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# On Commuting Between Television Fiction and Real Life

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# On Commuting Between Television Fiction and Real Life

## **Disciplines**

Communication | Social and Behavioral Sciences

## On Commuting Between Television Fiction and Real Life

*Elihu Katz, Tamar Liebes, Lili Berko*

This paper originates in a study of “readings” of the television serial *Dallas* by viewers of different cultural backgrounds. Theoretically and methodologically, it stands at the intersection of several converging research traditions. First, it reflects a renewed interest in the study of television as “text” – as programs rather than as medium. While concurring in Beverle Houston's (1984) interest in the relationship among text, situation-of-contact, and viewer involvement, the study reported here relates to the tradition of research on real readers, rather than the “ideal readers” of literary theory or of content analysis. It also relates to the longstanding traditions of study of the uses of mass communication (reviewed in Blumler and Katz, 1974), current concern with empirical study of the ideological effects of the media (Hall, 1980; Gerbner, 1979; Morley, 1980; Lulan, 1980), and the belated rise of interest in the psychology of entertainment (Houston, 1985; Tannenbaum, 1980). A good example of the parallel development in the humanities is Radway (1983). On the whole, these developments – sometimes grudgingly – assign viewers and readers a more active and critical role than heretofore (Himmelweit, 1980; Neuman, 1982). Thus, Stuart Hall's concept of “encoding and decoding” and Newcomb and Hirsch's (1983) “cultural forum” both posit process of negotiation between television texts and their decoding – comprehension, interpretation, evaluation – by viewers anchored in social and cultural contexts different from those of the producers.

But viewing, or reading, is not an individual process; it is often a social affair engaged in with others (Tarde, 1905; Gouldner, 1976; Morley, 1980).<sup>1</sup> It follows that the variety of decodings must be far smaller than the number of individuals involved and that both the process and effects of shared decodings will be reflected in individual interpretations. One must not assume that decodings are random. Nor are they dictated only by the personal and social circumstances of the viewer or reader; there is no quarrel here with those who insist that the text constrains certain preferred or dominant interpretations.

Our study is an attempt to observe these processes of viewer activity and interactivity at work in comparative readings of the world-wide hit program, *Dallas*. The data consist of tape recordings of focus-group discussions of *Dallas* immediately after viewing an episode of the program. Respondents were recruited from 4 different communities in the Jerusalem area (Arabs, Russian Jews, Moroccan Jews, kibbutz members), from non-ethnics in Los Angeles roughly matched with the Israeli groups for age and education, and from Japanese in Japan, where *Dallas* failed.<sup>2</sup> Each focus group consisted of three couples of like ethnicity, all of them friends, who were invited to view the episode in the home of one of the couples. An interviewer led the discussion, the first half of which was largely unstructured: participants were asked to retell the story and to describe the central characters. The second half of the discussion focused on more specific issues such as the “reality” of the characters and the “message” and “value conflicts” in the program.

Our assumptions (1) that TV viewing in daily life is done in the company of family and friends, and (2) that meaning emerges from such interaction (during viewing and thereafter in discussion) underlie the design of this living-room research. While the study

cannot put these assumptions to a strict test, the questionnaire completed by all participants following the discussion confirmed overwhelmingly that the program is both viewed and discussed with others. Moreover, there are repeated allusions to such conversations-especially with "friends at work" – and to previous exchanges between spouses and among friends. Contributions of group viewing to the understanding, interpretation, and evaluation of the program are illustrated in another paper from the project (Katz and Liebes, 1985).

## ON APPLYING A PROGRAM TO REAL LIFE

The study seeks to understand the ways in which viewers relate to the program. We make a major distinction between relating "referentially," in terms of one's personal experience, and relating critically to the program as an aesthetic and industrial construction (Liebes and Katz, 1989).<sup>3</sup>

This paper seeks to explore the referential dimensions, that is, the ways in which viewers apply the program to their lives. In particular, we shall look for evidence of what Victor Turner (cited in Newcomb and Hirsch, 1983) calls the "liminal aspect of the world of television" which invites viewers to attain new insights into themselves and their society and to reconstruct in novel ways the "meaningfulness of ordinary life." The idea that television is a liminal "time out" in which viewers are free to engage their thoughts and fantasies is closely related to Stephenson's (1967) much-neglected idea of communication as "play." Adapting Huizinga (1950) and Caillois (1961), Stephenson proposes that mass communication, like play, is an interlude, a voluntary step outside of reality and responsibility into the all absorbing world of pretending, into a time and space set aside for this kind of ostensibly "non-productive" and typically social activity. The elements of play in the present case are the characters and plots of television – news and entertainments – projected into the viewer's understanding or imagining of himself and his world. Like all liminal situations, it invites a viewing and reviewing – reflexiveness" in the anthropological jargon – of oneself and one's world from somewhere outside, and subjunctive "experiments" with what might be and what should be.

Altogether, we are interested, then, in (1) the extent to which viewers – in the focus discussions – depart from the program in the direction of real life;<sup>4</sup> (2) the topics that are raised in this connection; (3) the rhetorical and psychological "rules" of these transitions; (4) the ways in which such transitions are incorporated into social interaction in the groups; and (5) the kinds of groups – characterized by ethnicity, involvement with the program, etc. – that engage more or less in such digressions. But this is a tall order, and we shall be more modest.<sup>5</sup> For one thing, the present paper is limited to the analysis of the 12 Los Angeles groups; the comparative data from Israel and Japan are analyzed elsewhere (Liebes and Katz, 1986; Liebes and Katz, in press).

One more caveat: We have tried to simulate normal conditions of viewing, but in the scheduling of an interview in one's living room, in the presence of a representative of the University, is surely disruptive. That does not mean that the situation is necessarily inhibiting; the contrary may be more likely. We cannot be certain that people normally or

frequently discuss television in the ways to be reported here, nor that they discuss social and personal issues only in response to the stimulus of television fiction.<sup>6</sup> What we can be sure of is that many of our respondents began spontaneous discussions of the program *before* and *during* the viewing of the episode, that is, prior to the beginning of the organized group interview. Many of the issues which we subsequently raised in the questionnaire were anticipated by the focus-group members before they were asked (see, e.g., Liebes, 1984).

## A FIRST LOOK AT THE DATA

As a first analytic step, we noted and coded all conversational sequences that were about "real life" – ranging from one's personal affairs to those of other real people, near and far. Two rhetorical forms predominate in these statements. One form is "indicative," the other "subjunctive."<sup>7</sup> The indicative is about reality – the reality of the program and its proximity to life. Ideally; this syntactic form begins with an observation about a character's behavior, continues with a generalization about the representativeness of the character of the behavior, and then proceeds to exhibit a particular case of the generalization. In one group, for example, JR (the leading character, an unscrupulous business tycoon) was said to be behaving as would any man in his position:

### Example 1: CORPORATION HEADS BEHAVE THAT WAY (Group 2)

- M.: And he's always one step ahead. You know; he's not doing anything out of the ordinary that a man in his position would have to do where he's at. He's the head of a corporation. . .
- Int.: So you feel that . . .
- M.: You either sink or swim. Other people in his position would do the same thing. I have an uncle that's the same way. He's my uncle, he's my godfather, he's everything, but business first.

The subjunctive form is a playful one. It allows the discussant to characterize himself or others in fantasy terms, as they "might be" or "ought to be" rather than as they are. Or, it allows them to refer to imaginary situations. For example, here are two parents asking themselves how they would behave, or perhaps ought to behave, if their son – like JR – was a wrongdoer, and they – like Miss Ellie, JR's mother – were asked to testify in his behalf in a courtroom:

### Example 2: IF MY SON ROBS A BANK, I WOULDN'T DRIVE HIS GETAWAY CAR (Group 10)

- Rob: She wasn't supporting him. She didn't get on the stand and support him.
- L.: But it was still her son!
- Rob: It was still her son.

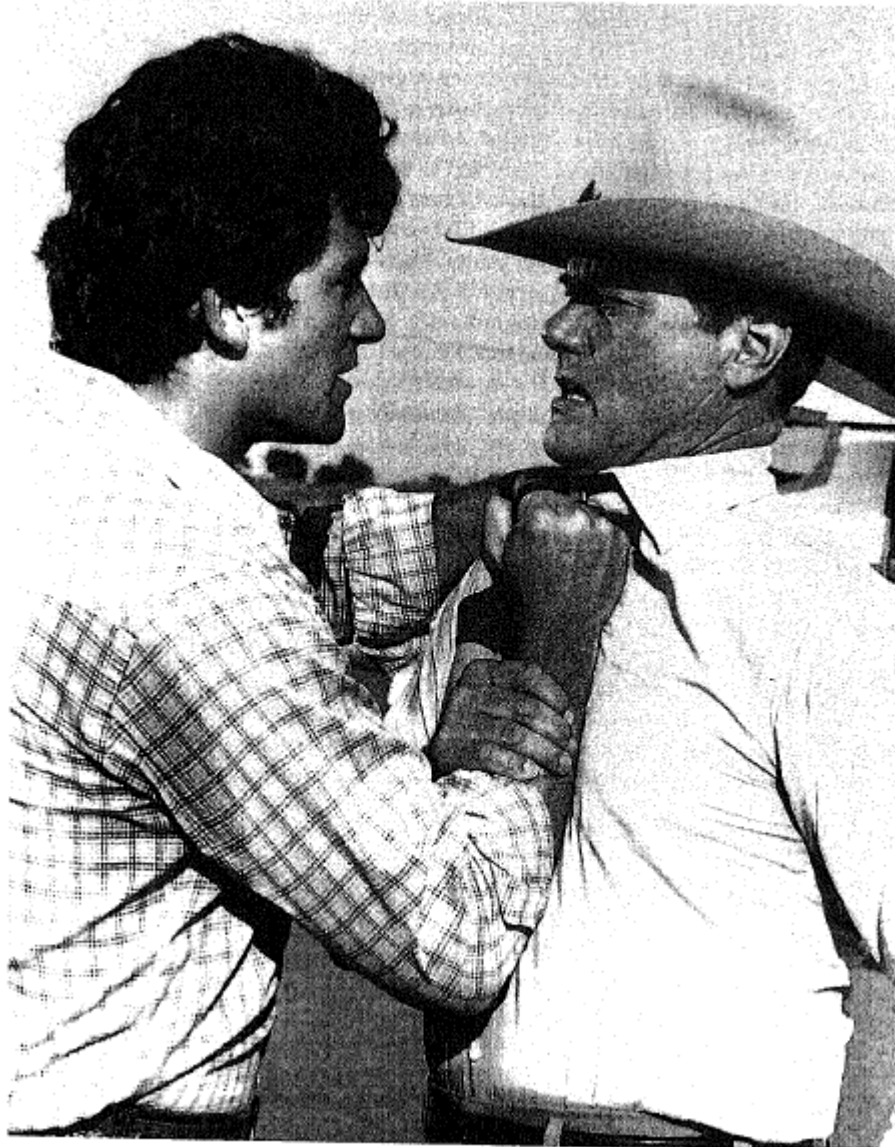


Figure 15. Patrick Duffy ("Bobby Ewing") and Larry Hagman ("J. R. Ewing"), Dallas (CBS), 1981. Terrence O'Flaherty Collection, Special Collections, University Research Library, UCLA.

- R: I know, but I feel differently about it.  
Rob: I mean I wouldn't disown a son I don't think.  
R: I wouldn't drive my son's getaway car because he decides to rob a bank, you know.  
Rob: But JR didn't rob a bank.  
L.: He's doing everything legally.  
R: No, but he's screwing so many people in his goals or his personal aims right now, and she's kind of standing behind him.

The subjunctive statements are less structured logically and rhetorically than the indicative ones; they permit ambivalences, speculations, and contradictions and invite playful retorts in the group, such as jokes. They arise from often intimate interaction, typically between husband and wife. They tend to move inductively from personal revelations or

associations to generalizations rather than vice versa. For example, discussing her disappointment in Bobby (JR's brother), Mar reluctantly concludes that humans are "fallible":

Example 3: LOOKING FOR A KNIGHT ON A WHITE HORSE, IN VAIN (Group 8)

Mar: You know I think we're looking, of course I don't know about anybody else, but I am always looking for a hero that when the women come on ... get lost or something ... it has ... or something that can do these things. I guess we're sure looking for a knight on a white horse or something, you know.

Int.: OK.

Mar: We're all human but we still think, well, there's got to be someone like – there just are some people like that – and this kinda does give you that idea. That he's just very fallible like all of us.

We find the two forms concentrated in different parts of the discussion. The subjunctive appears in the "open," unstructured part of the questionnaire where discussants are first invited to retell the story and analyze the characters.<sup>8</sup> The indicative statements concentrate in the more formal, directive part of the questionnaire where the interviewer later invites discussants to consider the "reality" of the program, its "messages," etc.

It is likely that the demand characteristic of the two phases of the interview, as well as the change in the role of the interviewer from less to more directive, accounts for the concentration of the two types of statements. It may be useful to think of the two kinds of discourses as ludic and formal, respectively" operating according to different rules and expressing different levels of consciousness. In the formal situation of the "closed" phase of the questioning, the interviewer may be perceived as a representative of authority – science, perhaps – expecting answers which are both technically and morally "correct." The idea that there are true answers pervades the rhetoric of this phase, and the group responds, as in a classroom, by making its identity clear and unambiguous and by making coherent contributions to science – hence, the "deductive" or axiomatic quality of these statements that move from the general to the particular. Moreover, the formality of the questions may well constrain discussants to be clear cut in their acceptance or rejection of what they perceive to be the "message" of the program or, indeed, in their perception of the expectations of the interviewer.

In the "open," nondirective phase of the questioning, the interviewer's role is quite different. By inviting free discussion of questions to which there are no obviously "correct" answers, the interviewer plays a more facilitating role, in which no "official" statements are expected and group members are virtually invited to "try on" other selves – relating to the television characters, or in general – for friends and spouses who know each other very well. Thus emerge new insights and creative outbursts – often surprising the speakers themselves – reflecting the unconscious self. Indicative statements, on the other hand, reflect the superego rather more. And when a boundary is overstepped too far, the group – often the spouse – will bring the errant member back through criticism and laughter.

We wish now to elaborate on these types of statements, referring to the subjunctive form as "ludic" and the indicative as "formal" or "real."

## LUDIC TRANSITIONS: FORMS OF IDENTIFICATION WITH CHARACTERS

The informal – mostly subjunctive – statements, it will be recalled, are playful. They relate, in various ways, to identification with characters. Identification takes several forms, and it is worth sorting them out. In its most elementary sense, identification involves the perception of being like/unlike. But, in addition, it may involve the *desire* to be like/unlike. Independent of these two is the affection of like/dislike. The combination of elements is revealing about the dilemma posed by *Dallas* to viewers, and hence its potential of playfulness and fantasy. Many viewers dislike JR but admit wishing to be like him. They like Bobby, JR's more humane younger brother. Some feel they *are* like JR, but are wary of saying (or thinking) that they *want* to be like him. The folk summary of JR's popularity – “love to hate him” – seems quite understandable and in these terms it is an easy step to hating oneself for being attracted at all, or perhaps for being ambivalent.<sup>9</sup>

The discussions clearly reveal these varieties of identification.<sup>10</sup> Some, of course, are straightforward: I am like him, I want to be like him, I like him (cell 1 in table). Or all three may be in the negative (cell 8). Some of this fantasy is in the indicative "I am," but much more of it is in the subjunctive "I would like to." In any case, these are imaginary games in which one fancies oneself as one of the characters or as associated with one of the characters in an “opposite” (counter) role.<sup>11</sup>

	I am like him		I am not like him	
	I want to be like him	I don't want to	I want to be like him	I don't want to
I like him	1	2	3	4
I dislike him	5	6	7	8

A second, more frequent type of identification presents the self as juggling different, often competing, attitudes or identities. Being playful, these are less constrained by the rules of cognitive consistency, but the strain is evident in at least some of our participants. One kind of dissonance, then, arises from the contradictions noted above. Another kind involves shuttling back and forth between liking and disliking one of the characters, or between wanting and not wanting to resemble two different characters, typically JR and Bobby. Still another kind of ambivalence involves identifying with one particular attribute of a character – if I were rich like him – and speculating on how one would play out other aspects of his life. Some invent situations – if my son were a bank robber – that are products of association with the television narrative. Participants “try on” different roles, consciously or unconsciously, and sometimes look to the reactions of others.

When these forms of fantasy enter into the discussion, the other group members often – not always – react. Reactions may take the form of serious discussion, even debate, but quite frequently interaction of this kind has a comic aspect, inviting jokes, barbed statements and laughter. For example, group members may discern and remark on the betrayal of attraction or identification with a character by another of their members. Spouses sometimes remark, jokingly, about the deeper meaning of being attracted to or identified with one of the



characters. Or, one group member may make a statement about his identification with a character or about his ambivalent feelings about two characters and evoke responses from others which take the form of "ludic interactions" or even more extensive discussions or debates.

Consider, first, an ostensibly forthright case of identification. Greg is impressed with Bobby's care for his wife:

#### Example 4: I WOULD ACT LIKE BOBBY (Group 3)

Greg: What impressed me was Bobby's concern for his wife. To me, he seemed to be doing all the right things, something I would do if I was in his situation.

Similarly, a member of Group 11 admires Bobby not only for his achievements but for his self-restraint. His tendency to lose seems to be a kind of consolation for Carol:

#### Example 5: I RELATE TO BOBBY BECAUSE HE IS NOT AMBITIOUS, NOT NASTY AND JR'S VICTIM (Group 11)

Carol: I think Bobby could be any one of us.

Int.: Any one of us, how is that, Carol?

Carol: Because most anybody in the world has a certain amount of ambition but most of us don't have the nastiness to go out and achieve our ambition, and I sit and watch Bobby and I love Bobby because I can really relate. I'm sure that if I wanted to go and become a top-notch executive and I put my mind to it, I could do it. But I wouldn't be able to because I couldn't be as nasty as you need to be. It's one of the reasons that I hate JR so much – because he is so awful to Bobby.

But Greg's apparent forthrightness is amended 15 minutes later by a more complex statement (cell 3 in the table) evoked by the group's analysis of JR:

#### Example 6: I AM LIKE BOBBY BUT I ADMIRE JR (Group 3)

Greg: You admire anyone that clever.

(multi-conversation)

John: Anyone who can do a job well, even if he's a rat, you have to admire him for it.

Int.: You say you admire him, John?

John: In a negative way, yes. It's nobody to set up as your idol or anything. Anybody who can do a good job like that, you got to...

Sandi: And get away with it; you've got to give them credit, right?

John: Yeah, and get away with it.

Greg: I kind of fantasize myself as a Bobby, acting like a Bobby but I admire JR more than I admire Bobby too. Bobby is a dummy. (laugh)

(multi-conversation with Sandi saying something about Bobby being a sensitive, loving person)

Int.: Can you tell me more, Greg, what it is about JR that you admire?  
Greg: Just his ruthlessness. (lots of laughter). No, it's his ability to survive, to come back from the bottom and bounce back up and come out on top again, you know, and no matter how many times you get him down, he'll bounce back up and keep trying and somehow come out a winner, you know. He'll have to step on a lot of people to do that, survival is something to be admired, the ability to survive.  
Sandi: No, unh-unh, I don't admire that.

Greg's change of heart is quite characteristic of these discussions. But other discussants are less self-aware than Greg. Consider Janet (Example 7), for example, who seemingly is altogether against JR once, then twice, then three times. At this point, she has so built up her case against him – stinker, braggart, egoist, sadist – that she would "like to see him get it right up the kazoo." Nine minutes later she likes him for his strength, and explains by generalizing that "underneath all our meekness lies something in us that would like to come out strong." She suggests that she is identifying with something opposite to herself.

#### Example 7: MY UNCONSCIOUS IDENTIFIES WITH JR'S STRENGTH (Group 4)

Janet: Because he's always so vindictive. He's rotten to his brother; he's worse to his wife.  
He's ... he's...  
Jus: He flaunts his money.  
Janet: He's a braggart, he's an egoist, he's a sadist.  
Jus: Yep ... oh yeah...  
Janet: He's just a mean individual. I just don't like him. I'd like to see him get it right up the kazoo.  
Lil: But he's a good actor. And I like his little grin – like he swallowed the canary.  
N.: He doesn't go roughshod – things happen.  
W.: I liked him in that swimming pool tonight. (laughter)  
Janet: Yeah. I like him even though he is a stinker. Everybody I think basically likes a strong domineering . . . even though we may consider ourselves meek – but I think underneath all our meekness lies something in us that would like to come out strong...  
Jus: You'd probably like to be that strong.  
Janet: Yeah, I would.  
Lil: Does that mean you respect him a little?  
Janet: Yes, yes I do, definitely. I respect his being that strong and nasty ... I like him.  
W.: We don't know why his wife left him you see. I mean maybe he was...

Unlike the cases of Greg and Carol, Janet admires her hero for being what she would like to be, but is not. Carol is positive on all three variables: she is like Bobby, she wants to be like him, and she admires him (cell 1). Greg fantasizes himself as Bobby, likes him, but is ambivalent about wanting to be like him (cell 3). Janet is unlike JR, loves/hates him (possibly more dislike than like), and says she would wish to be like him (cell 7). Whether any of the

eight possible combinations in our table is empirically empty is not altogether clear; but we would bet that anything is possible.

If one admires him for his successes (with power, women, etc.) one must overcome dislike for his ruthlessness. One may fantasize oneself as Bobby, but either not want to be like him (if one wishes high success: Greg) or want to be like him only at the price of withdrawing from the race (Carol). Consider how inadequate any one of these questions would be if asked on a survey questionnaire. The problem, rather, is one of forced choice between ruthlessness/success and fairness/failure, and the message of *Dallas*, at least for Americans, is that the pairs are inexorably linked, that the new success in America is not won by fair play, as explained by Mader (1983).

The ambivalence about identification with the two leading characters is expressed not only by individual group members but in interaction between them. Thus Beverly and Don, a married couple (Example 8) take opposite sides vis-à-vis JR. Beverly hopes to god she will never have a son like JR, while Don says – laughingly – that he would like to.

#### Example 8: HUSBAND ADMIRES JR, WIFE HATES HIM (Group 7)

Beverly: Jr and Bobby, their mother is just heartbroken with the things that JR does and she is heartsick for Bobby because he doesn't get the things that he wants and this kind of thing. Well that is every mother's reaction, but in our case I hope to God that I never have a son like JR. I would have to be, you know, that sick about it (ha, ha).

Don: I would love having a son like JR.

Bev.: Ah, phoo.

Int.: You would love to have a son like JR?

Don: You betcha. You betcha.

Int.: Why is that?

Don: I would like to have one that is as smart as JR (his wife laughs hard). A conniver, a doer...

Bev: And you would sit back just like Jock.

Don: I made a mistake once just after we watched *Dallas* for about a year or a year and a half or something. I told my oldest daughter that I thought JR was my idol, the kind of guy that you admire and respect. Even though he is a fink and a crook, you admire and respect him. She went out and bought me a picture of JR, and I hang it on the wall in my den (ha, ha).

Int: Do you still feel that way about him, that you have some admiration for him and some respect for him?

Don: Well, you have to have admiration for the guy. He accomplishes most things he sets out, no matter how, no matter who he has to step on to do it and if you are a successful businessman and handling that much money I think you have to do that in the world today. I don't think you can be Mr. Nice Guy and make 20 million dollars. I think you've got to step on somebody.

Rejecting JR does not stop Beverly from going on to fantasize about him. In a ludic mode, she uses fantasy to combine JR's wealth with Bobby's responsibility. Thus, she speculates on what she would do with JR's money if she had it to spend.

Example 9: IF I HAD HIS MONEY, I WOULD GIVE IT AWAY (Group 7)

Beverly: The money adds to it, but I think you have to be a scuzzy person to be able to act like that to begin with. I mean if I had a million dollars (he is talking about 50 million dollars for just a place to store his damn oil), if I had 50 million dollars I would give it to all my friends, all my kids. I wouldn't connive and cheat just to get more.

Don: Give her a hundred bucks and she splits it five ways (ha, ha). Twenty to each kid.

Bev.: Well, that's true, that is the kind of person that I am and there is just nothing about that show that I can identify with – nothing.

Reggie (Example 10) uses fantasy in the same way-to remove himself from the dissonance:

Example 10: IF I WERE HEAD OF THE FAMILY, I WOULD HOLD IT TOGETHER (Group 14)

Reggie: Well, JR certainly doesn't stand up for the family, he doesn't stand up for the company, he stands up for himself and, you know, if I was the head of the family and I owned the company, I would do more things that kept the family together than I would that kept everybody apart and fighting and he doesn't seem to be family-oriented.

Sandi: Well, no it is kind of like Don and Inez . . .

Reggie: He is self-oriented.

Sandi: Yeah, he is self-oriented but I think the family is a direct...

Reggie: I think he would keep them in the house and pay the rent on it but I don't think he would pay the goddamn electric bill, you know, he would keep everybody on the farm but he is just too, you know, for himself, he is no family.

Note that Reggie and Sandi have now projected their discussion onto another couple, not present, named Don and Inez. After Reggie has characterized JR for his egotism and neglect of family, Sandi proposes that JR is like Don in these respects and Reggie accepts and elaborates on her statement. This is the way in which characters become metaphors, even when they may have positive and negative valences for different people. They become shared currencies like Oedipus or Archie Bunker. There is a bargaining over the worth of these complex currencies, which is what keeps the conversation going and invites people to change their minds.

There is yet another way out of the dissonance. It is to fantasize oneself as identified with some agency of law that will redeem the old order and punish those who dare to try to propose the equation ruthlessness/success as a new norm. Consider Donna's (Example 11)

enjoyment of Miss Ellie's intervention to control JR.<sup>12</sup> This is an example of taking a role "opposite" the villain, and letting him have it.

Example 11: I ENJOY IT WHEN HIS MOTHER PUTS HIM IN HIS PLACE (Group 14)

Int.: OK, Laura, you started to say something.  
Laura: Just what he said, he just really is trying to have this image in people's minds built of Jock and it is a way of saying that nobody gets to the top without stepping, you know, knocking other people down in one way or another and it is just a way of doing it.  
Int.: Would you say that JR usually gets the things he goes after, that he wants?  
Laura: In one way or another.  
Sandi: Well he did up until this season and now he's kind of getting it.  
Donna: (speaks along with Sandi) They're getting back at him, he still comes out...  
Sandi: He's not as evil as he was.  
Donna: But he's had a few good digs. I really enjoy it when his mother will tell him off or put him in his place and you almost want to stand up and cheer every time someone puts him back down a few pegs, but he still comes out smelling like a rose.

As we have seen, many of these statements invite responses from fellow group members, the spouses, and friends. Some of these are debates, as in Example 8. Others are discussions which provide mutual reinforcement, as in Example 10. Some of these, and others, involve ludic interactions; they provoke laughter within the group to reduce the strain of identifying with a character or situation that recalls a problematic area for someone or other. Thus George, for instance, is concerned that Karen might be identifying with Pam's desire for a baby (Example 12) and Greg thinks that Sandi may be identifying with Sue Ellen's defense of her alcoholism (Example 13).

Example 12: SPOUSE SENSES THAT WIFE MAY BE OVERIDENTIFYING (Group 11)

Carol: She wants a baby.  
Jacque: Well, she thought she had lost a couple of babies.  
Karen: She couldn't have one.  
George: (Laughter)  
Int.: Why is that, George?  
George: Because she wants more children, and we can't afford any more.  
Karen: Because I want another baby.  
Int.: Well what do you think...  
Karen: I'm not going to jump (inaudible)

Example 13: SPOUSE SENSES WIFE IS PROTECTING SELF (Group 3)

Sandi: But look at Sue Ellen. She is an alcoholic and that was all bad and she lost her son because of it, but she overcame and developed into a better character, I mean...  
John: OK, well she was all mixed up (chuckle).

Sandi: Well, I know, but she did, I know, but she overcame it.  
Greg: Alcoholism isn't evil, it's...  
Renee: It's a disease.  
Greg: It's an emotional problem. (laugh)  
Sandi: But what I'm saying is (laugh)  
Greg: "I have an emotional problem."

These ludic interactions seem to end in a "punchline" (as in the previous two examples), both revealing of the essence of the exchange and putting an end to it. To sum up this section, we conclude that one form of transition from discussing programs to discussing life involves the subjunctive whereby viewers, often playfully; consider the nature of their identification with the characters, and thus with each other. The focal center for identification is obviously JR.<sup>13</sup> Unconditional identification with him is not frequent, but it is not uncommon either. More common is an ambivalent identification with JR, in which one either expresses positive and negative feelings toward liking or being (or wanting to be) a person like that, or where one vacillates between JR and Bobby. Uncompromising identification with Bobby appeared to characterize people who do not wish to be in, or have abandoned, the competitive race.

Alternatively, there are expressions of identification either with Miss Ellie – the mother – or with one of JR's victims; these identifications place the viewer vis-a-vis JR in a punishing or "law-enforcing" role, or in the role of victim, which invites spillover into expressions of punitiveness. Since it is rare to find identification with other characters – even the women rarely identify with the female characters – it seems fair to say the text of *Dallas* constrains viewers to adopt one or another position directly relating to JR, and thus to raise high on the agenda of the world the moral questions implicit in the nexus ruthlessness-seductiveness-power.

## FORMAL TRANSITIONS

The second form of transition from discussion of the program to discussion of life is concentrated in replies to the more formal set of closed questions, primarily, "*Is Dallas about real people?*" As was noted earlier, the interviewer tends here to present herself more authoritatively, requesting data in the name of research, and constraining participants – so we believe – to formulate their statements more abstractly and more analytically rather than to grope for characterizations as in the more "open" portions of the discussion.

Evidence of this new role relationship – in the second half of the discussion – appears not only implicitly but in explicit remarks about the "qualifications" of those who should reply to these questions. For example, some husbands disqualify their wives. E's wife, Ph. (Example 12), is not prepared to be excluded in this way.

### Example 12: WOMEN KNOW THE OIL BUSINESS (Group 2)

E: What do they know about business.  
Ph.: Yeah – we just say home and take care of the babies.

- E: What would you do if I asked you to go out and check the oil in your car...
- Ph.: I'd go check the oil.
- Cl.: I'd go raise the hood – pull out the little stick, check it, stick it back in there and shut the hood.
- J.: My wife isn't in the business world very much.

These statements have a characteristic sequence, far more lawfully observed than in the more spontaneous transitions. In response to the question, "Is Dallas real?" or sometimes to other questions – such as "What are business relations like on Dallas?" – group members will (1) reply in the affirmative (sometimes in the negative), (2) identifying the group in real life that best resembles the group in Dallas (in particular the wealthy business class), (3) generalizing about the behavior of this group, and (4) providing a specific example.

Reference to the Kennedys (in 3 of the 11 groups) is a good example: "They bootlegged; they chased women." But our point here is linguistic, about the syntactic sequence of the conversation. Note the generalization to wealthy families, followed by identification of a particular wealthy family, followed by more specific anecdotal evidence, followed by a group discussion about whether the "reality" of Dallas is restricted to dynasties alone or whether it can be generalized even further (Example 14).

#### Example 14; THE KENNEDYS ARE LIKE THAT (Group 4)

- Int.: Is *Dallas* about real people, do you think?
- Jus: I would imagine that some of those wealthy families are kinda like that. I'll bet the Kennedys were.
- N: No – they went East.
- J: I don't think you have to be wealthy to be like that-you can have a stinker in any family.
- Jus: Yeah – but look at the old man – he chased Gloria Swanson and all those gals.
- J: Who are you talking about – the Kennedys or *Dallas*?
- Jus: Kennedys.
- W: Fitzgerald – the old man Kennedy.
- N: Joseph Kennedy.
- Jus: She just asked – do you think they're real people?
- J: Yes, of course, but I said you don't have to be a powerful, wealthy family, to give birth and raise a stinker – a lot like JR or Kennedy.
- Jus: That's true.
- N: You may not be like that if you didn't have that money.
- J: C'mon.

As was noted above, most discussions of the "real" turn on issues of class and big business, with particular reference to questions of the morality of people in this class, their interpersonal and family relations, their honesty, their happiness, and how they got there in the first place. The Horatio Alger myth is nowhere in evidence here; nor is the myth of fair play.<sup>14</sup> Other issues in terms of which the reality of the program is tested come from the rest

of the family, though they are infrequent considering that the family is the more prominent of the two institutional realms of the Ewings. Concepts from popular psychology, such as "sibling rivalry," "childhood hangups," and parental approval, are attributed to the characters to bring them into the real world.

Here is a second example, referring to the millionaire DeLorean. It is of interest because it argues that *Dallas*, in its reality-serving function, discloses the behind-the-scenes workings of its class that become available to us otherwise only in the expose of scandals (Molotch and Lester, 1974). Here is evidence (Example 15) of the cliché current among communications researchers that (TV) news is entertainment, and entertainment is news.

#### Example 15: DeLOREAN IS LIKE THAT (Group 11)

Don: Just think of DeLorean and the auto industry, how many things have been going through his life in the last few years.

Carol: Well, that's one thing, one member of one family. We are looking at a whole family and every one of them has got problems.

Jim: If it hadn't been for the fact that it was a cocaine deal, what would you have known about the man?

Robyn: DeLorean?

Jim: Well, the guy worked for General Motors and then went to work for himself. Anybody with that kind of power has got to be moving somewhere.

Carol: That is right. If he hadn't gotten messed up in cocaine he would...

George: He got caught, that was the problem.

Not all transitions draw on television and picture magazines as a source of knowledge. In fact, epistemologically speaking, the most frequent source of knowledge for generalizations or the specific examples that illustrate these generalizations is personal experience; the next most frequent source is the mass media; and folk wisdom or popular psychology is in third place. It is interesting to note that women appear to draw more frequently on the mass media as their source while men draw on personal experience in the world of work.<sup>15</sup> Here is an example drawn from personal experience (Example 16) that follows the same sequential order:

#### Example 16: ALL MILLIONAIRES ARE LIKE THAT (Group 8)

Int.: Do you think they're typical of all people from *Dallas*?

C: I think all Texans are that way . . .

M: I've never rubbed elbows with millionaires.

C: They're all that way.

Int.: You think they are all that way?

C: I worked for a Texas company and they were that way, they were. . .

Lou: Competitive.



Here is an example whose opening generalization (Don, Example 17) draws on folk wisdom of the sort that predominates in TV fiction (Thomas and Callahan, 1982). Bob, invoking personal experience, qualifies the generalization:

Example 17: MILLIONAIRES ARE NOT LIKE THAT (Group 7)

Don: I'll tell you something, money breeds problems, position breeds problems.  
Int.: Do you think so?  
Don: Oh, sure. Position breeds problems.  
Int.: You are shaking your head too, Linda.  
Beverly: Especially when you want more.  
Don: Bob works in a bank and every day of the week when he goes in there he has a problem, right, it's not a piece of cake when you go to work in the morning. Mike is a government guy and he is working for the contractors and every day of the week he has problems. Every day of the week I go in, I have problems and we deal with the general public and money; that's right.  
LaVerne: How do you find, Bob, the people, now you find people, let's say, one is a millionaire as opposed to five or seven millionaires, do you find a difference in the ones who have more and the ones, the little ones?  
Bob: The type of people I deal with that have money are no problem at all; it's the ones that don't have the money that control the people, or handle their people's accounts. Their business managers are the ones I have problems with; but the people who have money I have no problems with at all, none whatsoever. They might within their own families or within their own circles, but not in the business dealings.

Many of these transitional statements go a step beyond comparing business in *Dallas* with business in real life, by going on to emphasize the difference and the distance between these upper-class examples and the average viewer or themselves. In effect, they move from a discussion of the "real" (i.e., real, but unlike us) to a discussion of the "ordinary" or the "normal" (real and like us). Their emphasis is on "them" and "us" where the Ewings and the Kennedys are on one side and the rest of the world on the other. Consider Example 18:

Example 18: ORDINARY PEOPLE ARE NOT LIKE THAT (Group 7)

John: The only thing different in it is they got the money.  
Robyn: Do you think that is the difference, they have a lot of money?  
John: As far as I'm concerned.  
Ruth: I don't know, but maybe money people act that way. I guess they could be that underhanded.  
John: I've seen a few.  
Ruth: Never been around that much, never had that much to worry about.  
Robyn: So the money is making them different from ordinary, real people?  
John: Ordinary people wouldn't be that way. They would be trying to make, get everybody to be together, get it together.

Another example (Example 19) of "them" and "us" is in Group 4, where the sequence, however, is somewhat cyclical, repeating generalization and illustrations a number of times and involving a number of different participants.

Example 19: EVERYBODY HAS PROBLEMS, BUT THEIRS ARE BIGGER (Group 4)

- J: They have good writers.  
Lil: Everybody has problems.  
N: Problems are created (garbled).  
J: Everybody's got problems; day to day business – everyday problems.  
Jus: You have debts...  
J: Only theirs are in millions.  
Jus: You have guys running off with some cute chick – and cute chicks running off with some guy ...  
J: Everybody's got problems.  
Lil: And some dirty old man...  
Int.: They're everyday problems just like everybody else's?  
J: They're not everyday problems but they're problems – they're bigger than everyday problems.  
Int.: They're bigger than everyday problems?  
W: They're different.  
J: They're different – sure that's what I mean.  
Int.: How are they different?  
J: Because they're dealing in millions that's why.  
W: Yeah, they don't worry about their job-and going to work in the morning and this'n that – they don't have that. They have their everyday problems too, I guess.  
Int.: What are their everyday problems?  
J: The family life.  
N: The men have to run the business – decide uh – make their ordinary business decisions. Miss Ellie has to walk around and see that the house is dusted.  
Jus: If the pool man came.  
J: And God forbid that the washer and dryer should go out at the same time...  
N: They don't have the sword over their head all the time of unemployment.  
J: Losing their jobs.  
N: Losing their jobs ... like ordinary people have to...  
W: Regular pressures.  
N: Whether their car will last another year – they don't have uh...  
Int: So their everyday problems are a little bit different...  
J: Bigger.  
N: Bigger – but there's not as many either.

Sometimes, the sequential order is attenuated and remains at the more axiomatic level and only an interpretive statement follows the generalization. Consider Example 20:

Example 20: THEY'RE TYPICAL OF BIG BUSINESS (Group 8)

- Lou: No – but you know I think they're – well in *Dallas* it shows them as very competitive – and I think that's what people at the head of big business are. They have to be competitive, and I think they are typical of people at the helm of big business.
- Int.: So the business part seems real to you?
- Lou: Yes, they've got a lot of people up there that are dependent on them that they keep employed and all and I think they just assume that responsibility and they are – they do act like that. Always thinking of ways to keep going with what they're doing and bringing in more revenue and outfox somebody else – and to the advantage of the company. I think they're typically big business people – really – real people.

Finally, we should note that playfulness makes its way even into this more sober area of the discussion, although these examples are only a minority of all ludic exchanges. These examples suggest the hypothesis that subjunctivity and playfulness assert themselves – in the context of discussions of the real – when disparity or distance is perceived between the viewers' reality and that of television. Joking and playfulness may serve to mitigate the possible threat of confronting competing sets of norms or anomie. Consider Mar (Example 21), who is untroubled, at first, by the promiscuity of *Dallas* because she cannot imagine herself similarly tempted. But suddenly she is shocked into the reality of the *Long Beach News*:

Example 21: LET'S DO IT (Group 8)

- Mar: Alice in Wonderland.
- M: Exactly the way I feel – you know – “Oh boy, it's nice to see how these people live.”
- Mar: And you really don't worry too much about their immorality because you say “Well I'm never gonna be in that sort of situation – so I don't have to worry about those problems” – that I personally don't go along with.
- M: They don't convey any message.
- L: Did you see what was on the front page of the paper tonight? ... 43% of the women – of the married women are having affairs outside the home.
- M: Oh gosh.
- L: The Long Beach Paper!!!
- Mar: What are we doing sitting here?
- Lou: You're getting the wrong paper.
- M: What about the men?
- D: What neighborhood was that?
- L: You know – back to *Dallas* – it's 100%.
- C: 100% – on *Dallas* – they have to have a blood test to find out who's the father of the kid.

Other examples invoke the same sort of subjunctive mode that characterized our earlier discussion but they are not always accompanied by playfulness. Here are two examples of the genre. The first (Example 22) moves from an awareness of "them" and "us" to a speculative statement about what might be "if we were all to come into \$10 million":

Example 22: IF WE WERE TO COME INTO 10 MILLION DOLLARS (Group 2)

- D: Do you think that's what they're saying about American society?  
Mern: I don't know about American society – hey, you know – you're asking us. You ask any working stiff and he's gonna tell you the same thing. Hey – well – you know. The haves and the have-nots – well, they have. You know, if we were all to come into 10 million dollars tomorrow, you'd be a completely different person.  
Ch: We'd be one of the "haves." (laughter)

A second example takes the form not of what might be but of how real life ought to be different from *Dallas*:

Example 23: WE NEED A STRONG FATHER IMAGE (Group 14)

- Ruth: One episode I remember I saw where JR was really getting his brother, Bobby; and really getting him and the father stepped in and he is the only one who could really set JR back.  
Arnie: I think the mother doesn't really have that much say-so.  
Lynn: But I think if you are trying to show a family, a family needs a strong father image. Some of the programs they show today; so many of them are without the fathers anymore, I don't think that is good for family entertainment. We need a strong father image. Holding everyone together.  
Robyn: And you don't see that in the kind of show that it is now. Now that Jock is gone.

As a last example, it is worth citing Greg (Example 24) who switches from the "them" of the characters to the producers who create the "thems" and the researchers who study "us." Thus, Greg is presenting himself neither as formal or ludic, but as a critical reader, who refuses to be lulled into false consciousness. He declares that *Dallas* is a "fantasy for the working man" but not for him. He suggests that the producers position the viewer to identify with power and to take sides in the fight between good and evil, and that the researchers are testing the effectiveness of the producers' manipulation. Judy and Sandi play "straight man" for Greg by treating the program as a documentary, finding reinforcement in the wisdom about "money breeding problems." If Greg's is an "oppositional" reading, theirs is a hegemonic one (Hall, 1980).

Example 24: *DALLAS* IS A WORKING MAN'S FANTASY (Group 3)

Greg: He hit on something that I thought should be mentioned, too, the fact that, you know, you see the rich businessman up there and everything and these guys, being rich are being exploited, you know and characterized and that probably has something to do with why they [the researchers?] chose non-college people who hadn't completed college for this [interview?]. This show is probably aimed toward the working man, it is sort of a fantasy for them, you know, to dream about what it would be like to be up in that power situation and want to see the good guy win over the bad guy and all that.

Judy: But yet they show that rich people don't have just a bed of roses their whole life.

Sandi: They have problems too.

Elsewhere (Liebes and Katz, in press), we elaborate on the types of critical readings, in contrast to the referential readings that are the subject of this paper. But notice, even here (Example 19, for instance), that in answer to the question, "Why do the Ewings have so many problems?" Janet answers, "They have good writers," implying that problems are the stuff of good drama.

## CONCLUSIONS

This paper has analyzed statements about real life arising from focus group discussions of *Dallas*. These referential statements all deal with transitions from discussing the program to discussing life, analyzed in terms of content, rhetorical sequence, and certain aspects of interaction among the discussants.

We distinguish between "formal" and "ludic" transitions. The formal statements arise in response to direct questions about the "reality" of the program and perhaps to the more authoritative role of an interviewer perceived as seeking "correct answers." Statements in this mode tend to be in the indicative.

The more formal statements discuss the characters in relation to issues such as social class, success, corruption in social institutions and their interrelations; they reject or ignore traditional American myths of achievement and mobility. Many of these statements take the form of "them" and "us" in which the discussants compare themselves to people like the Ewings and the Kennedys.

These more formal sequences tend to move from statements about a character or a problem in the program, to some generalization that establishes the reality of the program within a particular social group, to an illustration of the generalization taken from the media or from personal experience. Such statements may include comparisons of "them" and "us," as well as discussion and debate about any of the above.

Ludic sequences are less structured, and typically take the form of statements of identification (I like him, I am like him, I want to be like him). These interactions may conclude with generalizations ("We're all human": Example 3) or, often with a joke ("She doesn't like JR because she sees enough of that at home": Example 15).

Thus, the viewing of television fiction – insofar as that activity may be inferred from these focus-group discussions of *Dallas* – may be characterized as a process of freeing and unfreeing oneself from the constraints of the text. If they wish to do so, viewers are free to

exert their right to contemplate the *unreality* of the program, and to bring critical distance to bear. Of course they are also free to leave – but they don't. Sooner or later, most people feel constrained to consider the reality of "our" own lives with the (assumed) reality of "theirs," cognitively and emotionally. In doing so, they are free to identify with whomever they wish, but the actual range of identification – judging from empirical observation – seems to focus on JR. One can be "for" him, or "against" him – from above, or below, or as an equal.

Taking one or more of these positions vis-a-vis the principal character seems also to constrain the spectator, willy, nilly, to consider the main social and ideological issues in which JR is embroiled. The vertical dimension—the would-be controller (above) and victim (below) – spotlights issues of social control: ruthlessness vs. fair play, amoral individualism and its consequences. The horizontal dimension impels the spectator to consider not only the would-be defenders of JR but also the alternate lifestyles that are implicit in those who opt for more happiness and less success. Of course, spectators are free to try on any or all of these roles.

Nevertheless, neither the play of identifications at the subjunctive level nor the more sober reflection at the indicative ("real") level terminates the viewing process. The process is not complete, we believe, until the viewers have sifted and evaluated all of this through the sieve of their own values. This is the social process we call negotiation – part of which is interwoven as ludic interaction even during the ostensibly individualistic activity of identification – which the focus-group discussions permit us to observe. It is the process that frees the viewer from the dictates of the program (though not from participation in it) only to return him to the real-life controls of family and community. If the "message" of the program is influential at all it is probably through the mechanism of ideological agenda-setting and, possibly by gaining some sort of social acceptance in the process of negotiation.

Data from discussions of *Dallas* in other cultural settings can be marshalled to test the adequacy of the above analysis. Is the program as constraining elsewhere as it appears to be in America?<sup>16</sup> Does social interaction serve to mitigate the effectiveness of its "messages"? Beyond this, there remains the outstanding task of gathering evidence for assessing the extent to which such discussions actually take place spontaneously.

## NOTES

The authors wish to thank Daniel Dayan for his instructions and inspiration. He has served as consultant to the *Dallas* project since its inception. The present paper benefits, in particular, from his suggestions concerning the role of the interviewer in focus-group discussions and its implications for the discursive forms in which participants relate themselves to the program. We also thank Peter Clarke, Dean of the Annenberg School for material support. This paper is our initial effort to conceptualize various types of viewer responses to television fiction, even if it is being published later than subsequent efforts based on this project. Unlike these papers which try to integrate large quantities of data from several cultures and to formalize the nature of the several types of response (and the differences among sub-cultures in this respect), the advantage of the present paper is in its ethnographic detail, and in the analytic process of induction that we have attempted to apply.

1. For example, Lynn (Group 4): "I think a lot of people watch it because everybody is talking about it at work. I sit there at work a lot of times and especially if it is something important going on and everybody is talking about 'Dallas,' and I sit there eating my lunch."
2. The Los Angeles groups were all at least second-generation Americans. Dr. Herta Herzog-Massing (1986) conducted a parallel survey in the "gratifications" tradition among German viewers of *Dallas*.
3. Neumann's (1982) closely related study of the "analytic" and "interpretive" abilities of television audiences echoes this distinction. We differ from Neumann in excluding from the "interpretive" anything other than viewers' references to their own lives or to social problems. In particular, Neumann's assignment to the "interpretive" of audience statements concerning producers' intentions to influence them seems to us better classified as "analytic."
4. Formally, a distinction might be made between application of personal experience to the interpretation of the program and application of the program to an understanding of personal experience. But in practice this distinction is difficult to code.
5. A companion paper (Katz and Liebes, 1989) discusses these transitional rules.
6. Research on the extent of spontaneous talk about television has concentrated on intra-family communication. The quantitative data suggest that there is only little talk between parents and children, while the qualitative, more ethnographic studies insist that there is ample behavioral evidence of such evidence if one listens carefully. See the review of these studies in Bryce and Leichter (1983).
7. There are about 7 sequences of the one kind and 5 of the other, on the average, in each focus discussion.
8. Four-fifths of the subjunctive statements come from the "open" part of the discussion.
9. For example, "I find in myself the desire to be like him even though I dislike him, and I 'love' this disliking."
10. "I would lose 20 kilos," said a Jerusalem woman, if "Bobby would go out with me even for one evening."
11. Without being presumptuous, we call attention to parallel distinctions in Freud's discussion of narcissism. See Freud (1961).
12. The presence of a moral character to kosherize the viewing of evil is a major theme in Herzog-Massing's (1986) study of *Dallas* viewers in Germany.
13. This may seem unsurprising, except when considered from the point of view of the expectation that viewers are unconstrained. Nothing prevents them from identifying with the whole range of other characters.
14. Thomas and Callahan (1982) argue convincingly that prime time television portrays upper class families as unhappy and selfish. The predominant message of these programs appears to be one of consolation" money does not buy happiness. This myth is thought to counterbalance the myth of room at the top (minus the prescription of how to get there). Cf. Liebes and Katz (1983). For other examples of the message of blocked mobility, see Mander (1983) and Lowenthal (1942-1943).
15. Interpretation of this finding requires caution since most of the examples discussed here come from the world of business.

16. In fact, further analysis published elsewhere (Liebes and Katz, 1986) suggests that the program is treated *more* indicatively, and less subjunctively, by non-Americans. The Americans are more ludic in their readings than are most viewers elsewhere.

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