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MODES OF RECEPTION:  
A CONSOLIDATED ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

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## Abstract

Drawing on a synthesis of existing models of reception and findings from audience research, this paper outlines a conceptual framework for the (meta)analysis of existing and new reception data which delineates four primary modes of viewer interpretation and response: *Transparent*, *referential*, *mediated*, and *discursive*. I argue that the adoption of this consolidated analytical framework may facilitate a more systematic investigation into how viewers' interpretations are shaped by social group memberships, cultural competencies and discursive affiliations.

**Key words:** Modes of reception; viewers; television; film; audience interpretation

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Introduction

Recent contributions to this journal suggest that audience research has in some respects failed to live up to its early potential and is in decline (Barker, 2006), having left many important questions unanswered (Morley, 2006). Increasingly, it seems that our inability to identify general principles regarding different forms of audience response and the link between audience receptions and social positioning--a key concern of seminal work in the field--stems partly from the absence of a commonly accepted, comprehensive model charting the various modes of reception that can be adopted by different viewers across the full range of television and film genres. Without an overarching conceptual schema, audience ethnography "runs the danger of descending into anecdotalism" (Morley, 2006, p. 106). Indeed, we continue to see a proliferation of studies documenting seemingly divergent receptions of an ever-increasing range of genres (more "stories" about the idiosyncratic readings of "active audiences" Barker [2006]), but little work that draws together existing understandings into a coherent, unified model of audience reception (Schröder, 2000). We still lack, as Press (2006) suggests, a common language for talking about audience reception in a cohesive way. As a result, neither typical nor divergent receptions are being appropriately contextualized in relation to all *potential* interpretive modes.

Of course some might question whether a common analytical framework is really all that useful or desirable, since it does pose the risk of merely restating and potentially entrenching existing understandings, rather than allowing us to identify new forms of audience response and engagement with an increasingly diverse range of new

media forms. However, there are a number of compelling reasons for at least beginning the process of developing a consolidated model.

To date, as Morley (2006), Curran (1990) and others suggest, some widely accepted principles in this field have been based on largely anecdotal evidence, with little systematic verification of the extensiveness of the specific modes of audience “activity” and creativity being highlighted. The problem here is while it may well be true that some Australian Aborigines are “cheering for the Indians” (Fiske, 1989, p. 25), it may be equally true that large numbers of Chinese are “cheering for James Bond.” Until we know if that is indeed the case, it is perhaps unwise to draw any firm conclusions from the unusual or idiosyncratic response. Problems such as these might be countered through the application of a working model that allows us to identify similarities and differences in audience responses to texts encountered within multiple social and cultural contexts, and on this basis to formulate more accurate and defensible comparisons and generalizations about the nature of reception per se. At the very least, such a model would allow us to more clearly differentiate “typical” responses from those that are truly divergent. Indeed, only by identifying what is relatively common in terms of audience response can we be certain of what is truly unique. At present, it is difficult to make such assessments, as we have yet to consolidate our collective understanding of the most frequently adopted modes of response.

Thus, while I am not advocating a strictly empirical approach to audience reception research, I propose that a common analytical framework would offer a set of conceptual tools with which to categorize, analyze and theorize audience receptions in a more systematic and productive way. It would also lend itself to both quantitative and qualitative methodologies--including the large scale surveys favoured by Barker (2006)--and would aid in the ongoing process of testing and refining our theoretical understandings. Potentially, such a model might enable us to more systematically

document the reading strategies of different interpretive communities, and to explain how and why different groups arrive at different interpretations of the “same” texts. As individual researchers, none of us can hope to investigate the full range of local and cross-cultural responses to the growing array of genres that constitute the contemporary global mediascape. A common “language” in the form of a shared conceptual framework, however, would allow us to more clearly perceive correspondences and divergences across our collective findings. A consistent analytical approach might also allow us to chart how shifts in social, cultural, economic, and political conditions over time and in different national contexts impact on audience response. Additionally, as Schröder (2000) suggests, a common model would aid the process of research design and implementation, since we would have a much clearer sense of what it is, precisely, we wish to investigate, and how best to go about doing so.

It is important to note, however, that any such model must be *descriptive* rather than *prescriptive*. Indeed, the models I discuss below are ones that attempt to describe and label general patterns of response that have become apparent in the course of conducting empirical research. The fact that striking parallels exist across a range of concepts independently developed by different authors offers compelling verification that these modes do “exist” as such, and are not merely products of the analyst’s imagination. Whether these are the only possible viewing modes is obviously subject to ongoing interrogation, and we must not assume that *any* model represents the last word on the matter, nor that our data must be forced to conform to the established schema. However, I am confident that most reception researchers will welcome a conceptual framework that aids in managing the large and unwieldy volume of information typically generated from our projects, the analysis of which Justin Lewis (1991) once aptly compared to “wrestling with a jellyfish” (cited in Schröder, 2000, p. 234).

Obviously, a workable and acceptable consolidated model cannot be developed in an historical vacuum. Various models of reception have been proposed in the past; most notably Hall's (1980) schema of dominant/preferred, negotiated and oppositional decodings. As I will argue, however, this model fails to capture the full complexity of audience reception for two key reasons. First, because it conflates responses to textual *form* with responses to textual *content*--both in terms of what is depicted and what meanings are conveyed by those depictions. Second, Hall's schema privileges viewers' responses to *connotative* (ideological) meanings over their engagement with, and comprehension of, *denotative* meanings (Schröder, 2000), and in so doing offers a rather partial understanding of potential viewing modes.

Drawing on a critique and revision of Morley's application of this schema, along with a critical review and synthesis of various other models of audience reception, this paper delineates the grammar of a latent common language within the existing body of audience reception research; a language that has previously been uttered only in fragments. Following a brief review of key insights generated within the research corpus, this paper identifies four modes of audience reception that may be adopted in response to a wide range of film and television genres and across divergent social and cultural contexts. While some modes express the creative and critical capacity of audience members at particular moments (Roscoe, Marshall & Gleason, 1995), others imply greater reliance on information supplied by the text itself, and hence greater likelihood of capitulation to preferred textual meanings. Each mode is described and illustrated with reference to findings from a qualitative investigation into New Zealanders' cross-cultural receptions of the popular American television sitcom, *Murphy Brown* (Michelle, 1998). As I will discuss, these four modes of reception constitute an inextricably defining feature of the meanings viewers are able to make of

television and film texts, and thus have significant implications for the ability of media to successfully “set the agenda” for audience receptions in an ideological sense.

### Core Findings from the Field: A Brief Review

Audience reception research now comprises a substantial, but increasingly disunified, field of investigation. Much of the research to date has been concerned with three central foci. The first addresses the link between audience reception and social and demographic group memberships, drawing from the seminal work of Stuart Hall in trying to identify “how the different subcultural structures and formations within the audience, and the sharing of different cultural codes and competencies amongst different groups and classes, structure the decoding of the message for different sections of the audience” (Morley, 1980b, p. 51). Numerous studies follow Morley’s suggestion that *socioeconomic class* is the most significant factor in the production of distinct “clustering” in audience reception (e.g. Press, 1989 & 1991a; Seiter, Borchers, Kreutzner & Warth, 1989; Jensen, 1990 & 1995; Kim, 2004). However, other research has identified similar “clustering” effects linked to *gender* (Hobson, 1980; Morley, 1986; Brown, Childers, Bauman, & Koch, 1990; Livingstone, 1994; Zwaga, 1994), *race* and *ethnicity* (Brown & Schulze, 1990; Jhally & Lewis, 1992; Schlesinger, Dobash, Dobash & Weaver, 1992; Gillespie, 1995; Hunt, 1997), and *age* (Comstock, Chaffee, Katzman, McCombs & Roberts, 1978; Barwise & Ehrenberg, 1988; Press, 1991b; Willis, 1995; Riggs, 1996). Further, a growing body of work highlights connections between divergent receptions and social group memberships that disrupt traditional sociological categories, including *political interest* (Morley, 1980a; Corner, Richardson & Fenton, 1990a and 1990b; Roscoe et al., 1995), *moral and/or political belief* (Condit, 1989; Press, 1991a; Liebes & Ribak, 1994), *experience of male violence* (Schlesinger, Dobash, Dobash & Weaver, 1992), degree of *feminist consciousness*

(Ford & Latour, 1993), *sexual orientation* (Cohen, 1991; Feuer, 1995), *religious culture* (Hamilton & Rubin, 1992; Stout, 1994; Valenti & Stout, 1996), and personal *psychological characteristics* (Livingstone, 1990).

A second central foci addresses the role of cultural location and identity in shaping the nature of the encounter between “foreign” cultural texts and local audiences (e.g. Liebes, 1984; Ang, 1985; Katz & Liebes, 1985; Michaels, 1986; Michelle, 1998; Liebes & Katz, 1989 and 1990; Wilson, 1996a). Offering a counterpoint to ongoing claims of American cultural imperialism, these studies collectively suggest that cross-cultural reception involves a continuous and active process of mediation, selection and transformation by differently located audiences. Thus, rather than textual meanings being simply diffused among unsuspecting foreign viewers, local audiences have been found to make sense of American productions in relation to their own cultural location, and to appropriate these texts in ways which alter their meanings in (at times) quite fundamental ways (Ang, 1985; Liebes & Katz, 1990; Biltereyst, 1995; Michelle, 1998).

Collectively, these two research strands offer many interesting and useful insights, and provide ample evidence that audience reception is *potentially* an active and selective process whereby viewers negotiate the meanings of cultural texts encountered within specific social, cultural and discursive contexts. It is also evident that differently located viewers may at times make divergent interpretations of the “same” cultural text, reflecting the particularities of their demographic and social group membership(s), political and moral beliefs and interests, social and cultural identities and locations, and individual psychological make-ups.

That said, it does not necessarily follow that all or even most viewers frequently engage in such “creative” work in the course of their everyday film or television viewing. The suggestion that they do rests on an “undocumented presumption that forms of interpretive resistance are more widespread than subordination, or the reproduction of



dominant meanings” (Morley, 1993, p. 14). As Curran (1990), Corner et al. (1990), Morley (1993 and 2006) and others note, it is easy to overstate the case by emphasizing “evidence” of viewers actively and critically generating idiosyncratic meanings and pleasures, whilst discounting significant constraints on textual polysemy in terms of the power of cultural producers to *frame* audience interpretation and response (Condit, 1989; see also Ang, 1991). As Condit (1989) suggests, most texts are encoded with meanings that the majority of viewers will recognize and understand in broadly similar ways, even though they have different responses to, and evaluations of, those meanings. Identifying those meanings requires detailed textual analysis, with attention given to both what is represented, and how. Hence the third central foci within audience reception research, which examines how media frames determined at the point of textual encoding work to “set the agenda” for audience interpretation and response (see Corner et al., 1990a and 1990b; Philo, 1990, 1993 and 1995; Kitzinger, 1993; Miller, 1994; Roscoe et al., 1995; de Vreese, 2004).

As this brief overview suggests, there is general consensus within the field on the importance of identifying broad patterns in audience reception that are linked to social categories beyond the individual, and on the ability of cultural producers to prefer, but by no means *guarantee*, certain readings through the processes of textual encoding. However, our ability to consolidate existing knowledge is constrained by our increasingly diffuse interests, and by our lack of a common framework for analysing audience interpretation and response. If we are to stem a potentially unproductive slide into schism and partition, we need to find some means of reframing what we know, or think we know, in commonly accepted phrases and conceptual categories. We need, in other words, a shared language to talk about audience reception; one with a clearly perceived grammar. As a precursor to constructing just such a language, it is vital to

acknowledge the many commonalities that exist across existing schemas charting different modes of audience response.

### Existing Models of Audience Reception

One early model offered by Worth and Gross (1974) differentiates between *inferential* and *attributional* readings. *Inferential* readings reveal no acknowledgement of the constructed nature of the text, or the fact that it has been “created” by an external “Author” or production team. Such readings infer textual meaning by relating the text to real life, and treat depicted characters and events as naturally occurring phenomena (Worth & Gross, 1974, p. 36). Conversely, *attributional* readings recognize the constructed nature of the text, and draw attention to textual and aesthetic characteristics such as conventions of performance, narrative expectations, and intertextual codes (p.34). This schema thus makes a very useful distinction between readings which do, or do not, demonstrate an awareness of textual construction, but is limited by its inattention to viewers’ engagement with the text’s ideological content.

Such engagement is of central concern in Hall’s (1980) “encoding/decoding” model of communication, which proposes that viewers may make *dominant/preferred*, *negotiated* or *oppositional* decodings of media texts. While this model remains fundamentally useful, Hall’s decoding categories have been over-generalised in both concept and application. This is evident in the most celebrated application of Hall’s schema: Morley and Brunson’s *Nationwide* study. A close reading of the responses offered by participants in this study reveals qualitatively different modes of reception, reflecting varying degrees of attunement to *Nationwide*’s mode of address, production values, programme content and implicit ideological framework. These different emphases are, however, obscured due to Morley’s reliance on conceptual categories

that effectively *conflate* audience responses to textual *form* with their understanding of and response to textual *content*, and more especially, ideological *meaning(s)*.

To illustrate the problem, it is useful to reconsider the responses offered by two key groups of participants, the Bank Managers and the Further Education Students (Morley, 1980b). Morley interprets the Bank Managers' lack of engagement with the ideological content of *Nationwide* as signifying their acceptance of its "commonsense" framework as essentially non-controversial, and so categorizes their response as a "dominant/preferred" decoding. However, many of these participants actually focused on *Nationwide's* form of address to such an extent that they barely commented at all on its "implicit framework." In fact, some Bank Managers actively resisted the very notion that *Nationwide* was capable of conveying *any* ideological message at all, as suggested in comments such as "there wasn't a theme," "all you've picked up are people's reactions . . . it's not considered," and "it wasn't sufficient" (Morley, 1980b, p. 57). Thus, what this group actually articulated was an overwhelmingly negative perception of *Nationwide* as "just a tea-time entertainment programme, embarrassing, patronising, exploiting raw emotion, sensationalism" (p. 57). Such comments reveal, not opposition to *Nationwide's* ideological content, but rather, a striking attunement to its aesthetic *form* as a television production--one which, according to these participants, exhibits very poor production values as compared to their preferred genre of "serious current affairs."

Paradoxically, however, when a similarly disparaging response to the textual form of *Nationwide* is offered by black Further Education students, Morley interprets this as a "sign" of the disjunction between the cultural codes of their West-Indian, inner-city, working-class communities and those inherent within *Nationwide*, and largely on this basis classifies these participants as oppositional readers. Yet these participants primarily engaged in a "critique of silence" and, not unlike the Bank

Managers, hardly connected at all with the discourse of *Nationwide*. In fact, Morley notes that “in so far as they make any sense at all of the items some of them *at times come close to accepting the programme’s own definitions*” (Morley, 1980b, p. 63; emphasis added). Thus, their readings were not strictly “oppositional” after all! In many respects their responses parallel those of the Bank Managers, in that they critique various aspects of *Nationwide* as a television *production*. For these viewers, *Nationwide* is found wanting because it is “not interesting at all,” “that’s all rubbish,” and “they beat about the bush . . . they say it and then repeat it. . . . *Today’s* shorter . . . and then there’s *Crossroads* on after” (p. 58). If, as Morley contends, such remarks are indicative of a disjunction between the cultural codes of these West-Indian, inner-city, working-class groups and those implicit in *Nationwide*, one wonders why no such disjunction exists in the case of *Crossroads* or *Today*, which these participants classed as “good TV,” as “defined in terms of *enjoyment* and *entertainment*” (p. 58; emphasis added).

The difficulty here is that Morley presumes that readings which are framed in terms of an attunement to the form of *Nationwide* offer some kind of insight into viewers’ positions in relation to its implicit cultural codes and propositional content. I would suggest, rather, that such readings are of a different *order*. Indeed, this extended example usefully highlights the need to differentiate modes of reception which reflect an attunement to textual *form* from those which primarily engage with ideological or discursive *content*, and to acknowledge that these modes are not *necessarily* co-determinant (although in some cases they *may* be). Thus, a rather more judicious use of Hall’s categories of dominant/preferred, negotiated, and oppositional readings would limit their scope to charting the expressed *position* of viewers in relation to the discursive message content of a given television text (as suggested by Schröder, 2000). Hall’s categories must also be used more selectively, as they are insufficient to accommodate the full range of interpretive modes that can be adopted by audience

members at different moments. They need to be supplemented with concepts drawn from alternative models.

One such model is proposed by Neuman (1982), who distinguishes between *interpretive* and *analytic* decodings. *Interpretive* decodings relate “the content of the program to one’s own life or broader issues for the community or society” (Neuman, 1982, p. 474). Such readings involve

consideration of what social, cultural, or organisational factors might have influenced the writers and producers of the program, and in turn how the program might influence the thinking of a typical viewer, as well as the respondent’s own sense of the broader meaning, if any, of the program’s themes or their relevance to his or her personal situation. (pp. 474-475)

Neuman identifies three sub-categories of an *interpretive* decoding, reflecting viewers’ perceptions of the “intent,” “impact,” and “implications” of specific cultural texts (p. 480). Neuman’s second category of decoding—*analytic*--is similar to Worth and Gross’s (1974) notion of an *attributional* reading. Both categorisations highlight viewers’ recognition that the text is a construction with meaning(s) encoded into it by its producers. An *analytic* decoding involves some evaluation of the quality of “plot, pace, script, acting, or technical elements of the production” (Neuman, 1982, pp. 474-475). Three sub-categories of this decoding are identified, reflecting viewers’ evaluation of the “general,” “generic,” and “technical” form of a particular text (p. 480). These sub-categories of *interpretive* and *analytic* modes of decoding have been variously appropriated in the composite model of reception outlined below.

Another useful schema is that suggested by Richardson and Corner (1986), who differentiate between two modes of reading employed by viewers in attempting to make sense of the BBC2 documentary programme, *A Fair Day’s Fiddle*. The first, a *mediation* reading, resonates with Neuman’s sub-category of “intent” within the *interpretive* decoding, since both denote the viewer’s attribution of an intention or

motivation to a text's producers. One respondent in their study, for example, suggests that a scene in which a little boy interacts verbally with his mother whilst playing with his toys is staged or "fabricated" because "they [the producers] are trying to keep things natural" (Corner & Richardson 1986, p. 149; emphasis added). In contrast to this is a *transparency* reading, which assesses and comments on depicted people and events as though immediately or directly experienced, rather than encountered "second-hand" in ways heavily mediated by the processes of editing and various other formal conventions and constraints of television production (Richardson & Corner, 1986). Clearly, this category covers similar territory to the *inferential* reading mode identified by Worth and Gross (1974). Richardson and Corner also very usefully account for viewers' identification of a "manipulative" motivation behind such productions (Richardson & Corner 1986, p. 163). This notion of manipulative intent is one which is taken up in the model of reception outlined below, as are the two key interpretive frameworks identified by these researchers (in revised form).

The nature of an *inferential/transparency* reading is clarified somewhat in Schrøder's (1986) discussion of *strong* versus *indicative involvement*. In his analysis of Danish viewers' involvement in, and distance from, the American soap opera *Dynasty*, Schrøder describes *strong* involvement as necessitating a suspension of "disbelief" and a denial of the constructed nature of the narrative in order to grant the purely fictional the status of "real life," even if only temporarily for the purpose of allowing viewers to enter into the fiction and partake of its pleasures. Schrøder (1986, p. 70) also describes an *indicative* mode of involvement, in which characters are evaluated "from the perspective of like-us-ness." He suggests that this form of involvement may be expressed in either explicit comparisons between the fictional and real world, or more implicitly in slippages between events, experiences, and problems depicted on screen and those residing within the wider context of reception. This seems to imply that a

distinction should be made between two different types of inferential reading. First, one which regards the social “reality” constructed by a television text as a discrete and coherent “world of its own” and evaluates it on its own terms. Second, one which regards this textual “reality” as standing alongside “real life” and as being similar and/or different to it in any of its aspects, and which consequently evaluates the depicted “reality” in relation to persons, objects and institutions encountered within the real world. This distinction is retained and solidified in the model of reception outlined below.

Dahlgren (1988) offers a somewhat different set of categorisations in documenting viewers’ use of *official* and *personal* modes of discourse in their talk about television news programmes. A number of respondents who adopted an *official* mode also articulated what Dahlgren describes as a discourse of “media awareness/demystification” (Dahlgren, 1988, pp. 210-211), which reflected their awareness of various elements of textual construction. As noted above, such awareness is a key feature of an *attributional* reading, *analytic* decoding, and *mediation* reading. Importantly, Dahlgren adds that in articulating this discourse, viewers are able to assume one of two positions, “either a critical-intellectual stance or that of a ‘show-biz fan’” (p. 211). Media awareness/demystification discourse may also reveal a viewer’s understanding of the news as motivated discourse, a notion which resonates with concepts proffered by Neuman and also Richardson and Corner concerning viewers’ perceptions of the intentions of cultural producers.

In more informal contexts, Dahlgren found a tendency for individuals to use various modes of *personal* discourse, including that of “trivial [*sic*]/random personal association” (Dahlgren, 1988, p. 211), in which viewers make commonplace associations between what is depicted in news and their own life experiences. There are clear parallels between this concept and the categories of *inferential* reading and

*indicative involvement* discussed above. Dahlgren also notes that television news itself facilitates multiple subjectivities which viewers can mobilize in different settings. He suggests viewers may give different or even inconsistent accounts in different contexts, and can shift between fundamentally different modes of discourse in the process (p. 211). This idea of viewers shifting or “commuting” between different modes will be revisited at a later point.

Perhaps the most substantial work to date is that of Liebes and Katz (1986, 1989 and 1990), who identify two distinct modes of reading in their analysis of cross-cultural receptions of *Dallas*. The first, a *referential* reading, makes connections between the fictional “reality” depicted on screen and the viewer’s own knowledge and experience of the world—as with the categories of *inferential* reading, *indicative involvement*, and trivial/ random *personal association*. For viewers reading in a *referential* mode, characters are related to as though they were real individuals; in turn, these characters are compared to people and situations in the viewer’s own life world (Liebes & Katz, 1990, p. 100). Their second mode of reading, a *critical* mode, extends and clarifies the terrain variously charted by the categories of *attributional* reading, *interpretive* and *analytic* decodings, *mediation* reading, and media awareness/ demystification discourse. The term “critical” is used by these authors to denote the adoption of an informed or analytic perspective, which is seen to induce a remote or distanced, “objective” approach in particular viewers. For Liebes and Katz, “the critical . . . frames discussions of the programme as a fictional construction with aesthetic rules” (p. 100).

Most usefully, Liebes and Katz identify two distinct types of critical reading—*semantic*, and *syntactic*. *Semantic* criticism takes the form of inferences about a text’s ideological theme or message, and may also be expressed in comments about the rhetorical motivations or aims of producers. Offering additional insight, Livingstone and Lunt (1994) suggest that *semantic* criticism may be manifested in remarks about the



coherence of a particular argument, the adequacy of any “evidence” presented, and the motivations underlying the presentation of certain characters or textual content. This mode may also be expressed in viewers’ identifications of what could or should have been said, but was not. In its *syntactic* element, Liebes and Katz (1986, 1989 and 1990) suggest that being “critical” implies recognition that the text is produced or constructed, as evident in comments about the formal conventions of genre, narrative formula, the dramatic function of characters or events, or the imperatives and constraints involved in media production. For these theorists, syntactic criticism reflects a distanced viewing mode in which viewers “step back” from the “reality” of the text. It implies a less involved style of viewing and is thereby held to offer some degree of protection from the text’s ideological content or intended message (Liebes & Katz, 1986, p. 153).

Problematically, however, this assumption relies on the same conflation between receptions of textual form and textual content made by Hall (1980) and Morley (1980a & 1980b). I contend that viewers’ recognition of the text as a construction does not *necessarily* offer a “defence” against the text’s ideological effectivity. Indeed, as Dahlgren (1988) suggests, syntactic readings may be made from the point of view of a showbiz fan; alternatively, it is possible for a participant to be extremely disparaging of textual form, yet largely accept its ideological message “straight.” Admittedly, such participants are likely to *resist* the idea that the text has a meaningful message; but as Liebes and Katz (1989) rightly note, being *resistant* is not the same as being *critical*. For this reason, researchers must distinguish between uncomplimentary responses to textual *form* (e.g. “this programme can’t be taken seriously,” “it’s just entertainment,” “there is no message”) and critical responses to ideological *content*. While ideological content may be of less immediate concern to some participants, they *will* still have a response to it. However, the depth of probing needed to solicit this response is generally not feasible within a focus group situation, which raises important

methodological questions given the current predominance of this method within audience reception research.

Liebes and Katz's conflation of *semantic* and *syntactic* "criticism" is thus rejected on these grounds. Both "critical" elements are retained, but deployed somewhat differently and as features of two distinct modes of response in the model of audience reception outlined below. In terms of the model I am advocating, the only form of critical reading which is seriously capable of resisting or opposing the *semantic* or ideological content of a text is one which challenges that content directly in terms of its ideological or discursive grounding.

Taking a somewhat different approach, Hoijer (1992) draws on insights from cognitive theory to chart the influence of mental representations or cognitive structures on audience reception. She identifies three realms of accumulated experience represented in the cognitive structures of individual viewers, and illustrates how these are used as interpretive frames of reference (cognitive schema) in the process of meaning construction. The first realm is that of *universal experience*, described as those experiences "humans share by virtue of their being human beings" (Hoijer, 1992, p. 586)--including childhood, ageing, health, illness, work, love, and experiences of nature. Hoijer's second category charts the realm of *cultural experience*, including wider social norms and representations as well as those "typical of the gender and social class to which you belong, the area you live in, the schools you attend, your occupation and so forth" (p. 586). *Private experiences* are defined as the unique manifestation of those experiences in the cognitive schema of individuals (p. 586). Parallels can thus be drawn between the use of experience as an interpretive frame of reference and the categories of *inferential* reading, *indicative involvement*, *trivial/random personal association*, and *referential* reading outlined above, and elements of Hoijer's work are incorporated into the model outlined below.

More recently, Schröder (2000) has attempted to construct an empirically based, multi-dimensional model of media reception featuring six dimensions (Motivation, Comprehension, Discrimination, Position, Evaluation, and Implementation). While this schema diverges too far from established understandings to be widely accepted or useful<sup>1</sup>, Schröder rightly notes that reception analysis must “distinguish between readers’ subjectively experienced agreement or disagreement with the media text on the one hand (the reader’s ‘position’), and the researcher’s ‘evaluation’ of the role played by readers’ positions in hegemonic struggles” (Schröder, 2000, p. 236). This is because not all texts function to disseminate dominant ideology, as Hall presumed (Schröder, 2000). Some may be multi-vocal, while a few may privilege subordinated, suppressed or counter-hegemonic discourses. Of course, only the former dimension (the reader’s *position*) properly reflects a mode of audience reception *per se*; the latter category pertains to the researcher’s evaluation of the political implications of the viewer’s position *vis a vis* encoded textual meanings, as assessed in relation to broader hegemonic struggles. In terms of our critical and political practice as intellectuals, however, it is essential to retain the ability to make such assessments. Thus, I include both categories in the consolidated model outlined below.

As should be evident from this overview, the similarities between existing models of reception are quite substantial. These models are clearly amenable to consolidation, a move which may forge fruitful connections between related areas of investigation within the broader field of audience reception research. In considering the shape of such a model, a multi-dimensional approach is clearly essential given the multi-faceted nature of reception (Dalhgren, 1998). An adequate model must also be able to chart the diversity of viewers’ responses to the full range of existing and emerging film and television genres. Toward this end, the rest of this paper outlines a composite model of reception “modes” which draws together and extends upon four

key areas of commonality within the schemas discussed above. This model recognizes the capacity of differently positioned viewers to approach the process of meaning construction in different ways. It acknowledges that viewers' readings reflect varying degrees of involvement in, and distance from, media texts, along with varying degrees of attunement to their form and/or ideological or discursive content. It is intended to provide a common conceptual framework or shared "language" for the (meta)analysis of existing and new reception data, in order that the field as a whole might be consolidated and our collective knowledge synthesized and unified. Only then can we really begin to understand audience reception in its full complexity.

#### A Consolidated Multi-dimensional Model of Modes of Audience Reception

The model visually represented below (Figure 1) differentiates between *transparent*, *referential*, *mediated*, and *discursive* modes of reception, and identifies various sub-categories within each mode. All of these subcategories have been identified within the corpus of accumulated research, but have been described using different terminology. Further explanation, along with illustrations of the specific nature and tenor of each category of response, will be provided by drawing from a detailed qualitative analysis of twenty-two New Zealanders' cross-cultural receptions of an episode of the popular American situation comedy, *Murphy Brown* (Michelle, 1998).

This episode, aptly entitled "Murphy's Revenge," effectively constitutes a carefully constructed rhetorical response to a political controversy which erupted following the 1991 season finale, in which Murphy, a highly successful television journalist and divorcee, had given birth to a baby boy outside of marriage. This event evidently prompted the then U.S. Vice-President, Dan Quayle, to publicly criticize Murphy, a fictional television character, for glamorising single motherhood and "mocking the importance of fathers" by bearing a child alone and calling it just another

“lifestyle choice.” In the subsequent 1992 season premiere that formed the basis for this study, Murphy is depicted struggling to cope both with the demands of new motherhood and Quayle’s very public criticisms, which she explicitly rebuffs in a climactic “live-to-air” speech. In what follows, archetypal responses gathered during the course of in-depth individual interviews are used to illustrate each of the four modes of reception that together comprise the composite multi-dimensional model of audience reception.

FIGURE 1 HERE

*1) Transparent Mode: “Text as Life”*

My starting point reflects a perhaps controversial belief in the need to acknowledge that while audience members have the potential to be “active,” critical, and creative, they are not always so in the same way, nor to the same degree. A significant proportion of audience reception does not critically deconstruct what is seen or heard (indeed, it seems probable that viewers are more likely to offer such critique within the context of academic research than they are in their regular viewing); and while creative and idiosyncratic interpretations are clearly documented in the existing scholarship, there is little evidence to suggest that these reflect the predominant mode of response most of the time. Further, *all* viewers (including media researchers!) have times when they allow themselves to be completely absorbed and engulfed by some, generally their favourite, media texts, as Barker (2006) suggests.

This is not to imply that they will always do so *passively*: Quite the contrary, as the growing literature on fandom suggests (e.g. Jenkins, 1992). Indeed, rather than falling back on an unhelpful dichotomy between active versus passive modes of reception, the relationship between text and viewer may be more usefully conceived in terms of a continuum ranging from *close* (and largely subjective and textually-bound)

modes of reception to the more *distant* and supposedly “objective” modes of response favoured by critics and media educators. This continuum and its relationship to all four modes of reception is indicated in Figure 1 above.

Of course, what “engulfment” *does* imply is that the terms of audience engagement are determined by *intra*-textual cues and resources rather than *extra*-textual ones. Thus, when reading in a transparent mode, *the text provides the primarily resources for its interpretation*. This central defining feature of the transparent mode is delineated in the concept of *inferential* reading identified by Worth and Gross (1974), Richardson and Corner’s (1986) concept of a *transparency* reading, and Schröder’s (1986) notion of *strong* involvement. Consolidating these existing understandings, a *transparent* mode of reception is one where viewers assess and comment on persons and events depicted in media texts as though encountering them firsthand, rather than through the mediations of narrative construction, writing and editing, and textual/generic form. On this basis, texts are related to and evaluated on their own terms and according to their own internal logic.

In the case of non-fictional productions (news and current affairs, documentary, “reality” programming), depicted persons and events are assumed to be transparent reflections of an external “real” world, a reading which relies on a belief in the accuracy and truthfulness of depictions which are, for the most part, still presented and accepted by the majority of audience members as relatively undistorted reflections of reality. As Lewis rightly notes, “News and current affairs programs are still so ideologically loaded with codes of transparency that while their partiality is often questioned, their claim to signify real life is not” (Lewis, 2004, p. 290). In a transparent mode, while we may be very actively engaged in viewing “real life” events, our interpretation of them draws on frames and cues offered within the text itself, rather than extra-textual resources. Hence, the CNN-depicted “reality” of the Twin Towers on fire and

crumbling to the ground signifies “America Under Attack” (as it was so quickly captioned), as opposed to “a righteous act of Jihad,” or any number of alternative readings drawing on discourses circulating *outside* the text itself.

In the case of fictional media texts, viewers in this mode temporarily suspend disbelief and critical distance to grant fictional worlds the status of “real life,” or a “realistic slice of life,” for the purpose of entering into the story and engaging with it. Indeed, suspension of disbelief is an essential precursor to deriving the specific forms of pleasure and enjoyment intended by the makers of such texts. Thus, while a viewer adopting a transparent mode of reception of soap opera may be alert and very actively engrossed in considering questions such as “Why is she behaving so badly? What will happen next? Where is he going? Will she find out about her husband’s affair?,” their answers will draw from resources *inside* the text itself. Hence, “she” does not behave badly because the scriptwriters and directors desire a villainess to help provide more drama and increase audience ratings. Rather, she behaves badly because she is jealous, or aggrieved, or has been hurt in a previous relationship. *She exists as a “real” person within the lifeworld of the soap opera itself.*

The quality of the relationship between text and viewer in a transparent mode is thus characterized by closeness or lack of separation, and while viewers are objectively aware that it is “only a television programme,” or “only a movie,” their primary engagement is on a more subjective, emotional level. Thus, slippages may occur between fictional depictions and viewers’ everyday realities. For example, when watching a fictional production, viewers may draw on evidence *supplied within the text itself* to “explain” events and the actions and motivations of characters whom, like real human beings, have a personal “history” within the life world of the text. Here, Elizabeth<sup>ii</sup> draws on the available textual “evidence” of Murphy’s age, lack of parenting knowledge, and commitment to her journalistic profession to construct an

explanation for her parental ineptitude which is entirely consistent with that implicitly preferred in *Murphy's Revenge*:

*Q: Why do you think Murphy has such a hard time coping with her baby?*

A: She's obviously having a child later in life, and to have a baby and come home to a house [when you] don't know what you're doing, it's hard for anybody. On top of that . . . she's very good at her job and she wants to be there. . . . [S]he doesn't really know what she's doing. . . . As a social worker I could give her . . . information about what to do. About where to go for resources. (Elizabeth)

While Elizabeth clearly understands that this programme is fictional, she temporarily grants this fictional world the status of "real life" and consequently relates to Murphy as though she were a real person encountering real dilemmas. Consistent with her adoption of a transparent mode of reading, Elizabeth slips between this fictional world and her own everyday reality, activating her occupational identity as a social worker to reflect on the nature of her real-life professional intervention in such a situation, which would be to provide "information about what to do" to a new mother potentially at risk.

Paul similarly adopts a transparent mode of reception and attributes Murphy's problems to her age, lack of sleep, and inappropriately clinical approach to caring for her child, all of which are features of the fictional life world of this sitcom. Textual frames determined at the point of production thus serve as interpretive frames for this viewer:

*Q: Why do you think that Murphy has such a hard time coping with her baby?*

A: Well, the first thing that springs to mind would be her age. Assuming she is mid-forties, she'd be very set in her way of dealing with life. . . . [S]he obviously has the nice apartment, she has been very successful and in control of everything. Suddenly it's her first night at home, [and] she has this item . . . which she cannot control. It is controlling her. She's short on sleep, which would tend to aggravate the situation. (Paul)

Where such potential explanations are absent or unknown to viewers in this mode, they may well invent them, but do so in a way which does not interrupt the coherence of the fictional life world. In other words, their explanations "make sense"



*within the terms laid down by the text itself*, and propose realistic explanations for purely fictional occurrences. Andrew, for instance, is not a regular viewer and thus is not familiar with Murphy's "personal background," accumulated over the course of many episodes and several seasons. Instead, he attempts to construct a coherent explanation for Murphy's difficulties by "inventing" a past for her in which she had no siblings and few relatives:

*Q: Why do you think Murphy was having such a hard time coping with the baby?*

*A: I think she is an only child and probably her parents are dead as well. She hasn't got many relatives, because she doesn't know how to look after kids. (Andrew)*

According to the model of reception proposed here, responses such as these (in which the meaning of fictional textual events is constructed via reference to the "life world" of the text and the "historical background" and "personality" of individuals featured within it) reflect the adoption of a transparent mode of reading. Furthermore, a transparent mode appears to be one in which textual meanings are implicitly read "straight," since the text provides the primary resources for its own decoding. A dominant/ preferred position in relation to privileged textual meanings can thus be assumed of those reading *solely* in this mode. For some readers, this will seem a somewhat controversial assertion. However, as uncomfortable as we might be with a concept that *seems* to imply a lack of critical engagement and (perhaps also) the "easy" transmission of ideological messages, this viewing mode is clearly documented within the body of existing research. It must be acknowledged and more adequately understood if we are to strategically address its troubling political implications.

## *2) Referential Mode: "Text as Like Life"*

My understanding of this second mode of reception draws on the categories of *inferential* reading (Worth & Gross, 1974), *indicative involvement* (Schröder, 1986),

trivial/ random *personal association* (Dahlgren, 1988), and *referential* reading (Liebes & Katz, 1986, 1989 and 1990). Whereas a *transparent* mode is one in which viewers relate to media texts on their own terms (whether as unmediated reflections of “real life” or coherent fictional worlds of their own), a *referential* mode is one step removed, in the sense that viewers perceive the text as standing *alongside* the real world, and make comparisons and analogies between that depicted reality and their own knowledge and experience of the extra-textual world “out there”--experience which may be first hand, or itself mediated through encounters with other cultural texts. In other words, a viewer’s understanding of many, less immediate aspects of social reality may in fact derive from media itself, which as Lewis (2004) notes, does not necessarily mean they are perceived as any less “real.” In adopting this mode of reception, viewers are able to draw from three “pools” or sources of information, and may use this information to affirm, contest, or question the accuracy of textual depictions of people and events and the version of “reality” presented in a particular text. Such assessments are typically made according to a perceived fit, or lack of fit, with the viewer’s own cultural milieu and existing body of experiences, observations, and knowledges.

One source of referential information is each viewer’s *personal history or individual biography*, which includes their stock of experiences of childhood, adulthood and parenthood, along with personal and familial relationships. Several of the respondents in this study recognized elements of similarity between the reality depicted in *Murphy’s Revenge* and their personal experiences, which were often linked to becoming a parent. Some drew on their experience of the difficulties involved in caring for new babies in a way that confirmed the accuracy and believability of Murphy’s struggle:

*Q: Were there any parts that particularly stuck in your mind?*

*A: Some of the bits that I was able to relate to in terms of caring for babies. . . . In this particular instance she was trying to settle a baby that kept waking. . . . [My]*

eldest daughter . . . when she was really little she would wake [and] cried a lot and I knew she was dry . . . there was no reason for her to be awake. (Jill)

Similarly, Julie drew on her personal experience of hormonal imbalances following the birth of her child to make sense of Murphy's problems:

*Q: Why do you think Murphy was having such a hard time coping with the baby?*

A: The hormonal thing when you've had your baby, your hormones are just kind of crazy and you are up and down, up and down. (Julie)

Other participants drew from their personal experiences to contest this textual depiction as unrealistic. Sue's experience of caring for her babies was very different to Murphy's, and evidently provided her with a means of challenging the accuracy and believability of this representation:

*Q: Could you identify with Murphy at all?*

A: No. That baby . . . cried and cried the whole time and . . . a baby just doesn't cry the whole day. . . . I've not had a baby like that, I think some people have had babies like that but I don't think they're that common. (Sue)

Another source of referential information available to viewers is that of their *immediate life world experience*, including their experiences and observations of people such as extended family members, friends, neighbours, colleagues and acquaintances, and their involvement in activities and concerns related to the public sphere (e.g. education and employment; social and demographic group memberships; cultural, political, economic interests and affiliations). In Melanie's case, occupational group membership apparently provided an alternative source of referential information, as she draws on her experience as a voluntary social worker to affirm the resonance between Murphy's difficulties and very similar problems encountered by other inexperienced mothers:

*Q: Were there any parts in particular that really stuck in your mind?*

A: All of sudden she was left [alone] with a baby and that's what happens sometimes if you've never had a baby before . . . that's the frightening time. . . . I have seen heaps of women do that. I have known new mothers who didn't know which end

of the baby was which. They'd never held a baby and that's true. They didn't know. . . . I've seen them feed a baby with a bottle the way you'd feed a pet lamb. That's true. They didn't know how to hold a baby to feed it. Let alone breastfeed. (Melanie)

Even viewers with no relevant personal experience may draw on their knowledge of the experiences of others within their own life world to assess the accuracy of textual depictions. Robyn, who has no personal experience of parenthood, draws on his observations of friends and acquaintances who are sole or 'solo' parents in a way which affirms the realism of the textual depiction of Murphy's difficulties:

A: I don't have any kids but I know how tough it is for solo parents. Where I am from it's like fifty percent of them are solo parents, lots of my friends and that.

Q: *Seeing as you are not a solo parent at all, could you identify with the problems that [Murphy] was having in this programme?*

A: Oh yeah for sure, because I have seen it, I've seen some of those kind of problems, from where I am from. (Robyn)

By the same token, lifeworld experiences may be drawn on to contest textual realism. Kimi, for example, rejects the textual depiction of Murphy's parental ineptitude as inaccurate on the basis of her observations of professional people encountered via her occupation as a crèche supervisor:

I really don't believe people can be that professional and career-oriented that they can't even hold a baby properly. . . . Professional people that I have worked with are also very natural and . . . have a very caring way towards children. (Kimi)

Here, Kimi compares the depicted "reality" of Murphy's struggle with her own lifeworld knowledge of how professional people like Murphy "really are," and encounters a lack of fit which leads her to reject the version of events presented in this episode.

A third source of referential information is that provided by *viewers' experience and knowledge of the wider macro sphere in which they live, and/or in which a given media text was produced*. Such information may pertain to local, national and

international events, economic and political systems and controversies, social policy, contemporary social issues, mainstream public opinion, and social and cultural norms in their own country or that of textual production. Maeve, for example, draws on her historical knowledge of pre-industrial modes of family organisation to suggest that Murphy's difficulties are a product of the shift to a nuclear family structure and the consequent isolation of individuals from their extended family members:

*Q: Why do you think Murphy had such a hard time coping with her baby?*

A: I think it's our society who thinks that if . . . women go and have children, then we're expected to cope [but] I really think that in say, pre-industrial times . . . there was always the family there, and you had maybe an older sister or an Aunt or someone who could help to give you . . . some relief and perhaps hold the child for a while. (Maeve)

While Maeve draws on her knowledge of certain historical features relating to the macro sphere of Western industrialized societies to posit a sociological explanation for Murphy's apparent maternal ineptitude, Marjory draws on different knowledge from the same broad source to dismiss the textual depiction of Murphy's solitary struggle as inaccurate "nonsense." In the following example, she utilizes her knowledge and experience of the available support services for new mothers in New Zealand, along with her understanding of middle-class American life, as interpretive resources in the process of constructing a divergent reception of Murphy's difficulties:

*Q: Do you think that new mothers in New Zealand are likely to experience the same sort of problems that Murphy did in/*

A: /Oh I think that was just rubbish, any female who's got a few bob is not going to arrive home from the hospital with nobody to help her, for a start. I mean damn it, my mother had Karitane, she didn't know one end of a baby from the other but she had a Karitane nurse, and most others would have a grandmother or somebody there to help, so that was just a bit of nonsense. . . . It wasn't even the slightest bit realistic. She obviously had plenty of money, she lived in a great big house; it's absolutely absurd. In the normal American situation she'd have had a Hispanic maid, because that's what they normally do have, so she'd have had a live-in maid anyway, if she'd been living on her own in a great big house. (Marjory)

Clearly then, viewers are able to draw on various sources of referential information, including their own personal experience or individual biography, their immediate lifeworld experience, and/or their knowledge of the macro social, political, economic, cultural, national and international context in which they live or in which the text was produced. It should be noted, however, that in making referential readings, participants must first consider the text *as* life in order to evaluate its *similarity to* life as they understand it. However, the fact that this referential knowledge may be used to affirm, question, or reject textual realism means that a viewer's position in relation to the text's preferred ideological meaning(s) cannot be predicted on the basis of their adoption of this viewing mode.

### 3) *Mediated Mode: "Text as a Production"*

My understanding of this third mode of reception draws on insights derived from the categories of *attributional* reading (Worth & Gross, 1974), *analytic* decoding (Neuman, 1982), *mediation* reading (Corner & Richardson, 1986), *media awareness/demystification discourse* (Dahlgren, 1988), *syntactic* criticism (Liebes & Katz, 1986, 1989 and 1990), and *discrimination* (Schröder, 2000) outlined above. Consolidating and refining these existing schemas, I suggest that what distinguishes a *mediated* mode of reading is its explicit recognition of the constructed nature of the text as a *media production*--as an elaboration of established media codes and conventions. *Mediated* readings are thus generally characterized by a more distant or separate relationship between text and viewer (although the reverse may be true of "hardcore" fans), and while such readings may disparage the quality of production, particular aesthetic or generic features of the text, or the perceived intentions of its producers, these are not "critical" or ideological readings in the sense used here. In adopting a *mediated* mode of reception, viewers characteristically draw on (often quite considerable) knowledge of

aspects of media production, aesthetic ideals, generic conventions, and the functions and motivations of the film and television industries. At times, this knowledge may interrupt the process of identification and/or militate against viewers' engagement with the message content of media texts, thereby potentially (but not necessarily) undermining the text's ideological effectivity.

Within the broader perspective of a *mediated* mode of reading, three sub-categories can be identified. A *mediated* mode of reception with an *aesthetic* focus is one in which the viewer draws attention to any of various features of technical production, such as narrative construction, plot, pace, timing, camera work, use of visuals or captions, editing, scriptwriting, performance and characterisation, and the constraints placed on production and scheduling (the specific content of responses will obviously differ depending on whether the text is film or television; fictional or non-fictional). *Mediated-aesthetic* receptions often take the form of a positive or negative evaluation of the quality of such features. Hence, while some viewers may adopt the position of a showbiz fan (Dahlgren, 1988) to praise or comment in detail on aesthetic features, others may dismiss the text with comments such as "it's moronic," "boring," "repetitive," "overly sentimental," "obvious and predictable," "corny," "it's over the top," "superficial," or "it's over-dramatized." The following comment exemplifies the adoption of a mediated mode of reception with a particular focus on *textual aesthetics*:

The script isn't giving [Murphy] a fair go anyway, to develop any sort of real character; she's paste-board, to me. . . . Not three-dimensional. . . . [It's just part of] the drivel that the scriptwriters were writing. (Marjory)

In comparison, a *mediated* mode of reception with a focus on *generic form* is one where viewers draw on their knowledge of generic conventions—such as narrative formula and characterization particular to genre--or use as interpretive frames of reference texts of the same genre, other episodes of the same series, or even texts of

other genres (overt intertextual references thus fall within this mediated mode). This type of *mediated* mode is evident in the following comments:

[Eldin] was the foil. . . . To bounce comments off and round out the situations.  
(John)

The other characters were quite . . . minor . . . and when they came into the storyline they were sort of airing varying opinions about solo parents and stuff.  
(Alison)

I presume the whole series is really a vehicle for [Candice Bergen], isn't it, and all the people round. . . . It is a sort of a reincarnation of the *I Love Lucy* type of thing, but in a different setting. (Irene)

The third type of *mediated* reception is one which draws on viewers' perceptions of the *intentions* and motivations of cultural producers in terms of meeting various textual, generic, and professional or industry-based imperatives. Viewers may, for example, perceive that the producers have constructed certain textual features in particular ways for distinct reasons, such as the need to generate humour, interest, or drama within the text itself. Sue adopts this type of mediated mode of reading when suggesting that Murphy's difficulties have been engineered by the producers of this text in order to provide the necessary narrative complications:

*Q: Why do you think that Murphy had such a hard time coping with her baby?*

A: I think she had to. . . . Often (laughs) they've [put] pins or something . . . in the cots to make the babies cry, because the babies have to do something, you know?

*Q: What, on the programme?*

A: On the programme, yeah. If the baby was quiet and slept . . . it would be nothing . . . to have a comedy about, I suppose. It's just dealing with the problems of having a baby and all the funny things that could happen that all did happen. . . . They have to make a comedy of it, and they have to deal with it in a funny way. The baby had to cry . . . for the whole programme to be. (Sue)

Alternatively, viewers may draw on their understanding of certain generic imperatives in attempting to make sense of particular narrative elements, such as the need for texts *of that genre* to inform, entertain, amuse or educate, as evident in this response from John:



*Q: Were there any points of view that you felt weren't represented in this programme?*

A: Don't know; I wouldn't credit this programme with being worth even thinking about much. I wouldn't expect it to put all kinds of points of view across.

*Q: Why is that?*

A: Well it's supposed to be a situation comedy. . . . Trying to find humour out of situations, they wouldn't want to put all kinds of views across. (John)

Differently again, viewers may express an awareness of the text as reflecting the *industry-based motivations* of its producers, and hence as having a specific purpose such as informing or entertaining the public, or attracting a lucrative viewing audience in order to generate profit for the television network or film studio. Several participants drew attention to the economic imperatives of commercial television production, with Yuan's response being perhaps the best example:

*Q: What do you think then was the purpose of the programme being made? What do you think the makers were trying to do?*

A: All I can think is money. In other words, they make the money on these programmes in the countries where they were made and then sell them to countries that haven't seen them yet so they're making double money, or triple money. (Yuan)

What is evident from these examples of mediated readings is that viewers in this mode draw on (in some cases considerable) knowledge of, and insight into, aspects of media production, generic conventions, and the functions and motivations of the film and television industries. Such receptions thus require specific knowledges and discursive competencies, and it is clear that some viewers have greater access and allegiance to these interpretive repertoires than others. One of the key tasks of future work should be to explore the links between primary adoption of a *mediated* mode of reception and aspects of viewers' social position--particularly socioeconomic class, education, culture, and fandom. Further, while it is clear that some viewers who read predominantly in this mode *resist* the notion that the text conveys any serious, meaningful message worthy of their consideration, *it is simply not possible* to "read off"

a viewer's position in relation to the ideological content of a text from their response to its form. The historic practice of conflating responses to content and form must be avoided in future work.

#### 4) *Discursive Mode: "Text as a Message"*

My understanding of this fourth mode of reception draws variously from the categories of dominant/preferred, negotiated and oppositional decoding (Hall, 1980), *interpretive* decoding (Neuman, 1982), manipulative intent (Richardson & Corner, 1986), *semantic* criticism (Liebes & Katz, 1986, 1989 and 1990), and Schröder's (2000) dimensions of *comprehension* and *position*. Whereas viewers adopting a *mediated* mode typically highlight features related to the *form* of a given cultural text, receptions framed in a *discursive* mode specifically address the text's propositional or "message" content--i.e. its ideological connotations. That is to say, accounts primarily framed in this mode perceive that the text is attempting to communicate a particular message, and represent the viewer's response to that message. This response has two elements: *analytical*, and *positional*. First, in its *analytical* dimension, the viewer may identify (comprehend) the message that is explicitly articulated within the text, and perhaps analyse it further in terms of its motivations or implications. Only once a message is identified may they express their *position* in response to that message, which will be framed by their own discursive affiliations. Here, they may adopt one of Hall's three possible decoding positions.

While some viewers in an *analytical* discursive mode may simply identify a message or argument within the text, others may consider its nature, logic and coherence, or the adequacy of any evidence given in support of particular rhetorical claims. Other viewers may identify what was not articulated by a text but could, or indeed should, have been said. *Analytical* discursive readings may also reflect viewers'

consideration of the motivation behind the message, and may be framed in terms of the perceived political or discursive aims of the producers in promoting a certain message and in their representation of particular characters or events in a text. In this view, textual producers are seen as biased in a particular direction, and as attempting to persuade viewers to adopt their favoured position. Viewers in this mode may thus comment negatively or positively on the ideas or feelings the producers hoped to instil in the audience. Some may express a negatively-framed conception of the text as having a specific purpose in terms of exerting influence within the social or political sphere, or as Richardson and Corner (1986) term it, having a manipulative intent. According to these authors, viewers in this mode may suggest that in the process, the producers of the text have (perhaps deliberately) distorted reality in some way, and are attempting to deceive viewers in order to secure their own political or ideological intentions. The following interchanges offer useful examples of just such a response:

[Quayle] didn't come across particularly well and this was probably in their favour, they wanted him to look like bigoted and uncaring but just out for a social comment at any cost, but they are [just] challenging traditional values. And saying "this is the way of the world, let's embrace it and let's go with it, 'cause it's happening anyway, so we should just embrace it." (Courtney)

This episode particularly would be a political statement . . . obviously the producers have taken a stance to what Dan Quayle had said about their TV show and now they're digging the knife in and making . . . a political statement through their show. (Sue)

For other members of the audience, the motivations of cultural producers may be regarded more positively as progressive and as revealing a previously denied reality or "truth:"

*Q: Was this episode trying to tell you anything, do you think?*

*A: It was trying to come to terms with the fact that families are no longer mother, father and two-point-two children. Also I think it was trying to . . . tell perhaps younger women, or even women who haven't had children but are contemplating having children, that perhaps its not just simply like the Huggies ad, you know it's not all fun and games and you don't look beautiful all the time.*

*Q: And do you agree with those messages?*

A: I agree that we have to get in our popular culture that families have changed . . . [and] that . . . there are problems with . . . raising a child that you can't really experience, or be told [about] until it's actually brought home to you in episodes like *Murphy Brown*. And I think we need more of that, more of *Murphy Brown*. (Maeve)

*Q: Were there any parts in particular that really stuck in your mind?*

A: The use of Dan Quayle's actual speech and incorporating into that programme, well I thought that was really brilliant. . . . I guess the programme makers thought "well, what do we do with this?" and thought "well, shit, you know, here's a real opportunity to . . . pick up the gauntlet and run with it and . . . really meet the issues head on" and I think they did that really, really well. Oh, that was really a brilliant piece of social commentary really. It was great. (Matthew)

Analytical discursive receptions may also highlight the possible implications of the message for the wider community or society and its political, social or moral ramifications (Neuman, 1982). Here, viewers may comment on the impact of the text on their own thoughts or emotions, and may speculate about the text's possible effect on other, perhaps more susceptible viewers. Examples of this form of reading can be found in the following responses:

*Q: What does this programme say about motherhood, do you think?*

A: It's probably giving a very bad impression to some impressionable young girls who haven't much education or much intelligence. (Marjory)

I just don't believe that life's like that and I think sometimes people in our world will look at that situation and think "well that's funny", you know, "ha, ha" and . . . subtly they . . . try to perhaps live a life a bit like that. (Sue)

The second major category within this fourth mode of reception reflects the viewer's *position* in relation to textual connotations. This mode effectively constitutes the discursive response of viewers to the "text as a *message*." To ascertain what that (implicitly or explicitly) preferred message *is* requires detailed textual analysis in a form that accommodates both theoretical concerns regarding the "problem" of interpretation now that the Author is apparently deceased<sup>iii</sup> (Derrida, 1976; Barthes, 1977), and the practical realisation that certain forms of textual encoding can and do place certain constraints on textual polysemy. I take the position that it is possible to

engage in forms of textual analysis that acknowledge a certain level of polysemic undecidability and polyvocality within media texts (in the sense that they are *theoretically* able to convey various alternative meanings and are thus “readerly” [Barthes, 1977]), whilst simultaneously recognizing that the range of meanings that are likely to be made is limited by the internal organization of a text, which prefers particular readings and *potentially* places certain parameters around audience interpretation. Of course, to identify a preferred reading offers no proof of its ideological effectivity, both because the meaning of the text cannot be singularly fixed once and for all, and because authorial intention cannot guarantee that this preferred meaning will be the meaning discerned by any individual reader (Derrida, 1976; Barthes, 1977). Thus, even where the structure of a text does clearly privilege a particular discursive “voice,” there remains potential for audience members to draw on alternative discourses both present within the text (as subordinated or implicit discursive voices), and within the wider macro context of reception.

It also needs to be acknowledged that a greater degree of textual indeterminacy is now a more common feature of contemporary cultural production, and further, that contemporary viewing practices (such as channel-surfing or “zapping”) may, *at some moments*, work against any single text being able to convey a coherent message. New, non-linear narrative forms may actively resist the classic realist narrative structure presumed by much *Screen*-style textual analysis--a different approach would need to be taken to analyzing the TV drama *Lost*, or a film such as *Memento*, for instance. Clearly, the analyst needs to recognize the particularities of generic form, narrative, and mode of address, and adapt or develop more appropriate forms of textual analysis. The first and primary focus of interpretation should be on delineating the text’s denotative meaning (what is depicted, and how); only then should analysts turn their attention toward the text’s discursive articulations and connotative meaning(s).

Irrespective of the form of textual analysis engaged in, we must bear in mind that struggles over meaning still take place primarily at the level of reception. Undoubtedly, the process of meaning construction is influenced by a range of factors, including the text itself, the social contexts within which it is produced and subsequently encountered by audiences, the cultural affinities of differently-positioned audience members, and the ways in which social, economic, political and cultural factors influence their predispositions and access to particular discursive repertoires. Careful textual analysis should allow us to more clearly perceive the influence of these factors on the struggle over meaning at the level of reception, a struggle which *both* engages with *and* exceeds the text, frequently drawing on a wide range of extra textual resources.

Having asserted the need for textual analysis whilst simultaneously rejecting textual *determinism*, the model proposed here contends that in assessing the connoted meaning of the text in relation to their unique stock of prior beliefs, assumptions and discursive allegiances, viewers may adopt one of three positions. Some may affirm the propositional content encoded within the text and offer a *dominant/preferred decoding* of it, thus taking “the connoted meaning . . . full and straight” (Hall, 1980, p. 136)--as can be seen in this response from Robyn:

*Q: Do you think this programme was trying to tell you anything, was there a message in there?*

A: I suppose there was a message saying that it doesn't really matter, you don't have to have a mother and father as parents, there's plenty of other people out there that are solo parents.

*Q: Do you think that's a good message for them to be putting across?*

A: Yeah! Yeah I do. It's like in my opinion, everyone to their own, sort of thing, if you are happy and you're not hurting anyone. (Robyn)

Other viewers may agree only in part and offer a *negotiated* reading, perhaps drawing on different assumptions and discourses to reject some aspects of the message,

while accepting others. Such a reading, with its “mixture of adaptive and oppositional elements” (Hall, 1980, p. 137), is evident in this response from Irene:

*Q: Do you think that there were any points of view that weren't represented in this programme at all?*

A: Well it was totally justifying . . . her right to choose and do what she liked. . . . Well I think free choice is marvellous, but I think that with free choice must come consideration for other people and . . . to me, people making a free choice with no regard for the effect it is going to have on other people is wrong. . . . Maybe you have got the perfect right to have a baby if you want to have one, but you have also got an absolute responsibility to do the best you can for that child. But . . . [it wasn't] terribly stressed in that you see, it was just her right to do what she wanted to do which was stressed . . . which I think probably was wrong. The responsibility that she had to that child and to other people should have been stressed a bit. (Irene)

Alternatively, a lack of fit between the message of the text and the beliefs, assumptions, knowledges, and discursive allegiances of particular viewers may provide grounds for an *oppositional* reading. It should be noted that my use of the term “oppositional” differs from that of Hall and Morley, who largely took it as given that mainstream media texts would work to affirm and reproduce hegemonic interests within the wider society. In the model proposed here, it is argued that oppositionality needs to be understood strictly in relation to the preferred meanings of the text(s) in question, which cannot be assumed to affirm hegemonic interests at each and every moment (Schröder, 2000). In these terms, an oppositional reading is one where, based on their comprehension of the message in both its denotative and connotative aspects, a reader makes sense of that message “within some alternative framework of reference” (Hall, 1980, p. 138). An oppositional reader thus rejects the preferred meanings and makes sense of the text in a way which opposes and even critiques its propositional content. Further, as Morley suggests, the coherence of viewers' oppositional readings depends on the degree to which they have access to an alternative interpretative framework.

Such a framework is clearly accessible to Courtney by virtue of her strong religious commitments as a member of a Pentecostal Church and pro-life lobby group.

In the following extract, Courtney draws on the discourse of the moral right to construct an oppositional reading of Murphy's "live-to-air" response to Quayle's critique:

*Q: The press statement at the end when Murphy talks to the media, what stuck out in your mind about that?*

A: I guess it was quite subtle in the way it reflected on economic conditions, the Senator of the day's length of term of office, as opposed to some of the more basic foundations of our society which I believe is the home. And it was saying "because I am not of a minority now days, because of the way things are going, let's attack from the other side" instead of saying that "I do believe there's a family and it's important as the foundation of our society." She was totally lacking in that area. And no understanding that there's an important cornerstone in our society . . . [and] at the end of the day . . . children need security and society is based on the family. (Courtney)

Oppositional receptions thus resist and subvert the preferred meaning(s) of the text. They read "against the grain" and perhaps even redefine the agenda and meaning of the text in terms that reflect the reader's own social, cultural, economic, political and moral affiliations and interests (Hall, 1980; Morley, 1980a; Roscoe et al., 1995). In the following example, Courtney frames her objection to one of the preferred meanings of this episode in terms of a much broader critique of moral relativism, a critique which is grounded in her firm belief in the existence of a fundamental truth and universal moral law grounded in Christian doctrine:

*Q: What do you think this programme says about motherhood?*

A: It gives the impression that motherhood is purely a woman's choice . . . first and foremost and everything else is secondary. It's very much that anything the woman wants to do is quite acceptable . . . no one else can comment or have input, it's just the mother's choice the whole way. Which is the way society's going.

*Q: What do you think about that idea?*

A: I guess it goes on that vein that we live in a humanistic society and everyone does what is right in their own eyes, we have our own values, I mean if it feels right to us we can basically do it. The whole value system these days is challenged. . . . There's no checks and balances and right and wrong is even grey now. There's no black and white. So those are the main streams of opinion.

*Q: What is your opinion?*

A: I believe there are definite right and wrongs. . . . I believe there are natural laws of life as there are God's laws, and we can ignore them at our own peril but we won't break His laws, they will break us. (Courtney)



While most participants confined the scope of their receptions to this episode's more "obvious" propositional content around motherhood and the family, Courtney looks beyond this manifest message to consider one of the latent meanings of this text, which she situates within the context of a wider shift from "traditional family values" to "permissive" liberal-humanism. In so doing, Courtney effectively reads against the grain of this episode and critiques what she regards as its implicit affirmation of individual sovereignty in accordance with her own prior allegiance to the discourse of the moral right.

### *Evaluation*

The question remains, however: What are we to make of Courtney's reading in terms of its broader *political* implications? How are we to evaluate this kind of reception in relation to hegemonic discourses around gender and family? Until relatively recently, the conservative moral discourse she articulates *was* the dominant discourse on gender and family relations. But the pendulum has clearly swung toward a more progressive position. And yet it has not shifted so far that senior political figures such as Dan Quayle feel constrained in publicly affirming traditional "family values" and related gender roles. In this unstable, deeply contested context, our job as critical intellectuals is to determine the broader implications of particular modes of audience reception for hegemonic struggles such as this one.

To facilitate this process, I propose that once viewer positions in relation to encoded textual meanings have been determined, a final layer of analysis take place to evaluate whether those receptions constitute *hegemonic*, *contesting*, or *counter-hegemonic* readings. As stated above, it is necessary to differentiate this evaluation from a determination of viewers' positional response, since not all media texts are hegemonic in the sense that Hall's original decoding categories assume. Such

evaluations thus require careful consideration of audience receptions in relation to the role played by particular cultural texts within broader political conflicts. This is perhaps the most difficult of the tasks we face, but in the current geo-political context it remains the most important of all, as Hall rightly recognized.

### *Commuting Viewers*

In detailing these four primary modes of reception, my purpose is not to imply that *all* audience accounts can be defined as reflecting either a transparent, referential, mediated, or discursive mode of reception, although readings may well reflect the *predominance* of one or two of these modes. Rather, my aim is to begin the process of fleshing out a typology of the modes of reception that can be adopted at particular moments by different viewers, in order to provide the grammar for a common, unifying language within the field as a whole. Schröder's (1986) notion of *commuting* usefully conceptualizes the process through which some viewers may shift between different modes of reception.

Paraphrasing Schröder's explanation and extending the scope of its application beyond his limited use of it to explain the bipolar movement between involvement and distance, the notion of commuting reflects recognition that the experience of the viewer is not necessarily confined to any one of the modes of reception identified above (although in some cases it *may* be). Depending on their access to different discursive repertoires, some viewers may commute between these different modes, a notion which is comparable to Wilson's (1996b) concept of "playful" consciousness. In terms of this understanding, even those viewers who exhibit a high degree of identification and involvement may have moments of critical distance to certain aesthetic, generic, or rhetorical features of a text. By the same token, even those whose basic viewing experience is marked by attunement to the form of a text or opposition to its ideological

orientation may have moments of engagement in the fictional or real-life drama (Schröder, 1986, pp. 68-9). For Schröder, these experiences of involvement and distance may be “simultaneous and interdependent, yet still separate” (p. 77).

Clear evidence of this commuting process can be found in the responses of participants in this study; some more than others. Over the course of one interchange, for example, Matthew initially adopts a *referential* mode and contests the depiction of Murphy as struggling to cope on her own as inaccurate on the grounds that it is inconsistent with his own personal experience of parenthood, in which extended family members have always been on hand to assist his own partner:

*Q: Why do you think Murphy had such a hard time coping with her baby?*

*A: Well . . . when my partner's had a child . . . there's always been other people around . . . like grandparents . . . to help out, especially in . . . the basic crafts of motherhood, and . . . from that programme she was doing that all on her own without any input from any other woman who'd shared the experience.*

Matthew then immediately shifts to a *mediated* mode of reading in which he demonstrates an attunement to textual intentionality, in this case the characterisation of Murphy Brown: “I don't know why they did that, whether it was because they wanted to portray her as being a stronger character by not having help from another woman.” Commuting once again, Matthew then slips back into a *referential* mode of reading: “[F]rom my experience of things . . . you'd have some family around to help you. You wouldn't be looking at hiring a nanny the day that you came out of hospital to go back to work.” Almost immediately, however, Matthew commutes to an *analytical discursive* mode of reading which highlights the political motivations of the producers in terms of the message they sought to convey by depicting Murphy as struggling along on her own: “I guess they . . . could have constructed the programme like that, to capitalize on the opportunities given to them by Dan Quayle . . . making these statements. . . . I don't know what the timing of all that was really. Perhaps it sought to

do that.” Matthew finally shifts back to a *mediated* mode of reception and draws attention to the generic form of this text in acknowledging the centrality of the situation to this programme (a situation comedy), and hence the need for Murphy to find a nanny and return relatively quickly to her workplace environment:

And I guess that in terms of being a situation comedy, a lot of it is situated in that television studio. . . . That’s kind of where it’s got to take place so . . . it’s important to have Murphy Brown move back into that environment for the programme. That’s the stage, where it takes place. (Matthew)

Significantly, each of the modes of reception sequentially adopted by Matthew offers an alternative means of making sense of particular textual “information.” Depending on the mode adopted at any particular moment, Murphy’s difficulties in coping with her new-born child can be variously understood as unrealistic when compared with Matthew’s own personal experience of parenthood (*Referential mode*--life world experience); a reflection of the desire of producers to characterize Murphy as a strong and independent woman (*Mediated mode*--textual intentionality); a product of their desire to capitalize on the opportunity given them by Quayle to make a political point (*Discursive analytic mode*--motivation); or as symptomatic of the constraints and conventions of sitcom as a genre (*Mediated mode*--generic form). This same process of commuting between different modes of reception is identified by Thomas (2003), who notes that fans of the Archers “had a tendency to slip from the critical commentary mode, often expressing awareness of the text as a construction and of the agents of its production, to talk about the characters, or stories, as if they were real” (cited in Lewis, 2004, p. 293).

### Conclusion

While existing schemas of audience reception have clearly laid the necessary groundwork for the consolidated model offered here, none adequately charts the

relationship between viewers' assumption of particular modes of reception and important social and cultural variables such as socioeconomic class, gender, ethnicity, political interests. While Neuman (1982) does successfully link modes of decoding to educational achievement, the contribution of many of these studies (including my own original research) tends to be confined to the identification and categorisation of the different modes of reading adopted by respondents as individuals or group members. Corner and Richardson, for example, neglect to link use of their different frameworks of interpretation to the social location and group membership(s) of viewers, explaining that the scale of their research was "too small for us to correlate interpretative accounts with socio-demographic variables" (Corner & Richardson, 1986, p. 159). Similarly, the work of Liebes and Katz has been criticized by Tulloch (1990, p. 212) for failing to attend to "power dimensions of class, gender, age, religion and ethnicity." And while Kim's (2004) quantitative analysis of Morley's original data moves in a promising methodological direction, the identification of clear patterns of response linked to social position is undermined by Kim's reliance on Morley's problematic conflation of form and content, which muddied his original classification of certain groups as making dominant, negotiated or oppositional decodings. Any subsequent re-analysis that retains those original classifications reiterates the same problematic assumptions.

That said, it is clear that a critical theory of audience reception *must* go beyond this initial classificatory process to delineate the relationship between modes of reception and viewers' social positions. In this way, it may be possible to ascertain whether particular social groups, with access to specific forms of cultural capital, are predisposed to adopt particular modes of reception in relation to a given cultural text--even as we acknowledge the complex and multifaceted positions of individual audience members. I believe the model of reception presented here offers an analytical schema that will allow us to more systematically examine this link between viewers' adoption

of different modes of reception and their social group memberships based on gender, ethnicity, age, socioeconomic class, as well as political interest, education level, religious belief, and other relevant sub-cultural affiliations and discursive allegiances. It offers a common language with which to identify underlying patterns in the form as well as the content of audience response, and to test whether these are indeed linked to a variety of significant variables. More importantly, perhaps, it provides a common language with which to speak to each other about what is, and is not, typical as opposed to idiosyncratic, and on that basis to formulate general principles that rely on more solid foundations than interesting but largely anecdotal examples.

It is also my contention that the conceptual language offered here would help progress a deeper and broader understanding of the role of media within wider discursive struggles and political debates, allowing us to address questions of both media power and audience resistance. Most significantly, by retaining Hall's categories of dominant/preferred, negotiated and oppositional readings, this model allows us to identify different audience members' *positional* response to the connotative meanings of texts, while the additional *evaluative* categories of hegemonic, contesting, and counter-hegemonic reading allow us to consider what audience positionality actually means in the broader scheme of things. By differentiating between *analytical* and *positional* modes of response and our *evaluation* of their political implications, we have a more refined set of analytical tools with which to explore such questions as the media's role in the construction of "cultural citizenship" (Morley, 2006). We may, for example, be able to observe the shifting terrain of discursive struggles around issues such as unemployment, poverty or welfarism by tracking over time audience responses to essentially similar news coverage of these topics. Conversely, we may be able to examine the role played by media in the politicization of the general public over issues such as the war in Iraq and global warming, or in encouraging public acceptance of

controversial new technologies such as GE, stem cell research, or even human cloning. The emergence or regression of popular or sub-cultural resistance to media messages might also be more productively investigated and traced over time using the categories of response outlined above. Using this model, we may be able to identify the conditions, knowledges, and cultural competencies that are required in order for audience members to be able to make counter-hegemonic readings of mainstream texts. Such information has significant implications for media education aimed at increasing citizen participation in contemporary political debates.

Some might consider that I am stating my case rather too strongly here, and overemphasizing the untested potential applications of the model I am advocating. This is perhaps so; obviously the actual utility of this conceptual schema can only be demonstrated through its widespread application. Nevertheless, like Barker (2006), Morley (2006), and Press (2006), I perceive an urgent need to find some way through the current impasse if we are to avoid stasis, or worst, schism, in the field of audience studies. Thus, I suggest that if we are to preclude further diffusion and dilution of the power and focus of our collective endeavours and begin the process of consolidating and refining our theoretical understandings, the analysis of audience receptions needs to be reframed in a common language, such as is offered here.

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Author Note

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## NOTES

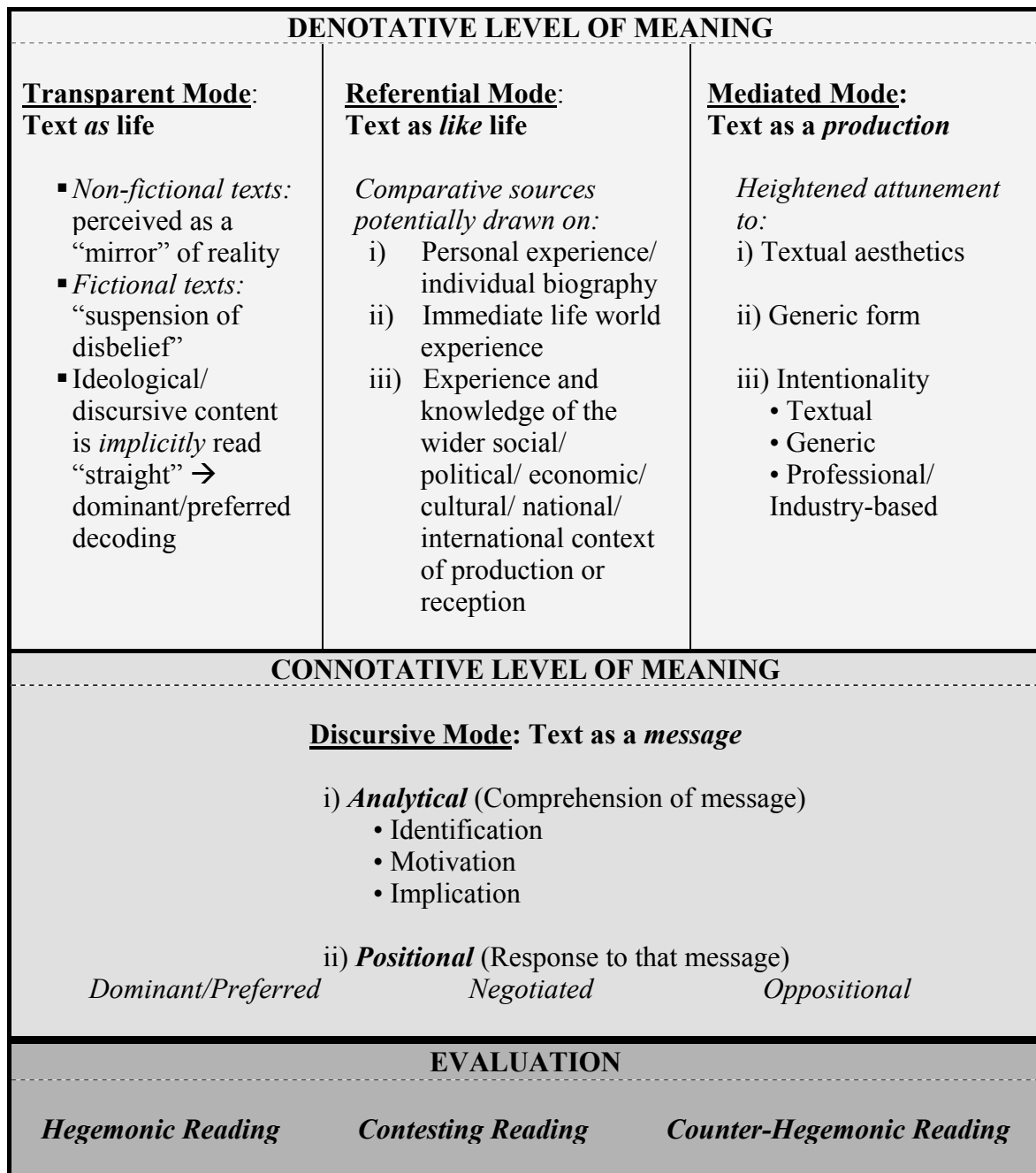
<sup>i</sup> This is not to say that Schröder's model does not echo concepts already identified across many of the existing typologies previously discussed. His concept of "discrimination," for example, is described as "the ways in which informants signal their awareness of the constructedness of the signifying structures of the media text in question" whereby the text is perceived as "the outcome of a production process" (Schröder, 2000, p. 237). This concept is clearly paralleled by the concepts of attributional reading (Worth & Gross, 1974), analytic decoding (Neuman, 1982), mediation reading (Corner & Richardson, 1986), media awareness/ demystification discourse (Dahlgren 1988), and syntactic criticism (Liebes & Katz, 1986, 1989 and 1990).

<sup>ii</sup> All names of participants have been changed to protect anonymity.

<sup>iii</sup> In the case of my original research, an in-depth textual and discursive analysis of the episode in question was conducted, taking into consideration both the *way* in which this story was told and *what* was actually told. My analysis suggests that the narrative structure and mode of discursive articulation in *Murphy's Revenge* worked to strongly assert a rhetorical message that was clearly intended by producers, and immediately apparent to most participants. In terms of my method, a verbatim transcript of the episode in question was firstly prepared and a synopsis compiled. An analysis of the episode's narrative structure was conducted following Tzvetan Todorov's (1977) model of classic realist narrative structure. This was followed by a detailed examination of the episode's narrative content and process of comic enunciation. Having previously charted the "discursive pool" available to the producers of this episode, it was possible to undertake a close examination of the nature of the interactions that occurred *between* these different discourses within the text itself. By attending to the frequency with which certain discourses were given voice through the dialogue and subject-positioning of the characters, the process of comic enunciation and, to a lesser degree, the mode of visual articulation, it was possible to demonstrate how one particular discourse came to be privileged by both the structure and content of this narrative.



Figure 1: Composite Multi-dimensional Model of Audience Reception



Close/ Subjective ←-----→ Distant / Objective  
(Relationship between text and viewer)