world, but a subjective experience of the world: a "structure of feeling" ' (1985: 45). Ang's research on *Dallas* has been followed up by numerous other inquiries into the gendered pleasures of soap, to the extent that it has now become a dominant area in feminist media research. A common theme in these projects is the mixed positions of soap opera viewers, who alternate between a critical mode of reception and an involved way of viewing. Dorothy Hobson (1989, 1990) interviewed British working women and examined how watching soaps contributes to the interpersonal relations and the culture of the workplace. In several groups of women working together soaps appear to be a daily subject of conversation. Hobson observes two ways of talking about soap operas between which individual audience members easily 'commute'. First, there is a more or less detached way of looking that acknowledges the constructedness of the story. The women she interviewed tended to speculate about narrative development, and the future feelings of characters based on their own opinions about realistic plots and stories. They tried to 'co-author' the soaps, so to speak, exploiting bits of information about actors from gossip magazines, other media and talks with colleagues, which shows that other texts than the soaps themselves play a part in their reception. Such comments underscore the importance of the 'intertextual' reception of popular culture: 'any one text is necessarily read in relationship to others and . . . a range of textual knowledge is brought to bear upon it' (Fiske, 1988: 108). This detached way of looking has also been observed by Katz and Liebes (1990) in their research on cross-cultural variations in the reception of soaps. They refer to this detachment as a critical mode of reception, characterized by comments such as 'they cannot be happy otherwise we would not have a story next week', or, 'she will die because I have read that the actress wants to leave the series'. Secondly, there is a much more emotional and involved way of relating to soaps. In Hobson's research among working women, it turns out that they use soaps to think and talk about their own lives. This has been coined as a referential mode by Katz and Liebes (1990) and involves comments such as 'I would never behave like Pamela', or 'that man is very much like my own boss'. According to Hobson such referential comments may invoke discussions about personal problems and emotions that might have been too painful to talk about in any other way. Hobson's respondents easily alternate between the two modes of reception, both engaging critically and being involved with the narrative and the characters. In their discussions in the workplace they will catch up with the storyline, speculate about what will happen next and discuss what they would do if they were in the same circumstances. Hobson concludes that 'these accounts disprove the theory that watching television is a mindless, passive event in the lives of viewers. On the contrary, the events and subjects covered in television programmes often act as a catalyst for wide-ranging and open discussions. The com-

munication was extended far beyond the moment of viewing' (Hobson, 1989: 66).

Ellen Seiter found similar patterns among American working class housewives, who frequently criticized their favourite shows and expressed a sophisticated knowledge of the codes and conventions that rule the genre (Seiter et al., 1989). At the same time, however, these women extrapolated the events on television on to their own lives, feeling intimately connected to the characters on the screen. Seiter's team therefore conclude that the appeal of soaps lies in their capacity simultaneously to engage and disengage the viewer, to allow critical comment and psychological investment at the same time, providing at once a sensation of analytical competence and a feeling of emotional involvement. An extensive textual analysis of American and British soaps carried out by Christine Geraghty (1990) shows how the particular organization of time and space, and the contradictory aesthetics of light entertainment, melodrama and realism construct a spectator position which is characterized by the ambiguity of distance and involvement.

Still, the conclusion that soap pleasures basically consist of alternating between critical and involved ways of watching is premature. Katz and Liebes' research (1990) on the cross-cultural reception of the American soap *Dallas* points out that there is considerable variety of viewing practices among ethnic groups. Russian immigrants now living in Israel mainly commented critically on the series, seeing it as an extension of American capitalism, while Israelis of Moroccan descent predominantly used the series to reflect on their own circumstances. Press' analysis (1992) of class differences involved in watching soap operas seems to suggest that middle class women more often adopt a critical viewing style, whereas working class women tend to project the series on to their own lives.

One might argue that the double pleasure of involvement and detachment does not need to be gender-specific. In fact, many soap analyses give little attention to the particular enjoyments of female and male audiences, and ignore the obvious articulation of gender and genre present in the soap experience (Gripsrud, 1990; Katz and Liebes, 1990; Schröder, 1988). Why do soaps attract female audiences specifically, and which pleasures can be considered as distinct to gender? A rather straightforward answer is suggested by the particular scheduling of soaps. Whereas the audiences of prime time soaps consist of men as well – although not in equal numbers – women are the main viewers of soaps broadcast during the daytime, a time at which more women than men are available as viewers. Seiter's research among American working class housewives shows that daytime soaps tend to function as an integral part of a housewife's working day. Some women have managed to organize their working day like a well-run business with rigid schedules, and for them daytime soaps signify the lunchbreak:

People know not to call me between 12.30 and 3.00 unless it's a dire emergency. If it is really something they can call me at 1.30, 'cause *Capitol* is on and I don't

really watch it. . . . All of my friends know, do not call at that time. My husband . . . if he comes in he's very quiet and just goes right on out. (Seiter et al., 1989: 230)

These women use soaps to divide work from leisure, a division much more clearly marked for women and men working outside the home. For housewives with a more chaotic routine, for instance because they have small children at home, TV soaps are more like radio soaps and are watched only at the really important moments: 'I listen to them, honest to God, I never sit!' Obviously, one needs to be highly selective and very well informed about the genre and the particular soap in order not to lose touch with the complicated narratives. Friends and family are indispensable sources for help. In fact, many women in Seiter's research were introduced to soaps by their mother or another expert.

Informed by a textual analysis of soaps, Modleski (1984) claims that it is not only the scheduling of soaps that is particularly appealing to house-wives, but the narrative structure of the genre as well. She describes women's work in the home as a sequence of incoherent, widely divergent and boundless activities characterized by repetition, interruption and distraction. They will easily recognize and be able to relate to the fragmented and cyclical narrative patterns of soaps. 'The formal properties of daytime television thus accord closely with the rhythms of women's work in the home' (Modleski, 1984: 102). Modleski's arguments can partly be refuted by referring to the numerous women who are not housewives and yet still enjoy soap operas. Other authors have used essentialist arguments to account for the popularity of soaps among women, assuming the genre's universal appeal to the female audience. Modleski mentions the work of Marcia Kinder, who suggests that 'the open-ended, slow paced, multi-climaxed structure of soap-opera is in tune with patterns of female sexuality' (Modleski, 1984: 98). Mattelart contends that the time patterns of soaps, distinguished by repetition and eternity, are linked to the female timescale, 'a cycle that links it into cosmic time, the occasion for unparalleled ecstasy in unison with the rhythm of nature, and along with that infinite, womb-like dimension, the myth of permanence and duration' (1986: 15).

While these are not arguments I would endorse,[5] it is important to incorporate the thematic and narrative structures of soaps in order to account for the pleasures they invoke in women. The soap's focus on family life and personal relations is thought to be one of the factors explaining the genre's popularity among women. Even if the world of business and work enters the series, as happens in prime time soaps aimed at a general audience, the narratives remain concentrated on the personal relations and problems of business men, workers, secretaries etc. Some authors argue that the particular style in which these problems are addressed – endlessly talking about them rather than undertaking direct

actions to solve them – is also appealing to women. Furthermore, in the context of the soap narrative, women express perfectly efficient and rational behaviour, a feature quite rare in other televised women. It is therefore alleged that soaps offer a 'feminine culture' of themes, values and styles that women know particularly well, and that is not otherwise very highly appreciated in contemporary society. Brown claims, for instance, that 'soap operas, like women's talk or gossip and women's ballads, are part of a women's culture that exists alongside dominant culture' (1990a: 205). Within the boundaries of women's culture 'it is acceptable behaviour to watch soaps. The boundaries establish for them a locus of empowerment for their own brand of pleasure.' Also, the specific treatment of personal themes and relationships is a source of pleasure. From Seiter's research it is evident that narratives in which traditional family values and structures are undermined are notably enjoyable: 'Women openly and enthusiastically admitted their delight in following soap operas as stories of female transgressions which destroy the ideological nucleus of the text – the sacredness of the family' (Seiter et al., 1989: 240). The vicious heroine is celebrated and the wife who opposes her hopeless marriage by beginning an affair can count on much support: 'O Bruce, my husband, gets so angry with me when I'm watching the show and they're married and I'm all for the affair. It's like [*voice changes to imitate Bruce*]: "I don't like this, I don't know about you." And I say: "Dump him!"' (p. 240). Christine Geraghty's (1990) textual analysis of shows provides an interesting clarification to these saboteur qualities of soaps. She contends that American soaps, like *Dallas* and *Dynasty*, turn around the problem that male 'patriarchs' have in keeping their family together. Their efforts are incessantly undermined by women, for instance ex-wives or adulterous daughters-in-law. Their presence and actions are a continual threat to the well-being of the family, always in danger of being torn apart. Apart from emotional tension, this narrative structure also produces the pleasurable knowledge that male power, embodied in the head of the family, is never complete and always under pressure. In British soaps like *Coronation Street* and *Eastenders*, women – often older characters – often function as head of the family. The pleasures derived from the female protagonist do not stem from their subversive qualities towards the patriarchal family as in American soaps, but from their positions of power.

To sum up: the particular gendered pleasures of soaps are thus seen to originate in the centrality of themes and values associated with the private sphere. The focus on women as protagonists, on their rational and calculated actions and the mischievous attitude towards male power form some of the sources of pleasure for the female audience. Further pleasures stem from the ability of soaps to evoke a mode of reception that is simultaneously critical and involved. The particular scheduling of daytime soaps ensures that the audience will consist of housewives and others working outside of the 9 to 5 labour market.

Technologies of gender?

In comparison with earlier feminist studies of the media, reception analysis has several advantages. The understanding of audiences as producers of meaning has directed researchers to the day-to-day experiences of audiences and has produced a steadily increasing body of material about the tastes, preferences and pleasures of women. As such reception analysis is clearly a useful contribution to the larger feminist project to rescue women's experiences from marginalization and invisibility. The studies discussed here indicate the existence of separate women's cultures organized around popular fiction and television drama. Radway (1984), for instance, argues that the romance experience constructs a female community of authors and readers that provides the affective support formerly offered by real social and kinship networks. Likewise, Brown (1990a: 205) contends the women's culture of which soaps are a part supply women with means of temporary escape from the pressures of patriarchy. However, despite the wealth of interview material and theoretical reflection in this area, fundamental issues in feminist media research – in particular the question of how media function as technologies of gender – have not yet been adequately addressed. The research carried out so far takes the concepts 'woman' and 'femininity' for granted rather than analysing them. For instance, the focus on female audiences of soaps seems inspired mostly by the quantitative fact that women are the most avid viewers of soaps. Concealed, but straightforward causal models are employed, assuming that the identification enabled by the female characters of soaps is an important reason for their popularity among women. Furthermore, it is thought that the thematic emphasis of soaps on problems and values from the private sphere must appeal to women in particular, 'belonging' as they do to the private sphere. Some authors modify the implicit essentialism of such arguments by explaining women's viewing styles and preferences by the conflation of gender and social position in the domestic context (among others, Hobson, 1980; Morley, 1986). Such moves, however, avoid the problem rather than addressing it. For what we then seem to know about gender and reception is how housewives – a particular social group which happens to consist of women mainly – relate to popular culture. Within contemporary patriarchal arrangements, this is valid knowledge surely, relevant to the experiences of numerous women. Given the increasing rarity of the nuclear family and the 'traditional housewife', however, it is rather disturbing that we hardly know anything about other groups of women, especially since in much research the tendency to equate 'housewife' with 'woman' appears hard to suppress (for example, Fiske, 1988; Brown, 1990a). Furthermore, the distinction addressed by most research is that between women and men, elevating gender to the overriding dimension of human identity, ignoring the possible intervention of other dimensions such as sexuality and ethnicity (to mention only the obvious). As a result, reception analysis as currently conducted tends to reconstruct

dominant gender discourse rather than analyse its dynamics. Morley's (1986) innovative research into television and the family, discussed above, is probably a good example. Charlotte Brunsdon commented on this project that 'his findings conform so tightly to what might be guessed to be stereotypical masculine and feminine behaviour as to be almost unbelievable' (1986: 103). She proposed that additional research was needed among groups with different demographic profiles, particularly those living outside the heterosexual family unit. Unfortunately, such projects have not been widely carried out to date, and the housewife of the traditional nuclear family continues to exert an irresistible attraction to researchers.

The problem, however, is not merely a methodological one of incorporating different subgroups into the research design; it is more fundamentally the absence of comprehensive theorization about the way gender and the reception of popular culture are related. According to Ien Ang and Joke Hermes (1991) this is one of the most undertheorized questions in mass media research. In most reception analysis, gender – regardless of its conceptualization as a social category – is assumed to precede cultural preference and behaviour. First, you are a woman (that is, heterosexual housewife) or a man (that is, heterosexual breadwinner), and then you like soaps and romances or sport and documentaries. Such a notion of gender, as was discussed extensively in Chapter 3, construes the concept as a relatively constant and consistent feature of human identity, established early in life. However, in contemporary society (and in many earlier societies for that matter) being a 'woman' or a 'man' does not come easily and requires continuous work. So many distinct and contradictory subject positions are offered that it seems as if in each social situation an appropriate gender identity has to be established and expressed anew. A particular genre preference, such as women express for romance and soaps can thus be seen not only as a result of gender, but as a means to express something about themselves as well. Gender should thus be conceived not as a fixed property of individuals but as part of an ongoing process by which subjects are constituted often in paradoxical ways. For reception analysis, the relevant issue therefore becomes how gender is articulated in media consumption, in other words how 'gender identities – feminine and masculine subjectivities – are constructed in the practices of everyday life in which media consumption is subsumed' (Ang and Hermes, 1991: 308). Morley's suspicions referred to earlier in this chapter, that his respondents were more concerned with keeping up their appropriate gender identity in front of the other members of the family, would serve as a clear example of such processes. However, whereas Morley seemed to assume some 'true' identity hidden behind 'misleading' answers, the point here is that identity is always in process, never finished, stable or true. Media reception is one of the practices in which the construction of (gender) identity takes place. Ien Ang's essay about the 'feminine' pleasures of soaps can serve as an illustration. She argues that the female fictional characters of soaps and

other series function as 'textual constructions of possible modes of femininity: as embodying versions of gendered subjectivity endowed with specific forms of psychical and emotional satisfaction and dissatisfaction, and specific ways of dealings with conflicts and dilemmas' (1990: 83). In the never-ending process of feminization – constructing the appropriate feminine identity – such fantasy modes of femininity offer opportunities to try out different subjectivities without the risks involved in real life. 'In fantasy and fiction, however, there is no punishment for whatever identity one takes up, no matter how headstrong or destructive; there will be no redistribution, no defeat will ensue' (1990: 86). Another interesting example drawn from empirical data comes from Sherry Turkle's research on women and computers. She wonders why women express such reticence about new information technologies and observes that 'women use their rejection of computers . . . to assert something about themselves as women. . . . It is a way to say that it is not appropriate to have a close relationship with a machine' (1988: 50).

Aside from the limited conceptualizations of gender, reception analysis also suffers from a bias in its research concerns, reflecting the gender politics of academic work. Overlooking the developments in reception analysis, one unmistakably observes an increasing 'gendering' of the field. Corner (1991), Curran (1990) and others have distinguished two critical projects in cultural studies: one is concerned primarily with public knowledge, interested in genres like news and current affairs and addressing the audience as citizens. The other focuses on popular culture and examines the implications of entertainment on social consciousness and values, analysing, for instance, soaps. This chapter has made clear that feminist work on the audience is carried out mainly within the popular culture project. Research about the public sphere of news has been seriously neglected by feminist researchers and some scholars working in this area see no problem in focusing their work on men only, in order not to 'contaminate' their findings with gender (Jensen, 1986). In spite of the theoretical recognition that gender construction involves both women and men, most research has focused on constructions of femininity in the media and genres that are read and appreciated predominantly by women; soap operas, romance novels and women's magazines. In addition, attention has been limited to female audiences of those genres, more often than not drawn from traditional family situations. The knowledge by now accumulated concerns a very particular group of media and genres consumed by a very particular group of women. To be sure this is a focus born from necessity, since these are precisely the genres and audiences that have been neglected by mainstream research. An academic community preoccupied with such prestigious issues as new communication technologies, the future of public broadcasting or the effects of political communication, does not come down very easily to the more mundane level of media use in the daily lives of 'ordinary women'. But consider the implicit message of this

research focus: is gender really only constructed in 'women's media'? How about the constructions of masculinity found in sports programmes, war movies, *Playboy* and *Penthouse* to ventilate just a few stereotypes of men? How do men use those media to construct their gender identity, to express that they are not women? And to cut through the dichotomy of 'women's' and 'men's' media, how do men's 'feminine' activities such as reading a women's magazine or enjoying a soap opera relate to dominant constructions of masculinity, and how do women's readings of the news relate to their functioning as citizens? The focus on the reception of soaps, romances and women's magazines seriously narrows the potential for articulating a comprehensive cultural critique, for whole areas of social and cultural practice tend to be ignored: at the level of institutional negotiation, or of the production of actual texts, there is little research that goes beyond the observation that women work in a male dominated field; at the level of textual negotiation there are many genres we do not yet know much about, for example, news and current affairs, quality and popular press, sport, quizzes etc. And as far as reception analysis is concerned, the public knowledge project tends to become a new male preserve, concerned with ostensibly gender-neutral issues such as citizenship, but actually neglecting the problematic relation of non-white, non-male citizens to the public sphere, whereas the popular culture project seems to have become restricted to the pleasures of women in their domestic roles.

Having reviewed the main results of reception analysis, it turns out that many of the questions paramount to the theoretical concerns of this book have not yet been adequately answered. Although we have increasingly detailed insight in the use and interpretation of 'women's' genres by female audiences, we know next to nothing about the use and interpretation of 'men's' genres by male audiences. Thus, the question of how gendered audiences make sense of gendered media, how genre and gender are articulated in daily life, has only been partially answered. Although the research carried out so far does tell something about women, its theoretical flaws have prevented extensive ventures into issues such as the construction of gender discourse, the intersection of gender with other discourses, and the disciplining and regulatory effects of gender discourse on various levels. The latter question brings us back to the issue of whether consuming popular culture can be reconciled with feminist claims. The 'politics of pleasure' will be taken up in the final chapter.

Notes

1. Soap operas: Ang, 1985; Hobson, 1989, 1990; Seiter et al., 1989; Press, 1991. Romances: Radway, 1984. Women's magazines: Hermes, 1993. Video: Gray, 1992. Computers: Turkle, 1988. Telephone: Moyal, 1992.

2. There are a small number of lesbian romances too, published by feminist publishers (Hermes, 1992).

3. In Chapter 8 the 'authenticity' of audience reaction will be addressed when discussing the status of people's talk.

4. See, for example, Brown, 1990a.

5. See Chapter 3.

8

Research Methods

Research questions in the field of gender, culture and media can be approached with a variety of research methods and a range of data gathering and analysis techniques. A number of these have been mentioned in the previous chapters: quantitative content analysis has often been used to establish numbers, roles and other characteristics of the portrayal of women and men in the various media; the question of media effects, for instance of pornography and violence in the media, is frequently tackled by using experimental designs inspired by (social) psychological research; in cultivation and agenda setting research that attempts to assess long-term influences of mass media, large-scale surveys are common; the position and experiences of women working in the communication industries have been studied by conducting in-depth interviews and surveys; in assessing the visual and narrative qualities of single texts and genres, semiotic and structural analysis are often used; ethnography has recently come to influence audience research focusing on the uses and interpretations of media and texts.

Far from being exhaustive, this list is only an indication of the range of methods being employed to study issues in gender, culture and media. The variety is almost endless, since both communication and gender are discursive and social phenomena at the same time, to be studied through an array of methods that find their origins in the humanities and the social sciences (and in the case of gender studies in other disciplines as well). Therefore, in principle – although not always in practice – the study of gender, culture and media is interdisciplinary, in its theories and methods alike. In many cases, the methodological input for such research also comes from a body of ideas and procedures that can be loosely labelled as 'feminist' methods. Most authors agree that studying gender or women is by no means the same as doing feminist research. However, the issue of what exactly constitutes feminist research has been a subject of debate since the late 1970s, centring on questions such as: is there a feminist research method, if so, what does it actually consist of? Should there be a feminist research method and what is the relation between feminist research methods and other methods (cf. Reinharz, 1992: 4)? This debate has not taken a very particular form in communication studies, as I shall elaborate in the first section of this chapter. Feminist communication scholars' studies have discussed these questions very much in the framework of the more general dispute on feminist epistemology and method-