Critical approaches to television studies
1. Introduction

Robert Allen (1992) – “How are meanings and pleasures produced in our engagements with television?” – This places criticism firmly in the area of audience interaction with text (also the area which cultural studies has particularly adopted).

However, answers to his question don’t preclude critical examination of related questions, eg. The commercial and political forces which shape the television with which we engage.
Thus a sensible model for criticism would be one which has to do with process, which recognises the interrelationships between institution, text, audience and cultural context.

Allen recognises this complexity when he comments on the unsatisfactory nature of quantitative research (e.g., content analysis) in trying to make sense of television. He refers to the different agendas of social scientists and to the considerable body of research which is taken up with the supposed influence and effects of television.

He talks about

“the home-talk of the knowledge class; the class which wants to take power over information media and cultural technologies like television, not only by running the culture business on behalf of the shareholders and stakeholders, but by regulating it, and controlling the literacies and discourses by means of which it is understood”.
2. Models of the mass media – theoretical approaches

- According to Graeme Burton (2000), television (and those who operate the television system) is a part of society and culture, and not a separate entity which impinges on society from “without”.
- Nevertheless, TV makers and performers are placed in a special position within society by virtue of their access to TV production.
- Culture and society are largely indistinguishable from one another: social structures and relationships are driven by cultural values, are an expression of these values.
• Culture is manifested through the artefacts and the behaviours of a society: social interaction is a form of cultural behaviour: TV is a form of cultural behaviour.
• We assume meanings, values, ideologies within these artefacts and behaviours.
• We construct those meanings under the influence of the very ideologies which we are attempting to define.
• Therefore critical detachment is a mental feat: it may even be argued that our notions of objectivity are themselves subjective.
Burton’s points draw attention to the following:

- That talking about TV requires scepticism about objectivity
- That views about TV may co-exist and not be mutually exclusive
- That all the concepts expressed in this course stand in some relation to one another and not alone
- That the central thrust of criticism seems to reflect on what meanings are produced how, by whom, and with what social and cultural significance.
Granville Williams (1996) – two views of the role and function of media in society as either:

- Media which impose commercial values on everything, and their views on the audience, which functions as consumer, or

- Media which are diverse and pluralistic, creative and aware that too much media power can work against the interest of democracy.

(This is essentially a contrast between determinism and pluralism).
Marxism – determinism

Marxist views of society and then the media developed throughout the 20th C. They remain hugely influential and useful. They focus on economic determinism, class relations and the exercise of power and control within social structures. They are sometimes described as control theories.
TV does partly exemplify the idea that society is driven by capital and economic forces. Commercial TV is funded by a capitalist system. TV programmes discuss the influence of economic forces. And developments in TV – whether these be new kinds of programmes or the digital expansion of new channels – are driven by economic interests: creating new markets, and making more money.
TV also represents class relations – e.g. Keeping Up Appearances, News (creates elite persons – shows some and not others) etc

TV also represents power relations – e.g. explicitly in the ways programmes show men treating women, implicitly as a way of exercising power over large sections of society, by representing certain ways of thinking and behaving as “natural” and others as not. (Different treatments are all expressions of ideology).
Pluralism

Pluralist view is about the notion of variety and choice – of channels, of programmes, of opinions. This choice exists, but within limits.

E.g. channel development – kids, sport, documentary, music – but nothing for disabled people. Same with programmes.
Libertarianism

Another view of the way that media do and should operate, which approximates to the notion that absolute freedom is right in principle, and if allowed to exist, will sort out everything else.

Idea sounds right, but in practical terms is nonsense. You are not free to start up a TV station because you feel like it – the capital costs favour existing rich players, let alone government constraints.
Social responsibility

This view argues that TV has a freedom modified by a sense of responsibility. Theory originally applied to press.

Anyway, most govs not optimistic about the notion of “natural” responsibility, which is why broadcasting acts and other mechanisms provide restraints.
3. Process models – key concepts

If one takes terms such as institution, product, audience, context, then a process approach would argue that understanding of one element is a product of understanding of all elements and their relation to one another.

The downside of some critical approaches is that they look at the parts rather than at the whole.
A process model: the interrelationship of some key areas in TV studies.

Social and cultural context

Commercial context

context of viewing

TV as institution as medium: as text: as audience:

of production and broadcast, adverts broadcasting
distribution cable, programmes etc groups &
satellite

Feedback and interrelationships:

TV ratings, market research programmes

with audience “participation”
4. Ideologies

The notion of ideology – systems of ideas about the world – both emerges from and informs any study of media. Where the ideas are systematic enough, they will be given labels eg, capitalism. Thus in a sense religions are also ideologies. These ideas include the values and beliefs which drive our social behaviour and which define our convictions about power relations – who should have power, and who should not.
An ideology is part of our consciousness because it is what we’ve grown up with – something we share with others in our culture. It is always a collective thing; the very notion of individualism is itself part of our ideology. Eg formative growing up years – include family, education, how TV makes sense of the world for us. These “ways” are ideologically determined.
TV is an agent or carrier of ideology. Althusser would call it an ideological state apparatus.

It is a means by which the interests and values of those who have power are made part of the thinking of those over whom power is exerted, though the exercise of that power is largely invisible.

Ideology is not political in a partisan sense – ie not only leftwing. Rather, all social relations have a political dimension because they all have dimensions of inequalities of power, and of the beliefs which inform these inequalities.
TV, in a variety of programmes, represents ideology in action. It cannot help being ideological. It may not consciously promote or reproduce inequalities, but the fact that it actually does so means that it cannot be regarded as “innocent”.
5. Commodification

Further extension of Marxist rationale. In the context of TV it applies to:

• The cultural artefacts which TV programmes are
• What lies behind the social behaviours and exchanges which TV depicts
• Audiences themselves, who are measured and described by ratings research, and sold as commodities.
Important to remember that TV programmes are commodities which are bought and sold – have material value.

Also can become cultural goods in themselves – eg keeping up with eGoli can become a cool cultural activity.
6. Representation

Representation: the depiction of social groups and institutions.

Not merely about appearance and description, but also about the meanings (or values) behind the appearance.

Because TV is a visual medium it provides us with icons, pictures of people and groups which at least look like life, even if they are only electronic constructs.

Our perception of others in life is also dominated by an inclination to assign them to categories and to make judgements about those categories.
These judgements inform our reading of TV representations, and there are three experiences through which these judgements may be formed:

1. We read the utterances and the non-verbal behaviour of people on TV as we would in real life – social experience.

2. There are also the judgements we may be inclined to make through our media experience of reading TV characters or TV narratives.

3. Layered onto this is the encoding of TV material by its makers (e.g., use of camera) – indirect experience.
7. Textual analysis – image, semiotic, structural

Image analysis

Good approach – distinguish between:

• What makes up the image
• What it may mean
• What helps fix the meanings

In other words, denotation, connotation, anchorage.
Another approach, looking at three other elements in the search for meaning:

- The positioning of the viewer in relation to the text, through the positioning of the camera in relation to its subject;
- The treatment of the image in terms of devices of form, such as focus, foregrounding, framing, colour;
- The context of the image in terms of what is depicted, how these items are juxtaposed, what symbolic connotations they may have.
Semiotic analysis

This approach draws on theories about sign and meaning.

Have signifier – the sign element eg coke can
(denotation)

signifieds – possible meanings – happiness..
(connotation)

signification – meaning for viewer, viewer chooses
CODES are another semiotic concept.

Codes – coherent systems of signs, made coherent and meaningful by conventions or rules as to how they are used.

Eg photograph – how has the subject been photographed?
Structural analysis

Structuralism usually used with semiotics. Has much to do with the organisation of and the meanings in narratives.

Two concepts here:

Syntagm – coherent collection of signs, perhaps from different codes, which form a definite unit (building block) of narrative. We recognise this instinctively when referring to shot, sequence, scene, episode etc.

Binary oppositions – most obviously symbolised by opposing protagonists (heroes and villains) – are a way of structuring ideas and plot lines.
8. Discourse analysis

Discourse refers to collections of meanings about a given subject.

Discourses have a great deal to do with ideology because their meanings are ideological.

Also obviously includes representation if discourse is discussing different types of people.
9. Genre study

The very fact that so much of TV product can be categorised is highly significant in terms of understanding the relationship of the audience with it, and the commercial structures which produce it. Genre study leads to:

• Understanding of audience pleasures
• Revelation of cultural myths
• Understanding of finance and marketing within TV institutions
• Understanding of intertextuality and postmodernist forms of TV
10. Audience study

Audience studies have shifted from influence or effects theories, to

- How particular audiences understand TV
- What they do with it
- How they construct meanings about the world
Broadcasting audience research involves:

- How many of what kind of audience are watching at a given time (TV ratings)
- What attracts audiences to certain kinds of programmes
- What do audiences object to in programmes
- How do audiences differ in region or gender in terms of what they prefer
- Are factual programmes regarded as being objective and impartial
11. Gender studies

Largely feminist criticism, but also masculinity studies now!
12. Cultural studies

TV is a form of culture, an expression of culture and a medium through which culture is mediated to its audiences. Look at any drama!

But they also carry and transform cultural activities such as sport, which are not originated by TV itself. Thus TV both generates and mediates cultural experience.

Cultural studies not in itself a critical method so much as a critical perspective, with particular areas of interest and particular concepts used to make sense of those areas.
Cultural studies is interested in:

- Differences and similarities between social groups, and what defines those differences
- Identities of social groups and how these empower or disempower them
- How language is used to construct representation and meaning
- Cultural production – popular cultural material which appeals to large audiences
• Consumption and commodities (as described in Marxist terms). – the argument that TV contributes to a cultural process in which goods are invested with a value beyond their basic financial worth

• Regulation – because this shapes production and consumption (ie the forces which regulate, constrain and control TV)

• Social practices which are around and behind the process of consumption, like fashion and music.
The study of popular culture linked with concepts of ideology and hegemony – if ideology about a dominant view of world held by powerful groups, hegemony is more about how that dominance is maintained.